

↗8 - 12 Tweens: Teens Before Their Time

We all know how it goes. One minute our children are in diapers, the next minute they're gossiping about the opposite sex and before we know it, they've turned into young adults. But, are children growing up too quickly? It seems, lately, that more and more eleven and twelve year olds do not see themselves as children. Why is this?

One very clear reason is that tweens (8-12 year olds) are being targeted by big business to buy sexy, grown-up clothes – and many of our children are eagerly buying into this marketing strategy. Kids are bombarded with sexual messages and images in all media- television, magazines, advertisements, music, movies and the Internet. While it used to be high school kids copying the pop stars' fashions now it's today's **fourth graders** that are doing it and it is not uncommon to see young children in provocative clothing, as they emulate their favourite pop star, such as Brittany Spears or Lindsay Lohan. The marketing of sexy, grown-up looks to tweens is a growing and concerning trend.

The US Girl scouts published a report in 2000 called "Girls Speak Out: Teens Before Their Time", which identifies three key areas of child development which they claim are out of sync for girls today. "Cognitive and physical development has accelerated, while emotional development often has not. The imbalance has lead to stress and tension in 8 to 12 year old girls that was not formally present. While girls may know about the facts about sex and even be physically mature they may not fully understand what it means to be in an intimate relationship."

Herein lies the danger. Some tweens progress from dressing like teens to participating in teen behaviours such as dating and sexual activity. Because they do not have the emotional maturity to navigate a relationship they may be forced or coerced into behaviours in which they do not want to participate. For instance, "Just Loosen up and Start Talking", a report generated from interviews of 220 Nova Scotia youth, states that 4% of the interviewed youth had experienced sexual intercourse by age 10 (grades 4 and 5). That number rose to 19% by age 13 (grades 7 and 8). 43% of the 220 youth had experienced sexual abuse and 18% had been forced or pressured into sexual intercourse.

Boys are also being bombarded by the same messages. What do our male youth think about the sexy images they see in the media? In the CBC Marketplace documentary, "Buying into Sexy: The Sexing Up of Tweens" teen boys were asked what they think of the sexy images of women. The teen boys said that they see women as 'bimbos' and are losing respect for females.

As parents, grandparents, concerned adults, we need to educate our children and youth about the media images and messages they see and hear. We need

to teach our boys to respect women and we need to teach our girls there is more to being a woman than being sexy. How do we do this?

Start talking to your child! Don't wait until they ask you questions, because more than likely they won't – you start the discussion. It might feel uncomfortable and you might not know what to say but if concerned adults don't provide them with this information they will get it all from the media. To help you get started check out the following websites.

www.familiesaretalking.org

www.canadianparents.ca

www.talkwithkids.org

May is Sexual Abuse Prevention Month. This article is one of four that addresses the issue of tween sexuality.

Contact the Violence Prevention Program at Family Transition Place for more information about SAPM activities or other violence prevention services. Phone 941- 4357 or 1-800 265-9178 or visit our website www.familytransitionplace.ca