



Time to end the sex sell

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WEDNESDAY VIEW

SEX is being used to grab the attention of not just adults but kids as well. If the multibillion-dollar “tween” market is any indication, it’s a sales pitch that’s working.

For one concerned parent, however, enough is enough. Julie Gale — the woman behind the “Kids free to be kids” campaign — is fed up with the way ideas about sex are influencing very young children in our society.

From padded bras and G-strings for four and five-year-olds, to Lolitaesque dolls, to gyrating, scantily clad music stars a la the Pussycat Dolls, *pictured*, sex permeates children’s culture.

Wander into your average department store and you’re likely to find miniature versions of adult couture, replete with plunging necklines, diaphanous fabrics, sparkles, spangles and sexiness for kids to don.

There are even high heels for tots, bling to drape around their cherubic necks and the piece de resistance, make-up, particularly lip gloss, to smear across those, as yet, naturally pouting lips.

Last year, the Australia Institute released a stinging report on what they termed (borrowing from an irate Phillip Adams), “corporate pedophilia” — that is, when marketers deliberately set out to exploit a child’s desire to grow up fast by targeting them with images, products and ideas about sex and adulthood — long before they are cognitively ready.

While the report prompted outrage, there was also a smear campaign directed at the authors. Accused of “reading too much into things” and for fuelling a moral panic, there was an effort to dismiss the concerns raised.

That is, until thousands of parents and other citizens lodged their disquiet. From this, it seems, a grassroots movement has begun to swell, determined to call the corporations and advertisers to account and, in doing so,

protect childhood.

The people behind this aren’t “prudes” nor are they adults wishing to live in an Arcadian past, where girls were made of sugar and spice and poor boys from doggy and creepy-crawly remnants.

On the contrary, these are professionals, parents, grandparents, teachers and even young people who are alarmed by the proliferation of sexual imagery and ideas being used to promote and celebrate kinderculture.

It doesn’t take Einstein Barbie to understand that not only are their complaints justified, they may even be far-sighted.

Once upon a time, practising being an adult was confined to the bedroom, house or family. Dress-ups, where kids paraded and played in mum and dad’s clothes, were an accepted and endorsed part of growing up.

Nowadays, these dress-ups occur in public and young kids are encouraged to try on a variety of adult identities for size.

Much of this is enshrined in cultural practice where kids are able to enter beauty pageants, idol competitions, and mimic their favourite celebrities at home, but also at school, the street and shopping malls, grabbing crotches, chests and buttocks and moaning, “don’t you wish your girlfriend was hot like me?”

Kids are being catapulted into a world of innuendo and titillation long before they’re ready.

We don’t need reminders of petite JonBenet Ramsay, she of the “bedroom eyes”, to know there’s something deeply wrong about this exploitation of kids’ natural urge to want to accelerate their childhood.

Bombarded with about 400,000 images a year, kids cannot escape nor easily unravel the implicit sexuality in advertising, films, TV, music and

magazines.

Barbie, and her nemesis, Bratz, aren’t just in the toy box any more; their human counterparts are in the school yard, the TV, in films, on the cover of magazines, lunchboxes, panties and singing songs.

But while kids might demand the sexy “stuff” and “looks” and savour the (temporary) results, earning kudos in the playground, it’s adults who have not only created this but bought it as well: hook, line and sinker. What can I say? There’s one born every minute.

While adults are also susceptible to seductive messages, it’s their responsibility to become the filters as opposed to the facilitators of these. Just because the corporations tell us that in order to get ahead in this Microsoft eat Apple world, our kids need to conform to a particular version of childhood, doesn’t mean we have to literally buy it.

As Gale suggests and Sweden and Quebec (which ban advertising to kids under 12 and 13 respectively) have demonstrated: we can refuse to buy the products and, subsequently, the ideas embedded within them, allowing kids to be just that: kids.

Adults must protect very young kids from the notion that sex sells — products and the self. If they do, they’ll be given the time and space to create solid foundations and nurture kids’ imaginations and identities; ones that aren’t contingent upon sex, looks or material possessions.

Resistance isn’t futile, it’s essential. And, through resistance, education and, as Gale suggests, legislation, the power can be ours. We must use it wisely.

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