



Generation sex

Saucy T-shirts, slutty dolls, pole-dancing kits and titillating teen mags – from toy shops to TV, sex is everywhere. But how young is too young, and how does a parent cope in the Noughties?

WORDS CLAIRE HALLIDAY

I WON'T buy my daughters a Bratz doll. I tell them: "I think they're silly" and "they're too expensive." I don't tell them: "They dress like sluts."

I loved my Barbie dolls. When my first daughter was old enough to appreciate such things, I had my collection rescued from the garage in Adelaide and posted over for her.

I have friends – more hardline feminist than me – who were horrified, but I ignored them.

After all, in 1997 Barbie underwent some waist-out, hips-and-bust-in resculpting as a retort to the critics, and any woman (plastic though she may be) who sacrifices her looks for her credibility can't be all bad, can she?

But something happened after Barbie. New-millennium feminism took ownership of a more aggressive sexuality (or sexualisation) and rebranded it female empowerment. Now Barbie's old-fashioned brand of feminine charms has been ditched for dolls with more "attitude".

Those friends of mine who dismissed Barbie are divided. For some, Bratz have been embraced as an "up yours" to all things insipidly girly, whereas others have put them in the same category as poor old Barbie. I don't know why they can't see the difference.

My oldest daughter has a Bratz doll, given to her by her grandmother. Part of the Bratz Genie Magic collection of 2006, it is wearing a genie costume, complete with crystal ball. It has those pouty lips and vacant doe eyes, but I take solace in the fact that the costume is not real. It's the doll playing dress-ups. I don't mind my daughters playing dress-ups. As long as they are not dressing up like sluts.

But when I take my eldest shopping for her seasonal wardrobe revamp, I realise it will be hard for her not to. In the pursuit of that ideal combination of good taste meets kid-friendly comfort, I find that the divide between rich and not-rich is creating a fashion underclass.

In the exclusive children's boutiques, where the price tags rival my day's pay, there lingers a polite refinement with retro undertones. Little girls still wear pinafores and boys wear knitted vests over crisp linen shirts. But in the chain stores, a pervading sassiness is inescapable.

If I had a newborn boy, I could cover his umbilical scar with a teeny T-shirt that proclaims him a "chick magnet". In other chain stores, in sizes that would fit an adolescent girl, there are T-shirts that say "Porn star", or "Too many boys ... not enough time" and singlet tops with pastel My Little Pony pictures outside and padded inserts inside.

Holeproof's Love Kylie Princess Club range of underwear, now discontinued, also sold in a leading chain store. With its bras and high-cut briefs trimmed with glitter, it raised, for mothers like me, the should I/shouldn't I? debate. I

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“ PERHAPS AS THE PURSE-CARRIER FOR THE TARGET AUDIENCE, I’M MEANT TO WONDER WHETHER THESE PRODUCTS ARE TOO SEXY. AND THEN TO BE PESTERED INTO BUYING THEM ANYWAY

Google news stories about a Kylie Club backlash – criticisms that the promotion of the children’s line of underwear was too closely linked to the adult lingerie being touted as “sexy, lacy, racy, girly, fun, comfortable for every day ... and night” – and find a quote from a Holeproof spokeswoman insisting the Princess Club range was separate from the adult range.

“It’s about having fun,” she said of the children’s undies. “We’re really specific about the audiences that we target.”

(A spokeswoman for the Cotton On Group, whose kids’ stores included T-shirts emblazoned with “fun” statements such as “The condom broke” and “All the cool kids go to rehab”, took a different approach in response to recent “sporadic complaints”.

“The slogan products aren’t for everyone, but there’s definitely a place in our society for provocative humour that pushes the boundaries,” marketing manager Emily Checinski told the *Herald Sun* last month.)

Perhaps as the purse-carrier for the target audience, I’m meant to wonder whether these products are too sexy or not. And then to be pestered into buying them anyway.

PERHAPS even more than that, to be so saturated with the surround-sound sexuality of today’s popular culture that I start to believe that, even if they are overtly sexy, that’s OK.

I try to protect my children from these marketing efforts – to dig my moat. I keep them away from commercial television as much as possible, don’t let them on the internet unattended, and tuck them in with Enid Blyton and happily ever afters.

But still I worry. The enemy is cunning.

I’m one of those parents who feels slightly uncomfortable fronting up to ballet recitals and watching someone’s pre-teen daughter in the jazz-ballet portion mouthing Justin Timberlake’s promise to “let you whip me if I misbehave” as she shimmies across the scout hall stage in too-tight spandex.

I have given thanks that my own

daughter chose classical dance instead. But she doesn’t always. I have watched *Video Hits* and worried over the groin-grinding moves to song that my daughter seems to know all the words to, and I have reached for the remote to flick it back to the *Disney Channel* only to see Hannah Montana doing a similar thing.

I have promised my nearly-10-year-old that she will get her ears pierced for her leap into double figures and I wonder, looking at the tiny bumps of breasts already changing her silhouette, whether her period will beat this milestone.

All her friends are doing it. The earrings. The period, too. They giggle and fawn and have pimples that they try to hide under their fringes.

Is the way our daughters are apparently speeding towards a sexualised existence a result of society’s influence? Or is that influence actually a response to what is evolving anyway?

One Thursday night I tuned into ABC-TV show *Difference of Opinion* to watch Jeff McMullen host a debate called “Sex sells: but at what cost to our kids?”

One panellist, Alan McKee, wants to reassure parents. McKee is an associate professor at the Queensland University of Technology, where he runs a degree in television studies. His view is that emerging sexuality is part of childhood – children are in the process of becoming adults and their thoughts and feelings about sex are part of that. To suppress or ignore it would do their development a disservice.

Another panellist, Melinda Tankard Reist, disagrees – urgently. She is the director of the national women’s think-tank Women’s Forum Australia. Her message is: Not yet. And: Things have gone too far.

She has analysed the three most popular magazines for young girls (five and up) – *Barbie* magazine, *Total Girl* and *Disney Girl* – and found that what she calls “sexualising material” made up about 50 per cent of the content of the latter two. For *Barbie*, the figure was 75 per cent.

According to Tankard Reist, sexualising material includes advice

Sugar and spice and all things not nice
In the 21st century girls are bombarded with images of pouty lips, doe eyes, sexy clothes, make-up and “attitude”.

on fashion, beauty and girly products – anything that requires a girl to think of herself in terms of being “attractive”.

She objects to lip gloss, perfumes and deodorants being promoted as “must-haves for primary-school girls”, and to step-by-step instructions on emulating the sexy dance moves of pop stars.

One issue of *Barbie* was touted as a “cute crush issue”, with images of teenage boys and men up to 30 years of age, and headlines such as “Who’s your celeb dream date?” Tankard Reist says, “This can lead to girls being prepped for sexual advances from men.”

I can see the logic in this argument and wish my girls will have at least a few more years unbothered by issues of fashion, body image and boys.

But still I rebel against Tankard Reist’s absolutism. I won’t let my daughters buy these magazines, but not because I think ensuring that their underarms don’t smell is a bad thing. Or that giving their lips an extra bit of colour will brand them as hussies and put them one stilettoed step closer to a life gone wrong.

I AM NOT against young women being taught to grow up. Eventually, that might involve too much make-up, but along the way, is there really anything so wrong with learning elegant ways to style their hair?

Personal hygiene and grooming don’t have to be about sex, as long as you don’t team them with articles about crushes and porn-influenced pop starlets that tar any concept of young girls understanding their own beauty with the same smutty brush.

This is why I don’t let my daughters buy these magazines.

Like Tankard Reist, I think: Not yet. But am I like her in other ways? What do I really think about the way to stop the sexualisation of children? Am I partly to blame? Should I be putting up more of a fight in the name of my gender? Refusing to wear lipstick and never hankering for a new-season dress?

A flick through my photo albums shows me growing alternately gangly and pudgy through many summers, in various bikinis, often hand on hip, one leg thrust forward, squinting into the camera. We didn’t have MTV then. Britney Spears wasn’t even born. But I still had the moves. I owned boob tubes, jeans that were too tight and even a pair of wedge heels for special occasions. Like most little girls, I was emulating the women around me.

I was nine or 10 when I owned my own lip gloss. It came in a roll-on tube, and “Kissable Kola” was my favourite flavour. Were there upstanding citizens who saw that as childhood-destroying? Now, it seems cutely innocent.

In late 2007, Melbourne Anglican Archbishop Philip Freier appeared in *The Age* newspaper brandishing a lip gloss pitched, he said, at children, and

available in “Tie Me to the Bedpost” pink. I wouldn’t buy it for my girls.

Will a future generation view this attitude as ridiculously prudish? An overreaction to what they might, one day, see as harmless branding?

I was relieved to hear that British supermarket giant Tesco had been forced to withdraw the Peekaboo Pole Dancing Kit from the Toys and Games section of its website after a public outcry.

Its extendable plastic pole, frilly garter and Peekaboo dollars – along with its invitation for children to “unleash the sex kitten within” – certainly seemed an affront to my idea of childhood. But perhaps Tesco was just ahead of its time. Pole-dancing is on the rise as both an adult and, according to a TV news story about a 10-year-old pudgy kid’s battle against weight gain, a child-friendly exercise. And if it adds some element of sexy confidence to our journey through daily life, what’s the harm?

It’s all so complicated. In the same way that I argue there is a difference between Barbie and Bratz, the way that I deem 10 an appropriate age for ear-piercing while my mother railed against 13, and the way I believe there doesn’t have to be a contradiction between being a feminist and being a model, I worry that sex and empowerment these days go too cosily hand in hand.

The word “empowerment” is given to any modern female behaviour. Everything from wrapping your legs around a slippery pole to selling your virginity to the highest bidder.

I listen to it on the radio and read it in print and hear it on the lips of girls too young to understand. It might have started out as positive, but it has ended, at least for me – in the same way that “precocious” is now just a nicer way of saying rude – as a defensive apology for a generation that perhaps doesn’t have enough real issues to fight.

The tenets of contemporary feminism suggest that everyone wants to be empowered in their underwear. Everyone from sporting figures, pop stars and students trying to pay for their degrees. This brand of empowerment is, it seems, the only way that supposedly intelligent, high-profile women can shout to society that sex appeal and accomplishment don’t have to be mutually exclusive.

For so many models and actresses, an appearance on the cover of *Playboy* has become a logical career step. Empowering? What happened?

I can only hope when my daughters are older and I ask what they want to be when they grow up, they say “artist”, “writer”, “photographer” or “police officer”, and not – ever – “empowered”.

At least, not in their undies.

* Edited extract from *Do You Want Sex With That?* by Claire Halliday, Viking, \$29.95.