



generation



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

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, and 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 had undergone 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, and now Barbie's old-fashioned brand of feminine charms has been ditched for dolls with more of what is called (as if it is a good thing) *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, while 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 is 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 argyle vests over crisp linen shirts. But in the chain stores, a pervading sassiness is inescapable.

If I had a newborn baby 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 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 include T-shirts emblazoned with fun statements like "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 Melbourne's *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 ►

marketing

the surround-sound sexuality of today's popular culture that I start to believe that, even if they are overtly sexy, that's okay. 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 each night 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 of the evening mouthing Justin Timberlake's promise to "let you whip me if I misbehave" as she shimmys 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 some song that my daughter seems to know all the words to, and I have reached for the remote to flick it back onto the Disney Channel only to see Hannah Montana doing a similar thing.

I have promised my nearly-ten-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 forever, 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. I know women who blame chicken – they've heard all about the hormones. 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 TUNE INTO THE 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 those thoughts and feelings would do their development a disservice. And if paedophiles glean any sexual pleasure from viewing advertising images that reflect that, then the problem lies with the individual interpreting the image rather than the advertisers who created it.

Another panellist, Melinda Tankard Reist, disagrees – urgently. She is the director of the national women's think tank Women's Forum



Toy story ... Skanky Bratz, or unreconstructed Barbie?

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 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 *Barbie* magazine issue 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 where they are 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. Or that teaching them how to pluck an eyebrow is thrusting them into a feckless life as cocaine-snorting, sex-crazy supermodels. I am not against young women being taught how to grow up into women, and I do think the path is different for males and females. Eventually, that different path might involve too much makeup and too many hours worrying about the thickness of their eyelashes (or waist) 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 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 that 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 ten 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 ten-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?

I AM IN THE CAR. IT'S LATE ON FRIDAY NIGHT and I am on my way to see *High School Musical: The Ice Tour*. It is Disney's multimillion-dollar answer to another musical romance classic, *Grease*, but with a slicker marketing team and minus the dirty words and French-kissing. I do not want to see it but I have been given free tickets and my eager passengers for the evening are my eldest daughter, her best friend and my son. ►

There's a billboard looming large ahead of us that asks a question I have, admittedly, considered myself but had no plan to address right here and now: *Want longer-lasting SEX?* My daughter's friend lets out a squeaky groan, then giggles, capturing the attention of my daughter, who emits a staccato "What? What? What?" Her friend is pointing now – waving a finger at the billboard with a sneer of real repulsion. "The advertisement. The advertisement!" Three sets of eyes track the huge writing and the friend groans again. It is lost on my son, whose word recognition is limited to his own name, but my daughter's friend giggles for another block at the horror of it all. This is the same girl I have seen moving her hips like a hip-hop dancer at the Grade 2 disco. A girl whose dad lets her source her "what it is to be a woman" knowledge from the Gwen Stefani songs that she plays in her motherless home. The one who refers to her vagina as her "puss-puss". And it occurs to me, as she giggles in the car, that the problem is perhaps not just that today's girls are being assailed by sexualised imagery and ideas earlier than ever before, but that there aren't enough people helping them make sense of it all.

Later I catch up with Julie Gale at her home in Melbourne's bayside belt. After researching the topic of childhood sexualisation to use in a one-woman comedy show, she'd found that, actually, she didn't find it very funny. So she made the shift from stand-up to political lobbying and founded Kids Free 2B Kids. Gale has a son and a daughter who, by 11, was well on the slippery slide into puberty. She has hovered over her daughter's shoulder to catch glimpses of the text messages that flit from one friend to another and is a devout believer that childhood in Australia is under threat.

She hates those damn billboards, she says. Trapped within the confines of their parents' cars, kids are left staring at the promise of a *stronga, longa donga* and the endless stream of women – huge, airbrushed and legs akimbo – peddling everything from men's shoes to overseas travel. But billboards are not all that Gale hates. She waves a plastic chain-store bag at me to make her point. It's filled with padded bras and g-strings and is, she can only breathe with incredulity, "extraordinary". "These days, the kids' section is paedophile heaven, really," she says. Even if her case is a little overstated, it's sound at its core: sex sells, and now it sells to children, and whenever children's sexualisation is used for the gratification (financial or other) of adults, something very uncomfortable is at work.

A year later, when I meet her again, Gale has turned what was simply an emerging hobby into a full-blown cross-media campaign. She pops up on radio, morning TV and, every now and then,



Branded ... Funny, or just inappropriate?

as a quotable do-gooder in the daily papers. She was in Boston for the annual summit of Campaign For a Commercial-Free Childhood. There, it became clear to her that Australian children are much more exposed to early sexualisation than the Right-leaning, God-fearing average American.

We are the culture that allows magazine headlines about "barely legal dream teens" and "raw and raunchy gutter sluts" to be on display where the after-school crowd line up for their Slurpee hits. It is us – or at least someone out there – who dresses our babies in the T-shirt declaring "All Daddy Wanted was a Blowjob". Gale's complaints about these issues went before the 2008 Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts "inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment". Inquiry participant Tasmanian Liberal Senator Stephen Parry expressed his concerns that girls as young as 11 and 12 were exposed to headlines in *Dolly* and *Girlfriend* such as, "Can I perform oral sex if I have braces?" In response, *Dolly* editor Gemma Crisp told the inquiry it was difficult to strike a balance between all of its readers, but: "We see it as a service. It's our responsibility to provide the correct information rather than [readers] saying to their 15-year-old friend, 'My boyfriend wants me to do this, how do I deal with it?' We do not create these questions. They are all 100 per cent reader-generated."

In 2005, a Roy Morgan Young Australians Survey showed that, although the magazine's core readership was still aged 14 and over, *Girlfriend* had experienced a 30 per cent year-on-year growth in its number of readers under 14. In answer to Senator Parry, Pacific Magazines youth titles publisher Nicole Sheffield told the inquiry she would object to an age-appropriate rating based on her belief that "everyone's development is different". She said, "I can sit in front of one 12-year-old and she will feel like a 21-year-old – she got her period when she was nine and she has a totally

different family situation [from another 12-year-old]." I check out a recent issue to find cover stories on virginity pledges ("girls that wait"), alcopops ("what's all the fuss about?") and "all new flirt moves". Inside – in addition to the information that, while Queensland's age of consent for vaginal sex is 16, you must wait until you are 18 to have legal anal sex – is an ad hawking wallpapers for mobile phones. There's one sporting furry pink handcuffs and the words "naughty but nice". Another: "I Have the Boobies so I Make the Rules."

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 ten an appropriate age for ear-piercing while my mother railed against 13, and the way that I believe there really 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 properly understand its connotations. 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 – 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 to our own Olympic ambassador Nikki Webster and even former *Hi-5* toddler favourite Kellie Crawford. (This year, Crawford stripped down to saucy lingerie for *Ralph* magazine. In response to outraged family groups, she said, "It was something I did for myself to remind myself that I am a woman.")

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 as logical a career step as posing in *Vogue* in haute couture. 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), published August 31.