



EDITORIAL

Much clamour about glamour

The premature sexualisation of children, particularly girls, is an easy target for paediatricians. A simultaneous chorus of 'child abuse' issues from our lips as we gaze at photographs of youngsters with bouffant hairstyles wearing heavy make-up. The same words were used about child beauty pageants by protesting Melbourne crowds and by psychologist Michael Carr-Gregg.^{1,2} The Melbourne crowd carried banners saying 'Let children be children'. This title is used in government reports from Australia and the UK expressing outrage at the continuing promotion of activities and competitions that involve dressing young children like glamorous adults.

A recent article on freestyle dance that expressed a less polarised view³ caused me to reflect on the 'Shirley Temple' phenomenon. What is it that so outrages us about the premature sexualisation of children, is there evidence that it is harmful and do different categories of dress-up have greater or less merit?

Probably our greatest fear is that premature sexualisation makes young children into targets for predatory adults. The horrifying story of JonBenet Ramsey, the 6-year-old beauty queen, is often raised as the ultimate cautionary tale. In 1996, JonBenet's body was found in the basement of her family home; she had been sexually assaulted and strangled. Her murderer has never been brought to justice, although a teacher who said he was in love with JonBenet confessed, but was later exonerated on DNA evidence.⁴ Poignantly, JonBenet was known as Little Miss Sunshine.

What is the evidence of harm? Psychologist Michael Carr-Gregg is quoted as saying, 'the sexualization of young people is associated with negative body image, disordered eating, depression, anxiety and low self-esteem.'² UK psychologist Linda Papadopoulos believes sexualisation of girls demeans femininity and will lead to violence against women.⁵ Although they may well be correct, I was unable to uncover any strong evidence to support their statements, although this is not surprising because the subject is not amenable to randomised trials and it is difficult to prove that such associations have a causal link.

I can think of no redeeming features for child beauty pageants, which inflict make-up and hairspray or wigs on very young, pre-pubescent girls. Past child beauty pageant contestants include Sarah Palin, almost sufficient reason to ban pageants. On the positive side, Oprah Winfrey's escape from poverty started with her participation in child beauty pageants. If adults want to play dress-ups with defenceless creatures, they should stick to pet shows, where the victims are relatively immune to ridicule and long-term trauma from being over-glamourised. Although we say this is 'almost child abuse', do we really believe that child pageants should be banned and that child care proceedings should be instituted against recalcitrant parents? If we do not prosecute parents who refuse to immunise their children, surely we are going to have to respect parental autonomy and live with beauty pageants. We may disapprove

strongly when we hear rumours that 6-year-old US beauty pageant star Eden Wood, star of the TV programme 'Toddlers & Tiaras', had cosmetic botulinum toxin injections, but we should disapprove even more if her manager's claim is confirmed that Australians posted death threats on Eden's Facebook pages.

Beauty contests are superficiality personified. The children contribute only their looks and act as a vehicle for their parents to decorate and exploit. Dressing children to perform is different. Arguably, the merit or demerit depends on how much skill the child needs to perform and the degree of any sexualisation. There was a scandal in Brazil when a 7-year-old girl from one of Rio's top samba schools was chosen to lead its 2010 carnival procession. Carnival queens are usually scantily clad soap opera stars. A child protection official protested, 'We are not against kids participating in carnival; it's part of Brazilian culture. What we can't allow is putting a 7-year-old in a role that traditionally has a very sexual focus'.⁶ He might also have protested about nepotism: the girl's father owned the samba school.

Photographs by Belfast photographer Carrie McKee (<http://www.carriemckee.com/>) of young Belfast freestyle dancers strutting in garish costumes are confronting, but the article they illustrate³ and an interview with Carrie about her project⁷ are far more positive. Teachers report that freestyle dancing improved boys' and girls' self-esteem and helped some cope with bullying. Carrie did not ask the girls to pose; they naturally adopted poses like that of Casie Tate, pictured here with attitude. Apart from the costumes, these could be elite gymnasts posing. The parents of the children who attended West Belfast's Illusion Dance School say dance kept their children out of trouble and off the streets. That is a far cry from saying sexualisation of children will have girls walking the streets.

The main distinction between glitzy dancers and young children in elite sports, music or Tiger Mother-style education⁸ is the sexual suggestiveness of the dancers' costumes. But pre-pubescent girls often copy sexy dancers they see on television or in videos. Part of our outrage may be railing against children wanting to grow up too early for us.

In conclusion, I abhor the superficial, exploitative nature of child beauty pageants that demean children, but I feel they fall short of constituting actual child abuse. In contrast, activities like glamourised dancing require skill and, as long as the costumes are not too provocative, may do more good than harm.

References

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Freestyle dancer Casie Tate. Photo by Carrie McKee.