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FOR HER

Teaching our girls that beautiful doesn't mean "sexy"

Zrinka Peters | Jan 03, 2018

Retailers take note: Start respecting young women.

> *"Women in the United States [are] still not equal; their images [are] used to sell things. In some ways, I decided, women are showpieces in American society, too."* – Malala Yousafzai

When my 13-year old daughter and I went fall shopping to buy her some jeans, I was really struck by how much our shopping experience has changed in the past few years. It's been a long time since the princess-themed outfits or the bright Justice-style pieces grabbed her attention. My sweet girl, who had been homeschooled in her early years and felt gloriously free to wear the twirly skirts she loved almost every day, is now a middle-schooler in the public school system and feels the unfortunate pressure to fit in. On the fashion want-list? Bras and underwear from PINK, and anything from Hollister, Abercrombie, or Aeropostale.

I cringe walking into these stores with her, with their stick-thin, too-young models staring with joyless eyes from the posters as they flaunt their brand-new mini-curves. I ask the store clerk if they have any jeans that are not "super skinny," that could possibly leave a tiny bit of breathing room on my teen's slim body. She politely tells me they don't carry

anything else in store, but that they might have some "boyfriend" jeans online. My daughter sighs and opts for the least "skinny" of the meager options. Tops are a little easier to find, although the material is thin and we talk about how she will have to layer with tanks or camis so that her bra is covered. I silently grumble and wonder why retailers can't make girls' clothing using fabric that is thick enough to be warm and conceal underwear, like they do for the boys.

We look for a dress or skirt outfit to wear to church and again begin the search for one that doesn't look ridiculously short over her long legs. I know opinions differ as to what constitutes modesty, and I'm not insisting that the hem hits the knee, but *come on*, give me something that doesn't threaten to expose her backside if she leans over or gets hit by a light breeze. Give me some options! Here's one — wait — is that lingerie? Nope, she assures me that it's not. We leave and decide to continue the search online instead.

I'm left wondering when exactly this happened. When did the cute, functional, modest-enough clothes that were easy to find for my 8- to 10-year-old suddenly morph into these hyper-sexualized threads that force us to search so much harder for something appropriate that doesn't look like it was worn by the Waltons? Something 'pretty,' but not "sexy." Why the hard, fast push by retailers into an over-emphasis on sexuality for tweens and young teens?

She and I talk about taking care of ourselves and looking nice, about how her physical attractiveness is a good thing but it's just one part of her, and not the most important part. We talk about how much more important her character, goodness and intelligence are. She gets it.

But more and more, I think we need to be talking about the sometimes subtle, gray area of difference between "pretty" and "hot." A difference that is expressed not just through hem length, but through attitude and intention, too.

Expressing style and feminine beauty through clothing and physical appearance is one of the fun things about being a woman. But it seems that often "beautiful" and "sexy" are shown as two sides of the same coin, and our girls run the risk of confusing the two, thinking that you can't have one without the other. This beautiful=sexy mantra has been repeated so often that we can be forgiven for confusing the two.

But it's not true.

If our young girls are aiming for "sexy," there is so much room to fall short and feel inadequate, when they are comparing themselves to airbrushed actresses and Victoria's Secret models. Shooting for "sexy" as a young teen is a depressing goal, at a time when there are still a lot of math tests, extracurricular activities and movie nights to focus on.

This is not meant in any way to shame or blame teen girls. They are only eating what we, the adults in their lives, feed them.

But I don't want my daughter thinking that her value as a woman is dependent upon her physical attractiveness. We are failing our girls miserably if we place such a heavy emphasis on sexualized attractiveness at such a young age. We are failing to show them that their worth is not found in their ability to turn heads. Every woman in the world has that ability, if she takes off enough clothes.

If we want our girls to realize their worth as human beings, if we really want more respect and equality for women, then why are we buying our young teens clothes that can't help but distract anyone when they walk by? I'm looking at you, booty shorts. And why do so many of the major retailers feed into this hypocrisy by supplying us with provocative advertising and so many skin-tight jeans, tiny, flimsy dresses and see-through shirts?

You are already pretty, girls — no, you are absolutely beautiful. You are smart and sharp and capable, and made to shine, from the inside out.

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