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Why Do We Let Them Dress Like That?

Women of a liberated generation wrestle with their eager-to-grow-up daughters—and their own pasts

By JENNIFER MOSES

What teenage girl doesn't want to be attractive, sought-after and popular? And what mom doesn't want to help that cause?

Redux Pictures

In the
pale-turquoise
ladies' room,
they congregate

in front of the mirror, re-applying mascara and lip gloss, brushing their hair, straightening panty hose and gossiping: This one is "skanky," that one is "really cute," and so forth. Dressed in minidresses, perilously high heels, and glittery, dangling earrings, their eyes heavily shadowed in black-pearl and jade, they look like a flock of tropical birds. A few minutes later, they return to the dance floor, where they shake everything they've got under the party lights.

But for the most part, there isn't all that much to shake. This particular group of party-goers consists of 12- and 13-year-old girls. Along with their male counterparts, they are celebrating the bat mitzvah of a classmate in a cushy East Coast suburb.

In a few years, their attention will turn to the annual ritual of shopping for a prom dress, and by then their fashion tastes will have advanced still more. Having done this now for two years with my own daughter, I continue to be amazed by the plunging necklines, built-in push-up bras, spangles, feathers, slits and peek-a-boos. And try finding a pair of sufficiently "prommish" shoes designed with less than a 2-inch heel.

Jennifer Moses, author of a recent WSJ article "Why Do We Let Them Dress Like That?" talks with Kelsey Hubbard about the tempest her piece has provoked.

All of which brings me to a question: Why do so many of us not only permit our teenage daughters to dress like this—like prostitutes, if we're being honest with ourselves—but pay for them to do it with our AmEx cards?

Today's teen and preteen girls are bombarded with images and products that tout the benefits of sexual attraction. But must we as parents, give in to their desire to "dress like everyone else?" asks author Jennifer Moses. She talks with WSJ's Kelsey Hubbard.

I posed this question to a friend whose teenage daughter goes to an all-girls private school in New York. "It isn't that different from when we were kids," she said. "The girls in the sexy clothes are the fast girls. They'll have Facebook pictures of themselves opening a bottle of Champagne, like Paris Hilton. And sometimes the moms and dads are out there contributing to it, shopping with them, throwing them parties at clubs. It's almost like they're saying, 'Look how hot my daughter is.'" But why? "I think it's a bonding thing," she said. "It starts with the mommy-daughter manicure and goes on from there."

Live Chat

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I have a different theory. It has to do with how conflicted my own generation of women is about our own past, when many of us behaved in ways that we now regret. A woman I know, with two mature daughters, said, "If I could do it again, I wouldn't even have slept with my own husband before marriage. Sex is

the most powerful thing there is, and our generation, what did we know?"

We are the first moms in history to have grown up with widely available birth control, the first who didn't have to worry about getting knocked up. We were also the first not only to be free of old-fashioned fears about our reputations but actually pressured by our peers and the wider culture to find our true womanhood in the bedroom. Not all of us are former good-time girls now drowning in regret—I know women of my generation who waited until marriage—but that's certainly the norm among my peers.

So here we are, the feminist and postfeminist and postpill generation. We somehow survived our own teen and college years (except for those who didn't), and now, with the exception of some Mormons, evangelicals and Orthodox Jews, scads of us don't know how to teach our own sons and daughters not to give away their bodies so readily. We're embarrassed, and we don't want to be, God forbid, hypocrites.

Still, in my own circle of girlfriends, the desire to push back is strong. I don't know one of them who doesn't have feelings of lingering discomfort regarding her own sexual past. And not one woman I've ever asked about the subject has said that she wishes she'd "experimented" more.

As for the girls themselves, if you ask them why they dress the way they do, they'll say (roughly) the same things I said to my mother: "What's the big deal?" "But it's the style." "Could you be any more out of it?" What teenage girl doesn't want to be attractive, sought-after and popular?

And what mom doesn't want to help that cause? In my own case, when I see my daughter in drop-dead gorgeous mode, I experience something akin to a thrill—especially since I myself am somewhat past the age to turn heads.

In recent years, of course, promiscuity has hit new heights (it always does!), with "sexting" among preteens, "hooking up" among teens and college students, and a constant stream of semi-pornography from just about every media outlet. Varied sexual experiences—the more the better—are the current social norm.

I wouldn't want us to return to the age of the corset or even of the double standard, because a double standard that lets the promiscuous male off the hook while condemning his female counterpart is both stupid and destructive. If you're the campus mattress, chances are that you need therapy more than you need condemnation.

But it's easy for parents to slip into denial. We wouldn't dream of dropping our daughters off at college and saying: "Study hard and floss every night, honey—and for heaven's sake, get laid!" But that's essentially what we're saying by allowing them to dress the way they do while they're still living under our own roofs.

—Jennifer Moses is the author of "Bagels and Grits: A Jew on the Bayou" and "Food and Whine: Confessions of a New Millennium Mom."

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