

Countering marketers' messages to nation's girls

"Oh, Mom, look!"

At bedtime Friday night, my daughter and I sat laughing about sex stereotypes. I had retrieved a fragrance advertisement from the trash with Paris Hilton flashing a come-get-me pose. The ad describes the fragrance and its namesake as "sophisticated, sexy, sensual, high society party girl, 21st century socialite, trend-setting, glamorous and confident."

I had tossed the ad earlier that day but pulled it back out as an interesting object lesson.

We had just come back from the opening night for the excellent Project Girl exhibit at Edgewood College. Project Girl has been a yearlong engagement with middle school girls in the Madison area, exploring the effects of commercial advertising and mass media on their lives in discussion and art. (Susan Troller wrote about this on the front page of the March 2 issue of *The Capital Times*.)

There were girls' and other artists' depictions of real girls and of ways the media sexualizes and otherwise distorts their images. The program also included a presentation of girl-targeted marketing trends, images of girls and women, and examples of stereotypes, many of which I'd never noticed and many of which start very young.

The Friday evening audience was rewarded for braving a blustery night to attend.

We saw images showing how a racy adult culture is being aggressively marketed to teens, and how a phony teen party culture is marketed to preteens and younger girls.

We learned how marketers create the illusion of power, control and choice by offering preteen girls choices of lip gloss and tank tops.

Watching the media images flash by, I felt awash in 1950s stereotypes of princesses, tidy housewives, cooks and shop-

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pers (I had never properly noticed how many little girl toys have purses with them), but also "mean girls," party girls, and amazing displays of girls making boys and men happy by being sexy.

We saw "Math makes me dizzy" and "Little Hottie" T-shirts, Bling-Bling Barbie and Bratz dolls with pouty lips and sexy clothes marketed to little girls.

One of Wisconsin's greatest feminists, Lt. Gov. Barbara Lawton, challenged such stereotypes as an assault on a girl's sense of self. She told girls how much society needs their full, engaged and complex selves and urged them to find their muscle and "reject any compromise to your dignity."

I was pleased that she also asserted that to reject such images isn't to reject femininity or our gender identity.

Last month, the American Psychological Association issued a report decrying the growing sexualization of marketing and other media images targeting girls. The association's Task Force on the Sexu-

alization of Girls suggests it is likely that serious problems for girls will be demonstrated to result from such sexual stereotyping.

They note that studies have already shown the strong links between such sexual images and three of the most common mental health problems of girls and women: eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression. These as well as other messages are harmful to boys and how they view girls and women also.

For a parent, challenging a child's culture is a high-wire act. How do we criticize the cultural messages without criticizing the child? If they've been drawn in by the bombardment, which they may well have been, given the unrelenting and calculated strategies targeting this plum market sector, then it's hard for them — and us — to remember at whom our anger should be directed.

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I'm sure my daughter and I will disagree at times about clothing, trips to the mall and makeup. But Project Girl provided a creative forum for a crucial conversation between us and helped us decode destructive media messages together.

Suddenly, we read "party girl" and "confident" on the fragrance ad in a new way.

We realized that the marketers were working to create the glib association between their product and being worthwhile, a party girl, and therefore, a confident, social success.

Maybe discussing sex stereotypes isn't my choice for every bedtime talk. But I was grateful as I watched my daughter take the bait off the hook she was handed and toss it away.

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