

Even children who haven't seen pornography are affected by it

Perhaps the most well-known adage ever to come out of the advertising industry is, “Sex sells.”

These days, “sex sells” has become a cliché — a tired joke rolled out for [countless](#) cheeky [Super Bowl ads](#). Today, says sex educator and author Cindy Pierce, marketers and entertainers know they have to take the “sex sells” mantra to the next level to get attention.

“We used to say sex sells, but now it's sexual violence that sells,” Pierce said. “Once we become used to one thing or desensitized to it, it ratchets up.”

In the last 30 years, media — from advertising to TV to movies and music — have become more sexualized than ever. A [2011 study](#) from the University of Southern California Annenberg found that of the 100 top-grossing films of 2008, 39.8 percent of 13- to 20-year-old female characters wore sexually revealing attire compared to just 6.7 percent of 13- to 20-year-old male characters. A [2006 study](#) from Rand Corp. found that teens who listen to music with sexually explicit lyrics tend to have sex sooner than those who listen to other lyrics.

For Pierce and University of Texas at Austin psychologist Rebecca Bigler, there's one driving factor behind the sexualization of American mainstream media: Porn.

“The porn industry has seeped into mainstream media. You see it in stiletto heels that come from porn and thong underwear that we now sell to 10-year-olds,” Bigler said.

The accessibility and intensity of Internet pornography has led more companies — from [Google](#) to [Hyatt Hotels](#) and even [Playboy Magazine](#) — rethinking the prevalence of porn in everyday life. Yet pornography is only part of the problem, experts say, when sexualized portrayals in TV, music and movies continue to push the envelope of what is considered acceptable.

“It's not just the pornification of our culture, but the way that actual porn is influencing children's understanding of relationships that worries me,” Bigler said. “It's argued now that children are affected by porn even if they haven't seen it.”

As Pierce writes in her new book, [“Sexploitation: Helping Kids Develop Healthy Sexuality in a Porn-Driven World,”](#) the relationship between easily accessible pornography and mainstream entertainment media is a complex one, and today's children will pay the consequences with their future relationships.

“When everyone is used to the message porn brings — that sex is violent and devoid of emotion — it creeps into everything and that becomes the new standard,” Pierce said. “Now that everyone has access to porn on the phone and laptop, they're emulating what they see in porn. And when they don't get the results they've come to expect, that's when it starts to really eat away at someone.”

Mainstreaming porn culture

Pierce writes in her book that because of the availability of the Internet, kids — particularly boys — can potentially see porn younger than ever, leading them to associate normal adult sex with pornography much earlier in life than previous generations who had to go to a lot of effort to

sneak and hide magazines or physical photos.

“He's got all these ideas about how bodies are supposed to look and how they respond to sexual activity based on pornography rather than reality,” Pierce said. “I hear all the time, 'I've read "50 Shades of Grey" and I know what women like.' That's terrifying to me.”

Author and California State University sexuality associate professor [Shira Tarrant](#) worries that because kids see porn younger than ever now, it's also harder for them to separate the fantasy and violence of porn from the reality of how sex should be.

“My concerns about pornography is that it makes it seem like sex happens by magic — it just happens and nothing ever goes wrong,” Tarrant said. “With any kind of media, if young people are immersed in messaging that portrays a skewed idea of relationships and don't talk about what we want our relationships to look like, we have real problems on our hands.”

While porn can have a huge effect on kids who see it, Pierce says other forms of media like music, video games and advertising can subtly reinforce the messages porn sends.

”It sort of adds another layer to the whole desensitization cycle,” Pierce said. “If your son is playing ‘Grand Theft Auto’ and he's looking at porn and he's internalizing all these ads and uncensored YouTube and music videos, he's marinating in this idea that women like violence — that they like to be raped and roughed up — and then they think that's what sex is like, that's what I've got to do.”

Tarrant said the negative messages of sexualized media are exacerbated by the fact that American culture is anxious about talking openly about sex. To not do so, she worries, will only create more problems for children.

“We need to have conversations with kids about sex and relationships, but also about media literacy,” Tarrant said. “What kind of message does it send if we become accustomed to seeing women's bodies on display for sexual consumption? It sends the message that that's what women's bodies are for.”

The Lolita effect

The overly sexualized messages of mainstream media also impact girls, but not in the same way. Bigler says girls may internalize porn and sexualized entertainment media differently than boys — rather than seeing porn as a "how-to" for sex, they think they're learning what men expect of them, and they prioritize living up to those expectations, as Bigler's research shows.

In a series of studies published in 2014, Bigler and a colleague at Arizona State University [found](#) that girls between ages 11 and 15 who show signs that they'd internalized sexualized media messages (like preferring skimpier clothing and entertainment media that focused on becoming attractive or getting a boyfriend) performed worse on Texas standardized tests than girls who did not prefer sexualized messaging.

In [another study](#) of girls of the same age, researchers observed girls who were given five minutes to prepare for a student-produced news broadcast when they didn't know they were being watched. The girls who displayed a lower preference for sexualized media spent their five

minutes studying the script, while the others spent that time fussing over their hair and makeup.

“Girls are looking to media models and because images are so altered through manipulation like Photoshop, they can’t possibly measure up,” Bigler said. “They’re putting effort into being beautiful and yet those efforts are not going to pay off because they’re not going to look like Beyonce.”

The internalization of these standards is called “the Lolita effect,” a term coined by University of Iowa gender professor Meenakshi Gigi Durham in her [2008 book](#) of the same name.

Boiled down, the term indicates that today’s girls and young women create ideas of themselves based on media messages that paint the “ideal woman” in limiting, salacious strokes: She’s most often white, smart but submissive, slender yet curvy and she likes rough sex.

It’s a message Pierce says people don’t even have to seek out — anyone can find it on the nearest magazine stand.

"If you look at fashion magazine ads, for example, when you see them all together, it's almost violent. You see these stylized photos of women on their knees, wearing leashes, somehow in a submissive position," Pierce said. "It's gone beyond objectification now."

Whether the exaggerated standards are directed at boys or girls, the effect is often the same, Pierce said — both have internalized unrealistic depictions of sex and relationships that often don’t feel natural to them. To cope with that feeling when they enter relationships in high school or college, many turn to alcohol to shed any remaining inhibitions, Pierce said.

“The pressure and the expectations of what they 'should' be doing is huge. They think, 'If I want to do this, I have to do things that my inner compass doesn’t say is right for me,’” Pierce said. “To do that, they disconnect with alcohol.”

Starting young

Unrealistic expectations of beauty and behavior can take root very subtly in a child’s early years, Bigler says — and a first source is often Disney.

"A lot of parents think when their 6-year-old wants to wear crop tops or whatever that she doesn't know about sex, she just thinks they're cute. That's totally wrong," Bigler said. "Girls as young as 5, 6 and 7 don't understand intercourse, but they know that sort of thing is meant to attract boys. Disney movies send that message pretty strong."

But Bigler says parents don't need to avoid the classics like "Sleeping Beauty" or "Cinderella." Rather, parents should use them as talking points for children as a primer for talking about sexual reality vs. fantasy.

"The solution is to talk to your kids about it," Bigler said. "Introduce the idea of, 'Why does he like her? Is it because she's kind and loyal and smart? Why should he want to kiss her? What should he do?'"

Pierce also advocates talking to children about their bodies, sex and the realities of it before the Internet and friends fill their heads with misinformation. Censoring the onslaught of media

available, Tarrant said, just isn't realistic.

"As popular as parental controls are, they just don't work. There's always a work-around," Tarrant said. "Those won't help kids grow into healthy sexuality. Having conversations will."

Because children are exposed to media (and, potentially, pornography) so young these days, that means having a series of talks with children — likely much sooner than many parents are comfortable with. Pierce says body confidence talks should begin at age 3, while talking about sex should happen in the first grade.

"If you don't tackle it at home, there's the playground, there's the Internet and the misinformation takes root. The people who think they can stop their children from being exposed are naive," Pierce said. "If you're one more voice in their head rather than just their friends or the Internet, it will give them context that can help them land on their feet in adulthood."