Addressing the Sexualization of Girls Through Comprehensive Programs, Advocacy, and Systemic Change: Implications for Professional School Counselors

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While today’s girls are learning that they can achieve at the highest educational and professional levels, they also receive strong cultural messages that portray girls and women according to limiting sexual stereotypes. The trend toward the sexualization of girls is increasing in contemporary culture and can negatively impact girls’ academic, career, and personal development. In this article, we describe the impact of these trends on girls’ development and provide interventions for use in comprehensive school counseling programs.

Girls in early adolescence are earnestly searching for guides to help them answer the question, “Who am I?” As they look to popular culture for answers, today’s girls encounter contradictory gender role expectations that send mixed messages about girls and women (LeCroy, 2004). On the one hand, girls are taught to be strong and competitive, to exemplify “girl power,” and to achieve at exceptional educational and professional levels. On the other hand, contemporary adolescents are bombarded with cultural messages that portray girls and women according to limiting sexual stereotypes (Murnen, Smolak, Mills, & Good, 2003). Further, they are socialized to believe that their power and worth are primarily based upon their sexual appeal. According to the American Psychological Association’s Report of the Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls released in 2007, this trend toward the sexualization of girlhood is increasing in contemporary popular culture and can be limiting to girls’ academic achievement, career aspirations, and psychological well-being (APA, 2007b).

It is important for professional school counselors to be aware of this trend for several reasons. First, according to the ASCA National Model® (American School Counselor Association, 2005), one role of the school counselor is to work toward removing institutional and global barriers that impede student learning and to promote the academic achievement of all students. Because APA’s (2007b) Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls found that the sexualization of girls may inhibit academic achievement, and thereby limit school success and career opportunities, it is a topic worthy of consideration by school counselors.

Second, there is a clear ethical imperative for school counselors to address this issue. Both ASCA’s (2004) Ethical Standards for School Counselors and the ASCA National Model (2005) charge professional school counselors with promoting social equity through advocacy and leadership as social change agents. Having a social justice perspective and a philosophy that all students are capable, valuable members of society is essential to the school counselor’s role as a change advocate (ASCA, 2005). Further, the American Counseling Association’s Code of Ethics asserts that counselors are obligated to advocate for systemic change on behalf of clients, whenever current environmental barriers exist that inhibit client growth and development (ACA, 2005, A.6.a). In addition, current best-practice guidelines for working with girls assert that counselors should understand the impact of gender on individual development as well as the influences of contemporary gendered social forces that operate in students’ lives (APA, 2007a). As suggested by the guidelines, these social forces include the effects of media in popular culture; the current portrayal of women as thin, young, and sexualized; and the cultural preoccupation with weight, shape, and appearance as determinants of self-worth (APA).

Because of their professional orientation and skills, school counselors are uniquely suited to play a pivotal role in creating effective change in this area. To this end, the purpose of this article is to (a) describe the sexualization of girls and the process through which girls internalize limiting cultural messages during the adolescent period; (b) delineate the consequences of this internalization process on students’ academic, career, and personal development; and (c) outline specific, concrete interventions that professional school counselors can use within the context of comprehensive programs.
SEXUALIZATION OF GIRLS

When girls’ worth is reduced to their value as a sexual object to be admired by others, they are sexualized and subsequently devalued. According to APA’s (2007b) Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, the sexualization of a person is defined in the following ways: (a) when a person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics; (b) when a person is held to a narrowly defined standard that equates physical attractiveness with being sexy; (c) when a person is sexually objectified, made into a thing for others’ sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or (d) when sexuality is inappropriately imposed on a person. These conditions are increasingly present in popular culture as girls are portrayed according to gender stereotypes (Lamb & Brown, 2006; Ward & Friedman, 2006) and are measured against a narrowly defined standard of physical attractiveness and sexual appeal as a determinant of their identity and worth (Barber, 1998; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Levine & Smolak, 2002).

It should be noted that problems related to adolescent girls’ sexualization cut across both race and class (APA, 2007b). It also should be noted that while boys are also affected by sexualization, it does not seem to pervade their overall sense of self the way that it does for girls (Poltc-Lynch, Myers, Kilmartin, Forssmann-Falck, & Kliewer, 1998).

The impact of sexualization on girls’ identity development and self-esteem is particularly critical during the early adolescent period. According to Erikson’s (1963) psychosocial development theory, the main task of adolescence is to understand and develop one’s own identity. Erikson contended that adolescents who do not resolve this developmental issue become confused about their role or place in the world. Bowen (1978) suggested that adolescents begin to differentiate from their families of origin, often looking to popular culture and to peer groups to gain a sense of who they are and where they want to fit in. Differentiation, however, becomes particularly complex for girls as they desire to achieve autonomy while also maintaining strong connections with others (Gilligan, 1991; Jordan, 2003). As girls attempt to develop a sense of self within the context of their relationships, they are socialized to look to sexualized societal ideals for guidance on how to appear and act (Moradi, Dirks, & Matteson, 2005) and learn that their sexual appeal will be the most direct avenue for achieving the social success they desire.

One of the strongest conveyors of these societal ideals is the mass media. Girls in adolescence are active consumers of media and are highly attuned to absorb its messages (Ward & Friedman, 2006). From television programming, movies, the Internet, computer games, music videos and lyrics, magazines, and the marketing of sexy clothing and products to young girls (e.g., Bratz dolls wearing sexualized clothing such as miniskirts, fishnet stockings, and feather boas; thong underwear sized for young girls printed with slogans such as “wink wink”; Playboy Bunny merchandise marketed to preteens), students are frequently exposed to sexualized, unrealistic ideals of how girls and women should look and act. This is of concern in that the more frequently students are exposed to sexualized media images and messages, the more likely it is that they will adopt attitudes that reduce girls and women to sexualized stereotypes (APA, 2007b; Martino et al., 2006; Ward & Friedman).

Girls also are highly influenced by family and peers, and for better or worse, these sources can mediate the messages received from popular culture. When parents adopt sociocultural messages regarding the importance of thinness, beauty, and sexiness and transmit them to their daughters, criticize girls about their weight and shape, or model the centrality of physical appearance in their own lives, girls begin to evaluate themselves according to these same standards (Haworth-Hoeppner, 2000; McKinley, 1999). Girls are influenced by their peer groups, adopting similar attitudes about the importance of appearance to their overall self-worth (Levine & Smolak, 2002; Paxton, Schutz, Wertheim, & Muir, 1999; Striegel-Moore & Cachelin, 1999). In sum, when girls are inundated with, and readily absorb, sexualized media images, and when these messages are reinforced at home, with peers, and at school, the sexualization of girls and women becomes normalized. Over time, it is of no surprise that girls begin to internalize these external standards for measuring women’s worth as a criterion for evaluating their own self-worth (APA, 2007b). In the paragraphs that follow, we discuss a prominent theory for understanding this internalization process and then delineate relevant consequences for girls.

INTERNALIZATION OF CULTURAL STANDARDS: SELF-OBJECTIFICATION THEORY

The process of the internalization of cultural standards about appearance and worth is best conceptualized through self-objectification theory (Fredricksen & Roberts, 1997). According to this theory, girls are socialized to overvalue a sexualized appearance. In addition, many girls have personal experiences in which they are treated in a sexualized manner. As a result of these cultural and personal experi-
ences, many girls begin to adopt this stance as well, internalizing societal ideals of beauty and the importance of sexualized appearance. As this occurs, they begin to focus on their bodies from a third-person (e.g., “How do I look to others?”) rather than a first-person (e.g., “How do I feel?”) perspective. Girls and women who self-objectify chronically monitor themselves in anticipation of how others might perceive them. When they evaluate and assess how they conform to cultural standards and how others might be judging their appearance, they become preoccupied and feel as if they are constantly being “checked out” by others, particularly males (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998). As argued by the APA task force, girls self-objectify when they “evaluate and control their own bodies more in terms of their sexual desirability to others than in terms of their own desires, health, wellness, achievements, and competence” (APA, 2007b, p. 21). While many of the studies supporting this theory were initially conducted with college women, recent research also has documented that young girls as early as age 11 are already experiencing self-objectification and its negative consequences (Lindberg, Grabe, & Hyde, 2007).

McKinley (1999) identified three major components of self-objectification: (a) body surveillance, (b) body shame, and (c) control beliefs. First, body surveillance, the chronic and habitual monitoring of one’s appearance, results in appearance anxiety and fear that one will be evaluated negatively. The APA task force (2007b) noted that the current fashion trends for teen girls (e.g., tight-fitting, stomach- and cleavage-baring shirts, micro-miniskirts, and low-rise jeans) contribute to increased levels of body surveillance in today’s girls.

Second, body surveillance results in body shame. Shame occurs when a girl internalizes the standards of idealized media images and feels she does not meet these standards. It also can occur when she perceives that her appearance is judged negatively by others. These negative evaluations result in the experience of shame as a person (i.e., she does not just negatively evaluate her appearance, she feels she is a bad person when she does not meet these standards; McKinley, 1999). Body shame is highly associated with body dissatisfaction, a risk factor for a host of negative psychological outcomes, including poor self-esteem, depression, maladaptive eating practices, and eating disorders (McKinley; Moradi et al., 2005; Polivy & Herman, 2002; Tolman, Impett, Tracy, & Michael, 2006).

The third aspect of self-objectification is the development of control beliefs. When a girl views herself as a sexualized object, she also will be more likely to believe that she should control her appearance and that with enough hard work and effort, she can reach the culturally prescribed ideal. Even though the ideal standards conveyed through the media are largely impossible to achieve, the media also transmit the message that the body is infinitely mutable (Heinberg, 1996) and that with enough work any individual can achieve the sexualized ideal.

There is a considerable body of research indicating that the process of self-objectification results in negative psychological outcomes for girls (e.g., Lindberg et al., 2007; McKinley, 1999). There is also an important line of research that demonstrates the specific effects of self-objectification on school achievement, including girls’ cognitive performance, career aspirations, and experiences of sexual harassment and victimization, discussed in the sections to follow.

**Impediments to Cognitive Performance**

Self-objectification can have a negative impact on girls’ academic performance and career aspirations. There is evidence that when girls engage in self-objectification, they experience a decrease in their available mental resources needed for challenging academic tasks, potentially leading to decreases in their cognitive performance (Fredrickson et al., 1998; Gapinski, Brownell, & LaFrance, 2003). In addition, self-objectification can fragment consciousness so that a girl has decreased opportunities to experience peak motivational states (i.e., flow; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In one study of college students, participants were asked to try on either a swimsuit or a sweater and observe themselves in a full-length mirror with no observers present. The women in the swimsuit condition performed worse on a subsequent complex math test compared to the women wearing a sweater. This difference did not occur with the male participants in the study, who performed equally well under both conditions (Fredrickson et al.). While this study was conducted with college students, it follows that when an adolescent girl is engaging in chronic body surveillance, evaluation, and anticipation of others’ judgment, her mental resources are not fully directed toward her academic work. If she is overly concerned about what others are thinking about her body, it stands to reason that she will not perform to her fullest potential in academic or future professional environments.

**Impacting Career Aspirations**

Another line of research relevant to academic functioning includes studies on stereotype threat. Stereotype threat occurs when a person’s group membership is made salient at the time a cognitive test is being administered, so that common stereotypes about one’s group (e.g., “girls are not good at math”) are activated for the individual. The test taker is then threatened that she risks being judged by or treated in terms of those stereotypes, or that the
negative stereotype could provide a plausible explanation for her performance (Davies, Spencer, Quinn, & Gerhardstein, 2002). For example, several studies have found that young women asked to view gender-stereotypic commercials (e.g., examples of women who are only concerned about their appearance and become overwhelmed with business-oriented tasks) actually performed worse on a subsequent math test when compared to women who did not watch the commercials (Davies et al.). Although these studies measure the short-term effects of stereotype activation in women, it is plausible that these gender stereotypes are activated many times per day in adolescent girls as a result of comments from others (including family, peers, teachers, and school administrators) and from frequently viewing popular media (Halpern, 2006).

The academic consequences of self-objectification and stereotype threat are particularly disturbing if girls perform less well in math and science classes as a result. If girls are vulnerable to such stereotypes, they may opt out of upper-level math and science classes if they believe they will not be successful (Halpern, 2006). Further, if girls are overly focused on their appearance and buy into stereotypes about how girls should look and act, they may make academic choices that are based upon additional gendered stereotypes (i.e., girls are not good at math and science) that could limit future educational and career aspirations (APA, 2007b; Halpern).

**Sexual Harassment and Victimization**

Another consequence of girls’ self-objectification relevant to school outcomes is sexual harassment and victimization. When both girls and boys are frequently exposed to sexualized media messages regarding women’s value and worth, they begin to adopt these attitudes and learn to see women as simplified types or objects, not as people. As this occurs, it becomes increasingly acceptable for students to treat girls and women with less respect, compassion, and empathy and instead to act in disrespectful and sexually degrading ways (Lamb & Brown, 2006). This can result in sexual harassment, which most commonly includes making sexual comments, jokes, and gestures; sending sexually suggestive pictures, photos, or messages; spreading sexual rumors; leering or staring at someone’s body in a sexual way; or touching, grabbing, blocking, or cornering an individual in a sexual way (Timmerman, 2005).

Research in this area indicates that there are significant, negative effects of sexual harassment on academic development. Some of these consequences include not wanting to talk as much in class, having difficulty concentrating, obtaining a lower grade on a test or paper than expected, changing one’s route to school, avoiding specific people, changing school attendance patterns, and feeling more self-conscious and less confident (Duffy, Warcham, & Walsh, 2004).

While both boys and girls are victims of sexual harassment, the consequences are more problematic for girls. Girls report more severe forms of unwanted sexual behavior, experience greater decreases to overall self-esteem, and are more likely to be frightened or upset by the experience than are boys (Murnen & Smolak, 2000; Timmerman, 2005). Further, when girls internalize and accept sexualized stereotypes of women such as those displayed in the media, they may learn to view sexual harassment as normal and expected behavior from men (Grube & Lens, 2003). In today’s culture in which girls are socialized to be sexy in order to be acceptable or valued, girls may even confuse sexual harassment with the sexual attention and acceptance that they desire (Grube & Lens). When sexualized attitudes and behaviors are normalized in a school, girls will be less confident in labeling or reporting these behaviors as sexual harassment. This may in turn influence their decisions to report more severe forms of unwanted sexual behavior in the future, including sexual assault and rape.

While girls who internalize sexualized messages might be more likely to tolerate sexual harassment, they also may be at risk for other types of sexual victimization. In an environment in which girls believe that the only way to achieve social acceptance is through their sexuality, they may present themselves to others in an overly sexualized manner. For example, many girls post sexual pictures of themselves on blogs or personal Web spaces (Facebook, Myspace, etc.). These online self-presentations may follow cultural trends, but they inadvertently make girls vulnerable to sexual predators. This exposure increases the risk for men to view girls as sexual objects and blurs the lines between appropriate and inappropriate sexual relationships (Russell & Purcell, 2008). As potential perpetrators may have access to these girls through online interactions, the risk of exposure to offenders, exploitation, and victimization is increased.

In sum, the trend toward the sexualization of girls is clearly limiting and can be harmful to students’ academic, career, and personal well-being. Many school administrators, faculty, staff, and parents may be aware of these trends but may not recognize the potential harm that might result (Lamb & Brown, 2006). School counselors can play an important role in increasing awareness of these issues and in implementing effective interventions for change, as outlined below.

**INTERVENING THROUGH COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAMMING**

As part of comprehensive school counseling pro-
program delivery, professional school counselors should provide a myriad of direct and indirect services to students and multisystemic stakeholders (ASCA, 2005), such as family, school faculty/staff, administration, and community members (Cobia & Henderson, 2007). Services provided that may be particularly salient to the topic of sexualization of girls include (a) large-group guidance, (b) small-group counseling, (c) individual counseling, (d) faculty in-service training, (e) parent workshops, and (f) multisystemic advocacy. We will give specific suggestions for activities and programming for each of these services. In addition, Appendix A provides a resource list of books and Web sites that school counselors can utilize for program design and planning purposes.

Self-Awareness

Prior to beginning any interventions, it is important that school counselors examine their own level of self-awareness. According to ASCA’s (2004) Ethical Standards, E.2.C, a school counselor “possesses knowledge and understanding about how oppression, racism, discrimination and stereotyping affects her/him personally and professionally” (p. 4). This self-knowledge will include the biases and stereotypes that he or she holds regarding gender, gender roles (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes, 2007; Gibson & Mitchell, 2008; Remley & Herlihy, 2007), and his or her own individual development of critical consciousness (Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hayes, 2007). Female school counselors also need to understand the manifestation of internalized oppression in their own lives. Internalized oppression may be defined as an individual believing the stereotypes about one’s group and then behaving in accordance with those stereotypes (Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hayes). In order to gain more insight and information, and to acquire skills for addressing the sexualization and self-objectification of girls and women, counselors can attend workshops, seminars, and conferences that explore gender issues; enroll in courses in gender studies at local colleges or universities; join counseling organizations that focus on gender equity; and read literature focused on gender (Choate, 2008; Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hayes).

Large-Group Guidance

One direct service component of a comprehensive school counseling program according to the ASCA National Model (2005) is large-group guidance. Large-group guidance involves classroom presentations designed to promote student competencies and standards aimed at fostering personal social, academic, and career development. An important skill that can be taught through large-group guidance is media literacy: the ability to identify, evaluate, and resist media messages (Levine, Piran, & Stoddard, 1999). In this approach, students learn how to become active consumers—rather than passive victims—of media influence (Levine & Piran, 2001). Media literacy can be conceptualized as a four-step process: (a) identifying harmful cultural images, (b) exploring and deconstructing their underlying messages, (c) resisting the message being sent, and (d) actively working to change these messages.

One way to assist students in identifying stereotypes might be through the following exercise: Have students divide into small groups and define the word stereotype. The counselors can ask students to give examples of stereotypes about boys and girls portrayed in the media. Next, they can list situations in which the stereotype might be false. Finally, counselors can process with students the dangers of stereotypes and can help students examine the influence of different types of media including music, magazines, movies, and video clips. As part of this discussion, school counselors can provide education about the unrealistic, unattainable nature of many media images. For example, students can learn how images that represent the sexy beauty ideal are actually created through intricate strategies used to enhance models’ appearances, including airbrushing, soft-focus cameras, digital editing, cosmetology, or cosmetic surgery (Groez et al., 2002).

When students have learned to identify stereotypes, they can begin to question the explicit and implicit messages embedded within various media sources. The Media Education Foundation (2004) suggests that girls can explore such questions as, “What is the real purpose of this advertisement? Will buying this product help me have the life portrayed in this ad? What are the consequences of these messages for girls? For boys? For all students?” (See Appendix A for resources.) A final aspect of media literacy is to take action on this social issue. Students can become involved in a media activism project through which they can become empowered to make a difference in changing harmful cultural norms. An example of such a project is the National Eating Disorders Association’s Media Watchdog program (www.NationalEatingDisorders.org), a letter-writing campaign for people who wish to write letters of support or protest regarding advertisements containing harmful messages.

In addition to using large-group guidance to promote media literacy, activities that promote a strong identity, a sense of positive regard toward self and others, and generalized self-efficacy will encourage protective factors and the development of resiliency to buffer adolescents from internalizing negative media messages. This will further aid in reducing the potential to self-objectify. Other guidance curricula and activities that encourage students to increase
social support networks and that foster involvement in extracurricular activities will be helpful in reducing risks associated with this issue (APA, 2007b).

Another important consideration in designing and implementing large-group guidance is how to handle student reactions to the guidance lessons. School counselors should be aware that individual student interpretations of classroom guidance material may prompt a myriad of reactions, including personal disclosures and strong feelings. The counselor should anticipate possible scenarios and be prepared to address students individually if affected (Stone, 2005).

Small-Group Counseling
Small-group counseling is another direct service component of a comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2005; Erford, 2007) and could be offered for students who express a need or desire for further exploration of this topic. School counselors can use popular media and media literacy strategies (see Appendix A) for facilitation of this topic, or they may choose to use existing curricula for facilitating groups with a focus on understanding how cultural messages are internalized with subsequent development of self-objectifying thoughts. However, school counselors should be sure that messages and values conveyed in the curriculum promote positive self-esteem and critical consciousness regarding cultural messages.

One example of a girl empowerment group curriculum is the “Go Grrrls” curriculum (LeCroy & Daley, 2001). This curriculum contains six units covering (a) being a girl in today’s society, (b) establishing a positive self-image, (c) establishing independence, (d) making and keeping friends, (e) what to do when overwhelmed, and (f) planning for the future. This particular curriculum has been shown to significantly, positively impact a myriad of outcomes, including self-efficacy, body image, and attitude toward attractiveness (LeCroy, 2004). Another possible resource for small-group counseling is the free, downloadable activities from the Turn Beauty Inside Out action kit (www.tbio.org) for girls interested in advocacy. Girls also can join letter-writing campaigns such as those supported through the Internet group Hardy Girls, Healthy Women (www.hardygirlshealthywomen.org).

In addition to facilitating small groups, school counselors coordinate other peer and cross-age programming, such as girl-to-girl mentoring (Erford, 2007), in which the oversexualization of girls could be addressed through providing role models in the school environment. Further, school counselors can help girls link with professional women through girl empowerment network organizations such as Girls for a Change (www.girlsforachange.org) and the Girl Scouts.

Individual Counseling
Girls struggling with issues around a sexualized self-concept may need individual counseling in order to maximize their potential as students. Through individual counseling, school counselors can help girls identify ways in which they have begun to self-objectify by increasing their awareness of how cultural messages have influenced them and their thoughts about themselves. To bolster girls’ sense of identity and worth, school counselors can encourage girls to trust their own values regarding how they should look and act, rather than relying on external standards. To accomplish this, counselors can assist girls in developing an internally derived value system and an internal locus of control so that they can rely less on cultural ideals and others’ opinions regarding the importance of appearance. Identity development also is enhanced when girls develop supportive relationships and are encouraged to create a unique identity within the context of those relationships.

Further, school counselors can use cognitive behavioral approaches to change students’ maladaptive beliefs about the overvaluation of appearance in determining self-worth or about using unrealistic media images as standards of comparison (Strachan & Cash, 2002). For example, they can replace the thought, “I must look like the pop star in these videos,” with the more rational belief, “These images are altered and don’t really represent what girls are like. I don’t have to look or dress like this in order to feel good about myself.” Additional information about changing irrational beliefs regarding appearance can be found in Cash’s (1997) psychoeducational workbook for improving negative body image.

Faculty/Administrator In-Service Training
When working with faculty and administration, it is important that school counselors remind faculty members to use culturally relevant strategies that include the elimination of gender bias in the classroom. Through faculty in-service training, counselors can help protect against stereotype threat with girls (Davies, Spencer, & Steele, 2005) by making faculty more aware of this problem. Important information to cover includes (a) ways in which gender biases are reflected in language (such as calling girls “drama queens,” “divas,” or “princesses”) and through other media; (b) what self-objectifying is and how it occurs; and (c) reminders that gender differences in test scores are based on averages and are not predictive of what any individual can achieve (Halpern, 2006). Additionally, faculty in-service training provides an opportunity for school counselors to disseminate to other professionals the findings from APA’s (2007b) task force report. Finally, counselors can provide training for faculty as they incorporate media literacy activities into their classrooms.
Parent Workshops
School counselors should regularly conduct parent or caregiver workshops as part of a comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2005). Counselors can help parents understand their role in helping their daughters think critically about cultural and media messages—and mitigate the potential to self-object—through designing parent workshops or hosting a girls summit on the topic. To effectively conduct a parent workshop on this topic, counselors can market the program through flyers, newsletters, and Web sites. A format for the workshop could include (a) welcoming parents, (b) covering the issue and consequences to girls through a psychoeducational format, (c) facilitating an activity, and (d) giving parents resources and suggestions for implementing the activity at home with their own children. Suggested areas of focus might include the following.

Values clarification. School counselors can encourage parents to assess their priorities in terms of the values and qualities they hope to instill in their children. Ideally these will encompass a broad range of nonappearance qualities such as self-respect, assertiveness, caring about others, wisdom, self-awareness, individuality, confidence, motivation, and spirituality (APA, 2007b; National Eating Disorders Association, 2004; Smolak, 1999). It is helpful for parents to provide encouraging, positive comments about their daughters’ strengths in these areas, rather than overemphasizing culturally defined standards for physical attractiveness as the primary measure of their worth. Further, parents should examine ways in which they have adopted attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that reflect an overvaluation of appearance in their own lives, as this modeling has a direct impact on the way that their daughters will prioritize this issue (McKinley, 1999).

Extracurricular involvement. Parents also can help girls become involved in a variety of school, volunteer, or work activities that do not focus on the importance of appearance and that provide them with opportunities to develop strengths in multiple life areas (APA, 2007b). Sports involvement, particularly team sports that do not emphasize thinness for performance or success, can foster a girl’s appreciation for her body and how it functions and performs rather than solely for how it looks (APA). This is particularly important in that developing an appreciation of body functionality (versus body appearance) is a protective factor against the development of negative body image and maladaptive eating practices (Avalos & Tylka, 2006). Further, sports involvement can enhance a girl’s sense of self-efficacy and overall self-esteem (APA; Lehman & Koerner, 2004; Richman & Shaffer, 2000).

Co-viewing of media. While parents should allow for autonomy, they also can demonstrate their willingness to understand teen girl culture. The best way to do this is through co-viewing of media (e.g., watching their daughter’s favorite television program with her, listening to her music, reading the lyrics of her favorite songs with her, renting and viewing movies together, leafing through issues of her preferred magazines; APA, 2007b). Rather than condemning her choices, parents can work to open up a dialogue about their daughter’s preferences. Parents then can assist daughters in identifying gendered stereotypes through asking questions (e.g., “I wonder why the girls are always dancing in the background rather than playing their own instruments in these videos?”) and by helping them begin to challenge harmful media messages. For example, parents and daughters can comment when offensive advertisements or programs appear on television. It is important for parents to remain mindful that their goal should be not to ban teen media from their homes entirely but rather to assist their daughters in developing a critical, reflective voice in responding to popular culture (Lamb & Brown, 2006).

Providing resources. School counselors also can give parents resources and information for discussing this topic with their child at home through letters and information packets containing book and Web-site lists (Erford, 2007). If the school has a parent resource center, counselors can stock books of interest on this topic, such as Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers’ Schemes (Lamb & Brown, 2006). Counselors also can give information to families who want to take a stance against the sexualization of girls by becoming involved in activism for change. For example, Dads and Daughters and the Campaign for a Commercial-free Childhood created a letter-writing campaign that resulted in the cancellation of a line of dolls based on the Pussycat Dolls (Goldner, 2006). As previously mentioned, the National Eating Disorders Association’s Media Watchdog program also supports letter-writing campaigns to advertisement offenders. Another avenue for activism is a boycott program called “Girlcught” (www.tbio.org). These and other Web sites for taking action or for locating more information are provided in Appendix A.

Multisystemic Advocacy
While addressing this issue with parents, students, and other stakeholders is important, school counselors also can advocate for policy changes to address this problem on a larger scale. Counselors can advocate for and promote school-level systemic change by questioning current practices and the status quo (Bailey et al., 2007; Stone, 2005), educating others, giving positive constructive feedback, and suggesting concrete changes (Cobia & Henderson, 2007).
However, it is important to recognize that change should not be limited to written policies or procedures, as the stated values of schools are not the only messages that may be conveyed to students. School counselors also should attend to the hidden curriculum, the unintentional messages students receive at school, as these may even be in direct opposition to stated policy and intended practice (Cobia & Henderson). The hidden curriculum might include traditions, interactions, messages in media and materials used at school, the implicit rules, or the behaviors of faculty and staff that may perpetuate stereotypes and further marginalize groups of students. The most effective way to combat the hidden curriculum is through the deliberate design of interventions and programming around issues such as the ones raised throughout this article.

CONCLUSION

The cultural trend toward the portrayal of girls according to limiting social stereotypes is increasing in current Western societies. Many girls are attending to these messages, thereby learning that their worth and value should be based primarily upon their sexual appeal. As a result, they experience consequences that are potentially harmful to their overall well-being and to their academic achievement. It is clear that a multilevel approach is needed to address an issue that is so deeply embedded in our contemporary cultural fabric. While this is a challenging task, school counselors are in a unique position to effect change in this important area, as they possess the knowledge and skills to design and facilitate comprehensive programs that can ultimately impact all school members and their communities.

References


# APPENDIX A

## School Counselor Resource List for Designing Interventions to Address the Sexualization of Girls

### Web Sites

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<tr>
<th>Web Address</th>
<th>Specific Topic</th>
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<td><a href="http://www.media-awareness.ca">www.media-awareness.ca</a></td>
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<td><a href="http://www.commercialfreechildhood.org">www.commercialfreechildhood.org</a></td>
<td>Advocacy for girls</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.commercialfreechildhood.org">www.commercialfreechildhood.org</a></td>
<td>Advocacy project for positive media</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org">www.nationaleatingdisorders.org</a></td>
<td>Eating disorders</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.girlsforchange.org">www.girlsforchange.org</a></td>
<td>Girl empowerment/activism/mentoring</td>
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<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.girlsinc.org">www.girlsinc.org</a></td>
<td>Media literacy, leadership, community action</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.hardygirlshealthywomen.org">www.hardygirlshealthywomen.org</a></td>
<td>Focus on relationships, context, environments, and activism</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.genausten.org">www.genausten.org</a></td>
<td>Girl empowerment</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.empower.org/svpi.htm">www.empower.org/svpi.htm</a></td>
<td>Information about the Empower Training Institute</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.empowerprogram.org">www.empowerprogram.org</a></td>
<td>Information about the Empower program for girls</td>
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<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.wordscanwork.com">www.wordscanwork.com</a></td>
<td>Conversation starters for adults and kids</td>
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<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.opheliaproject.org">www.opheliaproject.org</a></td>
<td>Information for parents and schools about relational aggression</td>
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### Books