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Every Little Girl Wants to Be a Princess, Right?

Beauty pageants have become a staple in American culture. Winners of pageants such as

Miss America are icons, representations of the ideal woman, and positive role models for young

girls. So society says. More recently, however, a new type of pageant has increased in popularity

to the point of being considered a national phenomenon. These pageants are just as glitzy, and

the competition is just as fierce; the only difference is that these contestants are the miniature

model. They are child beauty queens. The world of child beauty pageants has become a source of

fascination, as well as contention, in our society. Networks such as TLC and WE TV have

produced hit reality shows featuring the munchkin-sized divas because it sells, but one cannot

help but wonder, how can parading children about on stage like show ponies be a positive thing?

The truth is it is not. Beauty pageants are not a healthy activity for children because they force

young girls to act like little adults, exhibit age-inappropriate sexuality, and have negative body

image and mental health problems later in their lives. Children are the future of society, and even

those who do not have children should be concerned about the direction of the culture they have

to live in. Just because child beauty pageants are socially acceptable does not mean they should

be. Our culture needs to eliminate child beauty pageants, at least in their current form.

While beauty pageants for kids have been around for a long time, their huge popularity is

relatively recent. America’s first televised child beauty pageant was held in 1960 in Miami,

Florida, and it only aired on a local television station (Hilboldt-Stolley 2). Today, the “mini”

beauty pageant industry is a multi-billion dollar a year endeavor (Giroux 31). Little girls compete

in categories such as swimwear, beauty, talent, modeling, and glamour. They have spray tans,

false eyelashes, flippers for their teeth, pounds of make-up, and dresses that cost hundreds of

dollars each. Author Henry Giroux did extensive research on the child beauty pageant circuit for

his article “Child Beauty Pageants and the Politics of Innocence.” He then made this observation

when describing the differences in the original beauty pageants and what we see now: “the

children in the 1977 pageants wore little-girl dresses and ribbons in their hair; they embodied a

child-like innocence in their appearance as they displayed their little girl talents-singing, tap

dancing, and baton twirling. Not so with recent pageant shots” (43). That kind of simplicity does

not exist in today’s pageant world. Instead, it is a fierce competition for monetary prizes and the

“grand supreme” title. This is the world we are putting our toddlers into while instructing them to

“strut their stuff.”

The hit television shows are another new aspect of the pageant life that has contributed to

the explosion of controversy. Shows like WE’s Little Miss Perfect and TLC’s Toddlers and

Tiaras follow families in the child pageant circuit. Their cameras capture all the drama,

makeovers, tantrums, and meltdowns that are a regular part of the important national pageants.

TLC’s network website describes the show: “once at the pageant, it’s all up to the judges and the

drama ensues when every parent wants to prove that their child is beautiful” (TLC 2009). That

quote alone is enough to shine a small light on the darker side of the glamorous exterior of

pageants. The networks defend their shows, saying they are just documentaries of the life that

thousands of children lead and that viewers must make their own judgments. Clearly, pushy

parents are a part of the morbid attraction that those TV shows have for the masses, but with the

video footage from these shows, it is hard to deny that these children are being exploited.

One way that pageants exploit children is in a sexual manner. The majority of

participants are young enough that they should still be playing with baby dolls and jump ropes,

yet they are performing routines that involve a lot of hip shaking and kissy faces. Combine those

factors with the skimpy outfits, and many fittingly question how these pageant displays are any

different than child pornography. Mark Davidson provides commentary in his 1997 article for

USA Today Magazine entitled “Is the Media to Blame for Child Sex Victims?” He writes, “these

pageants commercially flaunt kids’ bodies, often converting preteen and preschool girls into sex

puppets adorned with lipstick, mascara, false eyelashes, bleached hair, high heels, and satin-andrhinestone gowns, and professionally coached in showgirl postures and movements” (1). Little

girls like to play dress up, but there is no doubt that the way they are dressed for the competitions

is catering to an adult preference. Sadly, their parents are the adults responsible for dressing

these babies as Vegas showgirls and belly dancers. These children are not dressed to please a

child’s tastes; they are dressed to please adults, and adults have a sexualized view of what is

beautiful.

Sexualizing children and preteens is wrong because it puts them at risk for more serious

physical harm. The sexual aspect of pageants caters to a world bordering that of pedophiles and

kiddy porn. Giroux argued that “the popular literature that supports the pageant culture fails to

acknowledge that ‘sexualized images of little girls may have dangerous implications in a world

where 450,000 American children were reported as victims of sexual abuse in 1993’” (40).

While pageants themselves are not sexual abuse, they can contribute to situations that result in

the sexual abuse of children. Parents should be aware of this danger when they place their

children in pageants. While parents are the ultimate decision makers for their minor children,

there should be a line where society says “enough.”

The famous case of JonBenet Ramsey’s murder played a big role in bringing out the

sexual aspect of the child beauty queen controversies. The six-year old pageant royalty was

found dead in her basement on December 26, 1997. She had been sexually assaulted and then

strangled and bludgeoned to death. The media went wild. Henry Giroux also studied the

JonBenet case for his article, and he described the media attention like this: “major media

networks, newspapers, and tabloids besieged the public with photographs and television footage

of JonBenet, dubbed as the slain beauty queen, posing coquettishly in a tight dress, wearing

bright red lipstick, her hair bleached blonde” (35). Many began to wonder whether or not her

participation in beauty pageants had contributed to her untimely death, but no one knew who had

killed her. Regardless, people were spooked, and beauty pageant entries dropped dramatically for

a period of time. Although the facts of who killed her and why remain inconclusive to this day,

the fact of the matter is, JonBenet was a young child forced to live an adult lifestyle. Her tragic

death made the sexual aspect of pageants a point of national concern.

Child beauty pageants are also harmful to the participants’ self-esteem and mental health

later on in life. The University of Minnesota conducted a study in 2005 on the relationship

between beauty pageant participation as children and eating disorders and poor body image.

While a relationship between pageants and eating disorders could not be nailed down, poor selfesteem and negative body image were apparent. Those two things are known to be symptoms of

eating disorders, so a correlation between pageants and eating disorders does exist in an indirect

way. The results stated, “women who participated in childhood beauty pageants scored

significantly higher on measures of body dissatisfaction, interpersonal distrust, and impulse

dysregulation, than women who did not…” (Wonderlich 297). Essentially, the women who were

mini beauty queens grew up to hate their bodies, missed out on meaningful relationships, and

struggled with self-control. Pageants teach young girls that they are only beautiful when they

have unnatural amounts of makeup on. It also teaches them that they need to compare themselves

to other girls, and if they do not compare favorably then they have failed. It teaches them to

expect perfection of themselves, but perfection does not exist in our world. Therefore, pageants

are setting them up to fail in their own minds and in their future social endeavors.

With all these apparent consequences of placing children in pageants, one has to ask

oneself, “what are their parents thinking?” Pageant parents and other advocates of child pageants

argue that these pageants are way for their children to get ahead in life. They say that pageants

are a great way for their children to pursue modeling careers or win money for college (Giroux

41). Reporter Lise Hilboldt-Stolley wrote an article entitled “Pretty Babies” from the viewpoint

of a pageant mom. She shared the pro-pageant views of one of the pageant grandmothers with

this statement, "they have good manners, high self-esteem, and they know how to act in public.

You can go into a restaurant and see a table of pageant kids eating quietly, surrounded by rowdy,

badly behaved kids all over the place” (3). But even with these supposed benefits, one has got to

continue wondering if it is worth all the harm. It is possible to obtain these benefits from other

activities or with different kinds of competitions. Young children, boys and girls, should be able

to compete in activities that involve talent and educational leadership. These activities would

help reap the benefits pageant parents say they see. The difference is that moving away from the

make-up and adult clothing would encourage children to be children and cut down on the

negative side effects of pageants as they currently exist.

In order to solve the problem of children, especially little girls, being exploited through

pageants, society needs to see these pageants for what they are and make them unacceptable in

their current forms. Although there are arguably some benefits to pageants, they do not outweigh

the cons, and these benefits can be achieved in more constructive ways. Instead of relying on

pageants to teach kids manners and poise, perhaps the parents should take responsibility for

instilling those characteristics into their children without taking away their childhood. They

should teach their children that hard work and a strong character will lead to success, rather

teaching them to exploit their sexuality to get ahead. Though pageants probably cannot be

stopped altogether, there should be mandatory regulations that forbid the ridiculous getups and

seductive dancing, and if little girls still want to play dress up, they can easily do it at home like

millions of little girls have done for hundreds of years.

Exploiting children cannot be justified. It is the responsibility of the adults in society to

take care of the kids and protect the well being of those who cannot yet take care of themselves.

Society should not be endorsing an unhealthy activity such as pageants for children. The glitz

and glamour of pageant life that appeals to parents should not be worth the emotional and

physical health of their offspring. Children should be taught to love and respect themselves as

individuals, and that is what society and the media should be endorsing. It is time to call for an

end to beauty pageants for children and find healthier ways for children to be competitive.

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