

## **Healthy or Harmful: National Experts talk about Children's Dance**

Mary Bawden

### **Abstract**

There is a dire need to protect children from hypersexualization through the use of evocative adult costumes, choreography and music, and to safeguard the art of children's dance. Sexualized messages through the media influence children. These messages have become interwoven into children's dance, which has increasingly led to harmful outcomes. There are many negative impacts related to the sexualization of children. Conversely, healthy dance has many positive outcomes for children. Education is required to shift mindsets, attitudes and cultural norms in the dance industry to prevent the sexualization of girls and boys. This report discusses the above issue.

### **Introduction**

There is a dire need to protect children from hypersexualization through the use of evocative adult costumes, choreography and music, and to safeguard the art of children's dance. Examples of hypersexualized dance might include a costume that reflects a burlesque show, movement that is sex industry inspired, and/or music that expresses sexual objectification or sex acts. Sexualized messages communicated through the media and personal relationships influence children. These messages have become interwoven into children's dance, which has increasingly led to harmful outcomes. There are many negative impacts related to the sexualization of children. Conversely, healthy dance has many positive outcomes for children. Education is required to shift mindsets, attitudes and cultural norms in the dance industry to prevent the sexualization of girls and boys.

### **The sexualization of girls**

The American Psychological Association's task force (2007) on the sexualization of girls found sexualized messages come from the following avenues:

- Media (including television, music videos, music lyrics, movies, magazines, sports media, video games, the Internet and advertising);
- Personal relationships (such as with parents, teachers, and peers);
- And girls themselves

Media is the main means of mass communication and provides news, entertainment and information to the community. It shapes public opinion and influences society. The various messages promoted through the media have healthy and harmful outcomes (Mughal, n.d.). Dr. Gail Dines (2015) has coined the phrase 'pornified culture' to describe what society is experiencing through media. Today, youth are continually exposed to sexualized messages, which directly impacts their development.

Advertising firms meticulously observe young people's behaviour and dress in order to sell them a sexualized image of themselves. An entire generation of children is therefore encouraged to adopt sexualized attitudes and behaviours for which they are not prepared emotionally, intellectually or physically (Gouvernement du Québec, 2023).

In 1983 the New York Times published an article called "The Loss of Childhood", where Marie Winn argued that the greatest cultural change was not that children had lost their innocence, but it was that adults had changed the conception of childhood itself. The definition of childhood has gone from an age of protection (shielding children from adult issues) to an age of preparation (exposing children to a wide range of adult issues). Johnson (2020) claims that the current social and media culture in North America blurs the line between childhood and adulthood "Under examination are not discrete, isolatable generations that media industries construct and exploit, but instead more complex processes in which the production and consumption of popular culture bends boundaries around adulthood and childhood" ((p.4).

As categories of age shift and meld together, online spaces in particular remain mostly unregulated, and exposure to sexual media content is the normative experience for children today. For example, a recent study in England reveals that children as young as nine years old are exposed to pornography, and that by age 13 over half of the study participants had seen it (McCallum, 2023). Research on pornography exposure continues to highlight the negative and harmful effects it has on children. The sexual messages being conveyed through the media and online platforms through which pornography is accessed, furthers the sexualization of children in society. One research study found that:

Beyond being increasingly rampant and having destructive effects on how young girls see themselves, sexualization negatively influences how they are perceived and treated by adults. Before girls even reach sexual maturity they are susceptible to objectifying perceptions, and the resulting view that their experiences do not matter (Holland & Haslam, 2015).

In North America, cultural and societal norms sexualize girls, which in turn has normalized hypersexualized dance for children. The media has impacted and influenced children's dance through the increase of sexual messages that are being communicated to audiences through sexualized costuming, movement and hypersexualized lyrics in music. There is a need for parents, caregivers, educators and policy makers alike to better understand the messages sent to children through dance education in order to identify healthy versus hypersexualized dance to prevent further harm to children.

### **The impacts of the sexualization of children**

The American Psychological Association says sexualization is different from healthy sexuality. A girl is sexualized when:

- She is valued only for her sexual appeal or behavior rather than other characteristics
- Her physical attractiveness is equated with being sexy
- She is treated as a sexual object — that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making
- Sexuality is inappropriately imposed on her  
(American Psychological Association, 2007, p.1)

Boys and gender-diverse individuals can also experience sexualization. As listed throughout the *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls* the effects of sexualization on children are vast and can include: body dysmorphia, eating disorders, poor academic performance, promiscuity, teen pregnancy, higher risk of abusive relationships, higher risk of pornography use, unable to identify sexual abuse, mismanagement of social networking, promotes rape culture, promotes objectification of females, relationship wounding due to constant comparison, co-dependence, and desensitization (2007).

In the dance industry, sexuality can be inappropriately imposed on a child, which leads to harmful outcomes. A child in dance is sexualized when they are taught to move to song lyrics that refer to sexual acts. A child in dance is sexualized when they are asked to move in a manner that is evocative. An example of such inappropriate imposition on children could include a dance performance to the song *Lady Marmalade* (Crew & Nolan, 1974) where the lyrics once translated to English say: *Will you sleep with me tonight?* Such impositions inappropriately present children as sexual objects, and through such troubling artistic choices, convey sexual messages to the audience. Accountability and regulation in dance studios and performance spaces would help to address and negate the harms caused to children through hypersexualized dance.

### **Healthy versus harmful dance**

Anecdotally, it appears that over the course of the last decade, the unfiltered influence of media on the internet has normalized hypersexualized rather than healthy dance for young children. In hypersexualized dance, children look like adults in evocative costumes, moving to sexually-suggestive choreography and sexualized lyrics; this is harmful dance. In healthy dance, children look like children dressed in age-appropriate costumes, choreography and music. Sexualized messages are not inappropriately imposed on them.

In many dance settings, girls are becoming increasingly sexualized at younger and younger ages. When children are exposed to and view hypersexualized dance there are harmful outcomes. This is partly due to the fact that children learn through imitation as a result of brain mirror neurons, which is a key aspect of childhood development (Burke, 2018; Hall, 2014). When children view hypersexualized movement and choreography in the media, it impacts their understanding of self and can lead to sexualization.

Research shows that teachers in dance studios whose practices promote healthy outcomes have positive developmental outcomes for children (Edwards, 2015; Tao et al., 2022). Proven benefits include: Creativity, problem solving, risk taking, high order thinking, communication, social awareness, emotional maturity, improved self-esteem (Hanna, 1999; Tarr & Dunbar, 2016). Through raising awareness on what constitutes healthy dance versus harmful dance, and celebrating healthy dance environments, dance culture can shift away from hypersexualization, which would foster more positive impacts and learnings for children.

## Conclusion

What is the solution to prevent the hypersexualization of children in dance? Through awareness and resources, educators, parents and caregivers can identify hypersexualized dance in order to make informed choices for their students and children. Developing and providing materials to assist adults with understanding healthy versus harmful dance practices is essential. Through engaging in respectful conversations, a shift can begin to take place in dance studio settings, competitions, and creative spaces to address the sexual messages being perpetuated through hypersexualized choreography, costumes and music. There is an opportunity to educate and engage in dialogue with studio owners, dance educators and parents to help think critically about how dance performances are consumed by audiences, and the messages that are being conveyed to both adults and children about children. The art of dance and its benefits for children must be protected, and through education, healthy dance spaces can continue to impact the next generation of dancers positively.

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## Biography

Dance Educator & author Mary Bawden received a BA in modern dance from UCRiverside, a MA, and a secondary teaching credential. Mary founded Dance Awareness: No Child Exploited in 2016 (DA:NCE) to educate an uninformed public with evidence based resources to show the connection between children's dance and the pornography industry. DA:NCE has materials that include national experts & dance educators. They emphasize how hypersexualized children's dance grooms children corporately for unhealthy outcomes. Mary's passion is to help adults understand the differences between harmful and healthy children's dance with informed choice and practical actions to change the culture.

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