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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,

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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

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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.

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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-and-rhinestone 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.

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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).

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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

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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 self-esteem 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.

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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.

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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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