

Eye Candy (what's wrong with this picture - everything)



Little girls' Halloween costumes are looking more like they were designed by Victoria's Secret every year. Are we prudes or is this practically kiddie porn?

Models wear the latest costumes in these photos provided by the manufacturers: Shipwrecked Pirate, Wayward Witch, Child's Chamber Maid Costume and Miss-Behaved

Apparently, witches aren't ugly anymore; they're sexy. So are pirates and pumpkins and princesses--traditional little girl Halloween costumes that used to say, Isn't she cute? now scream, That's hot! with an increasing array of halter tops, bare midriffs and miniskirts. Costume catalogs and Web sites, filled with images of pouty preteens modeling the latest in Halloween fashion, seem almost to verge on child pornography, and ooze with attitude. Witches are "wayward" and grammar-school pirates are "wenches." A girl isn't an Army cadet, she's a "Major Flirt," and who knew female firefighters wore fishnet stockings? Even Little Bo Peep comes with a corset, short skirt and lacy petticoat.

And while complaints about "slutty" kids' costumes may seem like a yearly parents' lament, the industry has been ramping up the sex appeal to ever younger groups of girls. It's not just 10- and 12-year-olds who have gone Halloween trappy. Now 6- and 7-year-old models are featured in catalogs wearing child-sized versions of skimpy costumes that used to be reserved for adult boudoirs. If you think we're exaggerating, note that they're actually selling something called a "Child's Chamber Maid Costume." And, many of the tween girls in the photographs are wearing more make-up than Christina Aguilera on awards night. More disturbing may be their expressions--they look as if they've been told to give the camera their best "sexy" gaze.

Tack on all the licensed outfits from popular TV shows and toy lines like Cheetah Girls, Bratz and Hannah Montana, and parents are having to search farther a field for something that won't make their little trick-or-treater look like a lady of the night. But with adolescent girls parading around in short-shorts that say JUICY across the bottom, and every younger girls aspiring to be a diva of some sort, is it any

wonder that their Halloween costumes have gotten racier? "No, but it is distressing," says Joe Kelly, founder of the advocacy group Dads and Daughters. He sees the trend as symptomatic of a deeper issue. "The hypersexualization of younger and younger girls only serves to reinforce gender roles. When an 8-year-old girl can't find a doctor costume because all they have are nurse outfits, that's a problem." Celia Rivenbark, author of the 2006 parental manifesto "Stop Dressing your Six-Year-Old Like a Skank," has noticed it too, and says that Halloween has become "just another excuse for little girls to dress like sluts."

This year Americans will spend close to \$2 billion on Halloween costumes, nearly double what they spent in 2003, according to the National Retail Federation. With so much money up for grabs, more and more retailers have elbowed their way into the costume market, increasing the pressure to offer a unique take on old favorites. "The idea of vamping up the appeal of the costume is something we've seen a lot of," says NRF spokesperson Kathy Grannis. So while the variety of costumes has certainly increased, they all look more and more alike. Whether it's a "Midnight Fairy Rock Girl," a "Scar-let Pirate" or "Miss-Behaved," chances are if you buy your daughter the costume she really wants, the one all the other little girls are wearing, she'll show up at the neighbor's doorstep in a choker collar, high-heels and baring enough skin to give you a real fright.

These new "edgier" costumes are simply reflections of pop culture, says Jackie MacDonald, a costume buyer for catalog giant Lillian Vernon. "Girls today seem to like a little pizzazz. The same old princesses aren't where it's at anymore," she says, before carefully noting, "We don't want to say they're sexier, just more confident."

Not that there's anything patently wrong with young girls wanting to look pretty. Child psychologists agree that embracing and understanding their attractiveness is a key part of early-adolescent development for girls. But when sexiness and body image become the sole criteria by which they judge themselves and each other, "That's when we start to see problems," says Dr. Eileen Zurbriggen, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, who last year chaired the American Psychological Association's (APA) Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. Their report, issued in February, declared that, "Throughout U.S. culture, and particularly in mainstream media, women and girls are depicted in a sexualized manner."

That shouldn't come as much of a surprise to anyone who's watched TV or thumbed through a magazine in the last 50 years. But what might be news is the increasing evidence of the negative impact an overemphasis on body image has on girls' lives. The APA task force's team of psychologists linked oversexualization with three of the most common mental health problems for women 18 and older: eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression. And there is evidence that the effect is trickling down the age brackets. "Clinicians are reporting that younger and younger girls are presenting with eating disorders and are on diets," says Zurbriggen.

Dr. Sharon Lamb, also on the APA task force, has recently coauthored a book, "Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters From Marketing Schemes," which includes a chapter devoted solely to sexy Halloween costumes. Lamb points out that most Web sites selling kids Halloween costumes divide

merchandise along gender lines, and typically offer more choices for boys than girls (boys get to be doctors, police officers as well as gory monsters and "Star Wars" characters). Of the 22 girl costumes featured on one Web site Lamb looked at, 15 were cheerleaders, divas and rock stars. "That really limits girls' imaginations," says Lamb, who surveyed 600 young girls for the book, many of whom admitted to dressing up as something sexy for Halloween in order to get attention.