

by Julia Bloore

GROWING UP TOO FAST?

**the sexualisation
of girls**



A CONVERSATION WITH MELINDA TANKARD REIST



Padded bras for six-year-old girls? Pole-dancing kits for children? Video games that encourage boys to simulate sex with prostitutes? Surely this isn't happening in the world our children are growing up in ... is it?

Well, according to Melinda Tankard Reist
— YES, IT IS!

Melinda lives in Canberra. She has a 25-year history of activism on issues concerning women. And she's the author of *Getting Real*, a book which confronts the sexualisation and objectification of girls in our culture. This topic first appeared on her radar just a few years ago, when she began noticing the growing amount of research that was being done. She also has three daughters, and could see the impact the culture was having on them.

According to Melinda, human rights violations against women around the world have often begun with an attitude that says: women are second class ... they can be objectified and treated as a piece of meat ... in fact, you can do whatever you want with them.

And Melinda's in no doubt: the age at which this attitude impacts girls in our culture is getting younger and younger.

Little girls are being made to grow up too fast, encouraged to act older than they are, forced to be adults before their time. And *Getting Real* includes reports by some of the most informed critics of this harmful trend.

For amongst the 11-year-olds having spray-tans once a week, the eight-year-olds being admitted to hospital with eating disorders, and the five-year-olds refusing to go swimming because they're "too fat", Melinda offers a glimmer of hope ...

I'VE NEVER HAD PREMONITIONS, BUT I THINK THAT ONE DAY I MIGHT.

GRAPEVINE: What exactly do you mean when you talk about the 'sexualisation of girls'?

MELINDA: Well, 'sexualisation' is about imposing adult concepts of sexuality on children. It's about valuing them for their physical appearance and their body parts, and treating them as much older than they are.

GRAPEVINE: And how is this happening?

MELINDA: Oh, in a million ways! For example, companies are now targeting children with products containing sexual imagery.

EYE-CANDY?

We're seeing padded bras for girls as young as six or seven. Pole-dancing kits for little girls. Kids' t-shirts with phrases like 'Eye Candy', 'Nudge-nudge, wink-wink' and some that are even more overt: 'Hung like a five year old' or 'I enjoy a good spanking'!

GRAPEVINE: Is that just marketers trying to be funny?

MELINDA: Well, it's considered to be a joke. But honestly, marketing products like this to kids is just encouraging them to act-out sexually.

Music videos are contributing to their early sexualisation with violent, sexual images showing women as never satisfied or wanting to be treated roughly. And billboards with this imagery are filling spaces viewed by our children every day.

I keep thinking it can't get any worse – but it always does!

GRAPEVINE: I gather you've come across some pretty shocking video games?

MELINDA: Oh, absolutely. Video games are becoming increasingly violent and



increasingly sexual. And research shows that they are knocking the empathy out of young people, teaching them that violence is a natural way to solve problems. Our children are being desensitised.

I'm not sure what the stats are in Australia or New Zealand, but we know that, in the US, boys are spending as much time playing video games as they are attending school!

GRAPEVINE: Most boys I know love video games, but mainly car-racing and hunting games. Those aren't the sort you're talking about, are they?

MELINDA: Yes and no. It's worth looking at some of the popular games and seeing what actually happens within each level. Take *Grand Theft Auto* for instance. Lots of parents think it's just a car game, but

there are themes within it that go well beyond that. For example, at one point it shows a man having sex with a prostitute – and then murdering her!

Taking it a step further, one of the worst games I came across was a game called *Rape Play* – a rape simulation game for boys which comes out of Japan. Interestingly, a quarter of all Japan's rapists are under the age of 19. The game comes with a multi-player function in which the boys can participate in a gang rape together.

GRAPEVINE: That's unbelievable!

MELINDA: Yeah it is! We lodged a complaint, and thankfully, in Australia, you can't play it – but it's still being played in many parts of the world. More and more of these games have violent scenes, and they're desensitising the boys playing them – teaching them that it's normal to be violent towards women, that violence is sexy.

GRAPEVINE: Has 'early sexual exposure' been an issue long enough for there to be some decent research on its long-term effect on children?

MELINDA: Yes, it has. We have reports from all over the world – America, Australia, the United Kingdom and, just recently, from the Scottish parliament. And there's growing evidence that early sexualisation is harmful to both the mental and physical health of young children. It contributes to eating disorders, low self-esteem, depression, self-harm, anxiety and poor academic performance.

NOT GOOD ENOUGH

Treating girls as sexual objects reduces them to the sum of their sexual parts, and makes them feel bad about themselves. Society is sending them a

message about how they should look – and, sadly, young girls feel they can't live up to that image.

In growing numbers, they're seeking cosmetic surgery, worried that they'll never be good enough, trying to imitate the airbrushed images of models and celebrities they see every day.

GRAPEVINE: Constantly feeling like you'll never meet the mark must be a horrible way to live. What's the outcome of this kind of thinking?

MELINDA: The results are diabolical. In Australia we have 1-in-100 girls with anorexia, and 1-in-10 with bulimia; 1-in-4 girls in this country wants to have plastic surgery; and we have rising rates of self-harm. The list goes on ...

GRAPEVINE: One of the things in your book that shocked me was that girls are now viewing previously bizarre behaviour as normal. Like that young girl who'd been tricked into taking her top off ...?

MELINDA: ... and the boys took a photo of her.

GRAPEVINE: What's crazy was that when she told her teacher about it, the girl didn't seem to have any sense at all of being violated!

MELINDA: I think girls *are* upset about it. I think innately they know this isn't right. But the culture is telling them again and again to do it. A number of music stars sing about 'sexting' with lyrics like "send a dirty picture to me ..." "make me drool ..." and "can you send a nasty pic?" With those sorts of lyrics on the morning radio, girls are being acclimatised to think that 'sexting' is normal behaviour – and they are often completely unaware of the consequences.

GRAPEVINE: Consequences like ...?

MELINDA: Well, if they send one image to one boy at his request, he can then (and often does) send it to all his friends. They then send it to all *their* friends, and it ends up embedded online permanently – it goes around the world! These girls just have no idea where it's going to end up.

GRAPEVINE: What makes them want to take sexual pictures of themselves for boys?

MELINDA: Girls are being taught that it's their sexual allure and sexual performance that gives them value, worth and attention. Just look at the way they're posing on *Facebook*, *MySpace* or *Bebo*. You see younger and younger girls pouting, arching their backs and sticking their chests out. They're reflecting what they're seeing everywhere – plastered all over public spaces, on TV, and on the Internet. No matter where they look, they see women styled and posing in sexual ways ... so, naturally, they think that this is normal.

But I think that, deep down, they're unhappy ... particularly the younger girls, the 11-to-13-year-olds. I think they have to overcome something in themselves to do this, to play these games of sexual performance.

GRAPEVINE: It's really sad that subtle sexual messages are being aimed at younger and younger girls. And parents need to be on guard. But, in the wider context, there's always been a connection between pornography and advertising – right? Or am I just getting paranoid?

MELINDA: No, there's a very strong connection.



PAR FOR THE COURSE

Porn-inspired scenes and messages have become mainstream in advertising. Women are rarely depicted as anything but sexually interesting and sexually available. They're posed in hyper-sexualised ways, and this material is allowed to wallpaper the public domain.

For example, a bikini-clad woman with her lips around the top of a Coke bottle, and the text, “*You know you want it!*” written across the top of the billboard. Or an advertisement for a record label with pop-singer *Pink* wearing a low-cut, leather swimsuit and being restrained by ropes. Drawing on our knowledge of pornography, and referencing fellatio and bondage, advertisers are using these allusions to sell soft-drinks and music ...

It's interesting. If a man was to put a sexual image of a woman – or a ‘pin-up’ – on his workplace wall, it would be illegal. That's considered sexual harassment, and correctly so! So why is it that marketers can put sexual images up all over the public domain, places where we have to live and move and drive our kids to school and go to work? Why is something that would be illegal in the workplace, legal everywhere else – just because it's advertising?

GRAPEVINE: But do these images really affect the behaviour of little girls?

MELINDA: They do! I talk to lots of girls about their relationships, their experiences and their sexuality – and the emphasis is all on performance. They don't often talk in terms of intimacy and connection with another human being – they talk in terms of performance. They'll say, “*I think I was*



okay ...” or “I looked at some porn first to find out what he might like.”

I read a feature that appeared in *Dolly* magazine. The scenario was basically, “OMG, my boyfriend wants me to do this!” I won’t go into detail as to what the particular sexual acts were, but the advice given to young girls was not: “Call the police!” or “Phone your mother!” or “Run away!” The advice was, “Here’s how you do it!”

Everywhere these young girls look, the message they’re getting is that they need to be the pleasure-providers for boys and men. It’s not about intimacy and connection; it’s not even about their own pleasure – it’s about what they can provide for one boy or many boys.

GRAPEVINE: Many boys?

MELINDA: Sadly, we have evidence that younger and younger girls are participating in group sex. It’s what they see in pornography – and they’re just acting it out. Psychologist Michael Carr-Gregg, who’s pretty well known here in Australia, spoke recently about girls acting out the sex-acts they’ve seen online. Pornographic values are seeping in to the sexual attitudes of young people. And even girls who are just starting puberty are copying what they’ve seen!

COPY-CAT BEHAVIOUR

Psychologists report that many girls now think sexual abuse is normal. And lots of boys think that girls want to be hit, want to have their hair pulled, want to be called whores and prostitutes. Why? Because sexual abuse is represented in pornography, music videos and advertising.



GRAPEVINE: Speaking of ‘connections’ ... there’s often a *disconnect*, isn’t there, between the women used in advertising and the products they’re trying to sell?

MELINDA: Definitely. Advertisers often use a woman to decorate a product that has no relationship to her at all. One example: a billboard advertising chocolate truffles. The image is of a giant truffle with a naked woman lying across it. There’s no logical reason for the woman to be there – she’s simply decorating the product.

Most ads picture women as white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class and idle. They’re there because they attract attention through their looks – and they’re primarily the same kind of women: thin, large-breasted, sexually-available and not doing very much. They’re just decorative objects.

GRAPEVINE: Your organisation – *Collective Shout: for a World Free of Sexploitation* – is protesting about this sort of thing. How do you go about it?

MELINDA: We name and shame advertisers, corporations, marketers and media who objectify women and girls to sell products and services. We've had significant victories against major corporations like Harvey Norman, Myer, Calvin Klein, Bonds – just to name a few. And we've empowered and equipped people to take action and claim back their communities and public spaces – to say enough is enough!

It's great. And we've been hugely successful with very few resources.

GRAPEVINE: Is it just an Australian thing?

MELINDA: Not at all! We have some New Zealand supporters already. If anyone's interested they can sign up at www.collectiveshout.org or on our Facebook page.

Look, this is a global issue. And many of the campaigns we run are global campaigns. We had a campaign against the Kanye West Monster video-clip, calling on MTV not to show it. It depicted naked women hanging dead with chains around their neck, Kanye West in bed with two dead women, and other scenes of eroticised violence against women. We succeeded in persuading MTV not to show that clip.

We've also had campaigns against child beauty pageants (which are coming to New Zealand). So there are many ways in which Kiwi women can have their say.

GRAPEVINE: I'd love to know your thoughts on women's magazines. They're often sold as being encouraging, uplifting, empowering ...

MELINDA: They're not!

GRAPEVINE: What do you think the underlying messages are then?

MELINDA: The thing is this: those magazines need to sell products. They rely on advertisers to exist. If they don't have advertisers they go out of business. And most of the advertising is for weight-loss formulas, cellulite creams, hair products, grooming, cosmetics ... which are all about trying to make you look better. So magazines have a vested interest in making women feel *bad* about themselves. If their readers feel *great* about themselves, they're not going to buy all those products!

The same is true of the magazines for young girls that I review – and by 'young' I mean magazines for girls aged 6 to 10. They're all about cosmetics and grooming. About imitating the dance-moves of 'hot' celebrities.

HOT'N'SEXY

One issue was called the 'Cute Crush' issue. It encouraged girls to have crushes, and talked about how girls can look hot and sexy for boys. What was once the reserve of magazines for older women has now trickled down and infiltrated the magazines for little girls.

This stuff is often entirely inappropriate – teaching girls a one-dimensional version of what it means to be female.

GRAPEVINE: And that one dimension is basically a sexual one?

MELINDA: Exactly! And that's how our girls are growing up to see themselves. Kellie Crawford, a former *Hi-5* presenter, posed for the men's magazine *Ralph*. They had her pictured on the cover in some skimpy black underwear with the title "*It's Hi-5 Hottie, Kellie!*" For

the subtitle they had, “*Busting out some Bedtime Stories*” – very creative! And in the accompanying article, Kellie shared that she’d done the photo-shoot to “find the woman in her ...” because she’d been working as a children’s TV presenter for so long she “just forgot she was a woman.”

It’s as if Kellie’s finally found her value and identity as a woman in her sexuality, and only in her sexuality. That’s what our girls are growing up to believe.

GRAPEVINE: Most parents would hope that their daughters are able to discern what is good and valuable – and, at the same time, identify and dismiss the rubbish! But how do we teach them that?

MELINDA: It needs to happen on a number of levels. Obviously education is important. But so is modelling the right behaviour at home. Make your home one that doesn’t tolerate endless talk about weight-loss and diets. And mothers: don’t restrict foods or weigh yourself obsessively each day! Your weight does not indicate your health, and your daughter needs to learn that.

You need to keep violent music videos out of your home. And keep a tight control over Internet-usage: make sure your computer’s out in the open where you can see what your kids are up to!

It’s important, too, that you choose *not* to support the corporations that are treating our girls these ways. If you don’t buy the products – the sexualised games, the clothing, the magazines – if enough of us opt out, then they can’t continue. There has to be a demand for these things in the first place!

And let’s not dress our little daughters like they’re women ...

GRAPEVINE: What do you say to parents who think this is just a bit of fun, that

it’s cute? If their daughters want to wear those kinds of clothes, put on the make-up, enter beauty pageants, is it really such a big problem?

MELINDA: Of course it’s a problem! ‘Adulthood’ children is a problem. You’re inviting people to look at your daughters as if they’re much older than they really are – and that’s problematic on so many levels!

Yes, parents say their kids like doing this, but I don’t think that’s a valid argument. Children are *taught* to like certain things. And they’re reflecting a cultural message about what is cute, what will make them attractive, what will make them accepted by their peer group.

We have to keep coming back to the problem of cultural-messaging – and encourage parents not to buy in to it.

Take the child pageant thing. Parents will say “*My daughter loves being in the pageant!*” But the kid’s only four years old. The kid might also like to eat icecream 24 hours a day – but we don’t allow children to make these decisions, because they are not cognitively equipped to do so. They don’t understand what’s in their best interests.

IRRESPONSIBLE:

Just because a child likes something doesn’t mean an adult should say: “Yeah, go for it! Wear the padded bras! Wear the lacy underwear! Wear the sexual slogans on your clothes!” This child is a CHILD! And allowing that sort of behaviour is just irresponsible.

GRAPEVINE: So parents definitely have a job to do. Do we need to take it further than that?

MELINDA: I think so. We need regulatory bodies to step up to the plate – and, unfortunately, there hasn't been enough regulation. Advertisers have been able to do whatever they want, and get away with it. In Australia, we're calling on more Government oversight so advertisers will have limits – and the penalties for ignoring those limits will be worth something. At the moment, the penalties are non-existent, or so small they're meaningless.

There needs to be individual responsibility, but there also needs to be *communal* responsibility. It takes a *village* to raise a child. It's too hard for parents to be doing it alone.

GRAPEVINE: You obviously dedicate a lot of your time and energy to this. How do people generally respond to your findings?

MELINDA: The feedback is hugely positive. Parents and teachers often feel desperate and powerless. They sense there's something wrong, but they wonder if it's just them. They're not sure if other parents worry about *their* daughters: about the toys, products, games, billboards, and music videos.

What mums and dads and teachers are realising – as a result of *Getting Real* and the work of *Collective Shout* – is that, gosh, they're NOT ALONE! The way they feel is validated by the research, and activists are out there trying to change things. The research and campaigning we do helps them feel much more empowered to take action.

I find it especially heartening when I'm talking to girls in schools, because there's a moment where you see the lights go on. You see them recognise

that, actually, there's nothing wrong with them – they're fine just the way they are. When speaking in schools I use a presentation with about 150 images in it. We unpack those and help the girls to join the dots and see that, really, they're okay. They're actually okay!

The cultural messaging has been making them feel bad about themselves. But I love seeing those lights going on ...

GRAPEVINE: What's the most important thing you'd like to get across to young girls?

MELINDA: Resistance. The message of resistance. Don't buy in to the culture. Go against the flow. Rise above the air-headed cult of celebrity and fashion. You're worth so much more than that!

Our girls have incredible potential ... they have so much energy ... and they can change the world! I would encourage girls to believe that they can use their lives to make a positive difference – rather than

being stripped down, dumbed down, and treated as just the sum of their sexual parts.

I'd encourage them to see their *real* value and worth, and not get sucked in by a toxic culture. 🍇



MELINDA'S BOOK 'GETTING REAL' (PLUS LOTS MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND HER WORK) IS AVAILABLE FROM WWW.MELINDATANKARDREIST.COM



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HAVE YOUR SAY!**



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