Book Review - *So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood and What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids*

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In their aptly titled book, *So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood and What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids*, Drs. Diane E. Levin and Jean Kilbourne shed light on a problem that is familiar to many modern parents, caregivers, and teachers of young children. By contrast, the problem appears to be completely off the radar of adults who do not spend a lot of time with young children. For this reason, it is helpful that two respected scholars of child development have devoted their considerable expertise to writing a book to bring more visibility to this pernicious problem.

In *So Sexy So Soon*, Levin and Kilbourne spend the first four chapters describing the reality of modern children who are constantly inundated by electronic media and aggressive marketing with both implicit and explicit sexual themes, as well as the resulting confusion and inappropriate sexual emulation by young children. Most previous public discussions have concentrated on the sexualization of older children (i.e., tweens and teens), but Levin and Kilbourne purposefully focus their attention on the phenomenon with respect to younger children because the authors believe that the roots of the problem actually stem from earlier childhood experiences. The final five chapters of *So Sexy So Soon* provide extensive advice on how to address the problem. Levin and Kilbourne offer specific strategies that adults can implement to help the children in their lives cope with the bombardment of sexual images and messages. In doing so, Levin and Kilbourne suggest, but do not explore, broader, systemic solutions.

At first blush, the authors appear to have written a book on a non-legal topic. Indeed, Levin and Kilbourne are not lawyers. As experts on child development, not law, they have for the most part sidestepped the legal implications of their topic. They do provide a few commentaries about the legal landscape that led to the current situation, and they summarize several potential legal strategies to help rectify it. However, these passages are parenthetical diversions from the authors’ primary focus.

I encourage the family law legal community to read this book because it raises important legal issues and hints at potential legal solutions. Indeed, the problems discussed by Levin and Kilbourne are so ubiquitous in our society and so insidious to the health of our nation’s children that the one-on-one approach emphasized in *So Sexy So Soon* is insufficient as the sole antidote to the sexualization of children. As noted by the authors, even the most conscientious and vigilant of parents cannot protect their children without additional help beyond the immediate family unit. To find effective solutions, the problem will need to be addressed—at least in part—on a broader societal level. Lawyers will clearly be critical to that effort, but first they need to understand the problem. Though it has a few flaws, *So Sexy So Soon* is an excellent primer for those previously unfamiliar with the problem.
**OVERVIEW OF SO SEXY SO SOON**

In the first four chapters of their book, Levin and Kilbourne define the problem of the “new sexualized childhood.” They clarify that sexualization is not synonymous with sexuality or sex. They cite the 2007 Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls that states that sexualization involves treating other people (and sometimes oneself) as “objects of sexual desire . . . as things rather than as people.” When people are sexualized, their value comes primarily from their sex appeal.

Levin and Kilbourne describe the sexualization of children as beginning with the exposure of sexy and sexualized images and language to increasingly younger children, which results in a variety of negative consequences. Children are confused and scared. They are alienated from their parents and their family’s values. They inappropriately emulate the sexy and sexualized images and language that they witness. Their ability to form healthy, respectful relationships with other human beings is also undermined. Moreover, the sexualization of childhood also impacts how adults view children. Corporations see children as potential consumers of sexy and sexualized products.

In more extreme cases, Levin and Kilbourne contend that the modern sexualized childhood contributes to pathological sexual behavior, including sexual abuse, pedophilia, and child prostitution.

**“Age Compression”**

In analyzing the problem, the authors describe an alarming “age compression.” The term “age compression” is used in many disciplines to describe the recent trend that children at ever younger ages are doing what previously was done only by older children and adults. There has been an overall trend of age compression in the past few decades, the effects of which have been discussed generally by other writers. However, in So Sexy So Soon, Levin and Kilbourne focus more narrowly on the impact of age compression with respect to sexy and sexualized images and language. The authors note that sexy and sexualized media, toys, behavior, and clothing that once seemed appropriate only for teenagers or adults are now well-entrenched in the lives of tweens and younger children. The concept of age compression is key in So Sexy So Soon because the authors emphasize the importance of experiences from preschool age to the tween years as setting the foundation for later attitudes and behaviors.

In identifying the underlying cause of the sexualized childhood, Levin and Kilbourne pin the blame squarely on the media and marketers. The authors contend that such groups have spent a lot of money to understand child psychology and to exploit their understanding of child development by using sex to make tremendous profits. Levin and Kilbourne note that marketing to kids has become a huge industry and is now pervasive in our society. They assert that the goal of such marketing is not just to encourage children to consume products and services here and now but also to turn children into shoppers for life. The authors explain that emphasizing sex and sexiness has become an efficient means to do this.

Because the media and marketing influences in question are so pervasive, Levin and Kilbourne conclude that the problem is not one that parents can solve alone. It would be a monumental, all-consuming, if not impossible, task for parents to block all sexualized and sexy images and language from entering their homes. However, even if such blocking were feasible, children would still be exposed to it when they left the family home to go to the homes of friends and relatives, or to go to school, shopping centers, and other public places. Due to the pervasiveness of the sexualized media and marketing messages, Levin and Kilbourne contend that the problem is larger in scope than can be addressed by the family alone. It is a societal problem, and the entire society has a responsibility to help parents do their job well instead of thwarting their efforts at every turn. The authors are adamant that the media and marketing industries should not be let off the hook, and politicians should not be permitted to avoid their responsibilities to create policies and regulations to protect children from sexualized content. Thus, even though So Sexy So Soon focuses on advice to be implemented on a granular level, the authors hint that a much broader approach is preferred and legal solutions are needed.

**Real Life Anecdotes**

For many adults who are not in touch with the realities of modern childhood, or even many parents and teachers who are desensitized or oblivious to the current sexualization of young children, the concerns raised by Levin and Kilbourne may seem abstract or theoretical. To bring the reality of the problem to readers, the authors make effective use of several real-life anecdotes. So Sexy So Soon describes 8-year-old girls who scheme to circumvent their “mean” parents’ prohibition against belly
button exposing clothes that will make them look “sexy” to boys in their class. A 7-year-old hears the term “blow job” from kids at school and asks her parents what the term means. A 5-year-old is nearly suspended for using a phrase he has heard— but doesn’t understand—when he tells a girl in his kindergarten class that he wants to “have sex” with her.

Levin and Kilbourne caution the reader that these stories are not aberrational but are typical of the types of concerns parents and educators routinely share with the authors. Some adults may still think that the authors’ anecdotes are hysterical anomalies. However, based on my own experiences, I do not believe that they are. As an elementary school teacher for several years prior to becoming a lawyer, I was frequently stunned by behaviors I observed. Children singing sexually charged lyrics or wearing midriff revealing tops were certainly concerns. However, much more disturbing were children’s use of classroom toys in graphic ways to replicate sex and inappropriate “sex play” with classmates in the restroom. Due to the age of the children in my classes, these experiences were particularly a shock; I taught kindergarten.

THE PROBLEM’S LEGAL ANGLE

In Chapter 2, the authors focus briefly on the problem’s legal backdrop. They note the huge number of hours that children are spending in front of “the screen” (i.e., a television or a computer), and they point out that during those times children are constantly bombarded with advertisements, which often contain sexualized content. The authors explain that marketers view children as potential consumers and that they have learned to use sex and sexiness very effectively to make them want to shop. However, Levin and Kilbourne describe this as a modern phenomenon because historically the federal government has protected children from products and practices in society that can do them harm.

In 1978, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) issued a report concluding that children under the age of 7 lack the cognitive ability to evaluate child-oriented television advertising, and Congress responded by considering legislation to extend more regulatory power over advertising to children. Levin and Kilbourne describe a powerful lobbying effort by the entertainment and marketing industries that defeated the would-be expansion of regulatory power to protect children from advertising that targeted them. Significantly, the lobbying effort not only blocked the passage of new legislation but also resulted in Congress’s stripping the FTC of the limited powers that it previously exercised to oversee the content of children’s advertising. Thus, lobbying by the entertainment and marketing industries left children more vulnerable than ever to the aggressive practices of child-oriented television advertising.

Failure of Regulatory Power

The authors also describe a second contemporaneous failure of regulatory power with arguably even greater impact on the sexualization of children. Until the mid-1980s, children’s television programming was regulated by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Regulations restricted marketers’ access to children by limiting the number of advertising minutes allowed for each hour of children’s programming. Per the FCC’s interpretation of these regulations, if a corporation developed a children’s television program with an accompanying line of toys and other products, the entire program would be considered an advertisement for purposes of counting the number of permissible advertising minutes. This administrative interpretation effectively prohibited television shows from marketing an accompanying line of products. However, in the mid-1980s push for deregulation of many aspects of industry, this interpretation was abandoned, and for the first time marketers were able to develop products for children that were directly linked to children’s television programs. As Levin and Kilbourne describe it, the “program-length commercial, a program made for the sole purpose of selling products, was born.”

The authors trace the fall-out of this milestone. For the first time, children became a separate consumer marketing group. All the bestselling toys and other children’s products (e.g., clothing, bed sheets, breakfast cereals) were tied to television programs. Sex and violence became the primary marketing tools used in attracting this new child consumer demographic. The amount of sexual content in television programming also grew dramatically during this time.

Levin and Kilbourne note that a bit of a backlash occurred in 1990. After intensive lobbying by concerned organizations and individuals, Congress did reinstate some of the FCC’s regulatory power over children’s programming, but the program-length commercial was not curtailed. As a result, the
authors conclude that the partial “reregulation” had only “limited impact” in reducing the use of television programming as a means to market products to children. 58

The final chapter is devoted to the ambitious topic of “Creating a New Cultural Environment.” It provides a dozen ways to “turn the world around,” 59 several of which are actually ideas for legal solutions. 60 Most of the suggestions involve a heightened role for the government regulation of media. 61

Some Legal Solutions

For example, the authors advocate the regulation of marketing to children, and are emphatic that such regulation should be imposed not only on explicit advertising (i.e., the advertising children see) but also the programming and products that implicitly fuel it. 62 They note that countries such as Sweden and Norway have banned all advertising directed at children under the age of 12, and Greece, Denmark, and Belgium have imposed severe restrictions on such advertising. 63 Levin and Kilbourne raise a persuasive argument that such regulation would also be desirable in our country because such advertisements pose a “public health risk.” 64

The book also supports the establishment of clear ratings for all television programs, video games, and other media. 65 They note surveys that indicate that parents currently tend to be poorly informed of the existing patchwork of rating systems used in the various media. 66 For this reason, Levin and Kilbourne advocate the establishment of a new, more comprehensive ratings system “by authorities outside the industries involved.” 67 Presumably, such an authority would be an administrative agency like the FCC, FTC, or the Department of Education. In conjunction with such a ratings system, the authors recommend more effective controls to give parents an enhanced ability to block children’s access to pornographic Web sites. 68

Significantly, Levin and Kilbourne also advocate governmental research on the impact of media, marketing, and sexualized content on children. 69 The authors note that there has been little such research to date, and there is particularly a dearth of research on the impact on younger children. 70 Levin and Kilbourne emphasize the importance of funding sources that are not connected to industry to ensure the objectivity and impartiality of the results. 71 Governmental funding would be critical.

Finally, despite the networks’ free use of the public airwaves, Levin and Kilbourne view them as currently escaping responsibility for the problem of sexualized children. 72 The authors suggest that the FCC ought to take a more active role in creating and enforcing standards for networks to follow. 73 Specifically, Levin and Kilbourne recommend the promotion by the networks of accurate health information and responsible sexual behaviors, as well as the modeling of good relationships and positive sexuality. 74 Although not everyone concerned about the sexualization of childhood would necessarily endorse these specific recommendations, further public dialogue could discern a consensus as to the most legitimate way to enhance the FCC’s role in establishing network standards.

Indeed, a wider discussion among lawyers of the legal solutions advocated in So Sexy So Soon is critical to identify the most viable and most effective means of more comprehensively fighting the plague of sexualized children. The child development expertise of Levin and Kilbourne is invaluable in formulating one-on-one strategies for parents and educators. However, legal experts must be recruited to identify and implement the best legal strategies. Only lawyers have the requisite expertise for that next task, and the public now seems more inclined to endorse broader regulation of industry on many fronts. 75

ALIENATING POTENTIALLY STRONG ALLIES

Because we live in a pluralistic democracy, any legal solutions to the problem of the modern sexualized childhood would need to be achieved through political channels. The farthest impacting, most efficient legal solutions would require Congress to enact legislation. For that to be achieved, it would be necessary to appeal to many members of Congress. Pragmatically, broad support from within the executive branch would also be a prerequisite. However, congressional action and broad executive branch support can typically only be achieved if politicians are motivated by their constituents. Even more modest, purely administrative fixes would likely require an exertion of political will to overcome inertia and achieve a change in the deeply entrenched status quo.

Due to the need for significant political support to attack the problem from a legal perspective, it would be important to rally as many interested constituencies as possible, and not alienate potential allies by taking sides in the cultural war and beating up on sacred cows such as Disney princesses, a topic beyond the scope of this review.
CONCLUSION

In their book, So Sexy So Soon, Levin and Kilbourne focus much needed attention on and provide important analysis of the recent problem of the sexualized childhood. As experts on child development, the authors have provided critical insight as to the root causes of the problem. They have also given parents immediate and helpful advice on how to guide their children through the bombardment of sexualized and sexy images and language to minimize the negative impacts to them.

Levin and Kilbourne have also flagged the need for broader, more systematic solutions beyond their own scholarly disciplines. Specifically, the authors have hinted at the need for legal solutions to the problem, but it will take creative and dedicated lawyers to flesh out and implement such solutions. However, in doing so, lawyers ought to be careful to avoid alienating biases that may rebuff potentially sympathetic groups who might serve as political allies and avoid needless attacks on sacred cows.

NOTES


2. Id. at 13.


6. Id. at 180-184.

7. Id. at 35-39.

8. Id. at 180-184.

9. Id. at 79-82.

10. Id. at 7.

11. Id.

12. Id.

13. Id. at 8-9.

14. Id. at 8.

15. Id. at 74-78.

16. Id. at 4.

17. Id. at 9.

18. Id. at 37-39.

19. Id. at 9.

20. Id. at 69-70.

21. Id. at 69.


23. Levin & Kilbourne, supra n.1, at 69-70.

24. Id. at 13.

25. Id.

26. Id. at 62.

27. Id. at 31.

28. Id.

29. Id. at 37-38, 62.

30. Id. at 79-82.

31. Id. at 81.

32. Id.

33. Id. at 79-82.

34. Id. at 81.

35. Id.

36. Id. at 16-28.

37. Id. at 24-26.

38. Id. at 21-22.
39. *Id.* at 22-24.

40. See, e.g., *id.* at 22.

41. *Id.* at 35-37.

42. *Id.* at 37-40.

43. *Id.* at 37.

44. *Id.* at 35.

45. *Id.* at 35-36.

46. *Id.* at 36.

47. *Id.*

48. *Id.*

49. *Id.*

50. *Id.*

51. *Id.*

52. *Id.*

53. *Id.*

54. *Id.*

55. *Id.* at 37-38.

56. *Id.* at 37.

57. *Id.*

58. *Id.*

59. *Id.* at 180-188.

60. *Id.* at 180-185.

61. *Id.* at 180-182.

62. *Id.* at 180.

63. *Id.*

64. *Id.*

65. *Id.* at 180-181.

66. *Id.* at 181.

67. *Id.*

68. *Id.*

69. *Id.*

70. *Id.*

71. *Id.*

72. *Id.* at 181-182.

73. *Id.* at 182.

74. *Id.*
