

## **Generation Diva**

### ***How our obsession with beauty is changing our kids.***

By Jessica Bennett, *Newsweek*

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There's a scene in "Toddlers & Tiaras," the TLC reality series, where 2-year-old Marleigh is perched in front of a mirror, smothering her face with blush and lipstick. She giggles as her mother attempts to hold the squealing toddler still, lathering her legs with self-tanner. "Marleigh loves to get tan," her mom says, as the girl presses her face against the mirror.

Marleigh is one of many pageant girls on the show, egged on by obsessive mothers who train their tots to strut and swagger, flip their hair and pout their lips. I watch, mesmerized by the freakishness of it all, but wonder how different Marleigh is from average girls all across America. On a recent Sunday in Brooklyn, I stumble into a spa that brands itself for the 0 to 12 set, full of tweens getting facialed and glossed, hands and feet outstretched for manis and pedis. "The girls just love it," says Daria Einhorn, the 21-year-old spa owner, who was inspired by watching her 5-year-old niece play with toy beauty kits.

Sounds extreme? Maybe. But this, my friends, is the new normal: a generation that primps and dyes and pulls and shapes, younger and with more vigor. Girls today are salon vets before they enter elementary school. Forget having mom trim your bangs, fourth graders are in the market for lush \$50 haircuts; by the time they hit high school, \$150 highlights are standard. Five-year-olds have spa days and pedicure parties. And instead of shaving their legs the old-fashioned way—with a 99-cent drugstore razor—teens get laser hair removal, the most common cosmetic procedure of that age group. If these trends continue, by the time your tween hits the Botox years, she'll have spent thousands on the beauty treatments once reserved for the "Beverly Hills, 90210" set, not junior highs in Madison, Wis.

Reared on reality TV and celebrity makeovers, girls as young as Marleigh are using beauty products earlier, spending more and still feeling worse about themselves. Four years ago, a survey by the NPD Group showed that, on average, women began using beauty products at 17. Today, the average is 13—and that's got to be an overstatement. According to market-research firm Experian, 43 percent of 6- to 9-year-olds are already using lipstick or lip gloss; 38 percent use hairstyling products; and 12 percent use other cosmetics. And the level of interest is making the girls of "Toddlers & Tiaras" look ordinary. "My daughter is 8, and she's like, so into this stuff it's unbelievable," says Anna Solomon, a Brooklyn social worker. "From the clothes to the hair to the nails, school is like No. 10 on the list of priorities."

Much has been made of the oversexualization of today's tweens. But what hasn't been discussed is what we might call their "diva-ization"—before they even hit the tween years. Consider this: according to a NEWSWEEK examination of the most common beauty trends, by the time your 10-year-old is 50, she'll have spent nearly \$300,000 on just her hair and face. It's not that women haven't always been slaves to their appearance; as Yeats wrote, "To be born woman is to know ... that we must labour to be beautiful." But today's girls are getting caught up in the beauty maintenance game at ages when they should be learning how to read—and long before their

beauty needs enhancing. Twenty years ago, a second grader might have played clumsily with her mother's lipstick, but she probably didn't insist on carrying her own lip gloss to school.

### **New Methods, Old Message**

Why are this generation's standards different? To start, this is a group that's grown up on pop culture that screams, again and again, that everything, *everything*, is a candidate for upgrading. These girls are maturing in an age when older women are taking ever more extreme measures, from Botox to liposuction, to stay sexually competitive. They've watched bodies transformed on "Extreme Makeover"; faces taken apart and pieced back together on "I Want a Famous Face." They compare themselves to the overly airbrushed models in celebrity and women's magazines, and learn about makeup from the girls of "Toddlers & Tiaras," or the show's WEtv competitor, "Little Miss Perfect." And while we might make fun of the spoiled teens on MTV's "My Super Sweet 16," these shows raise the bar for what's considered over the top.

A combination of new technology and the Web, is responsible—at least in part—for this transformation in attitudes. Ads for the latest fashions, makeup tips and grooming products are circulated with a speed and fury unique to this millennium—on millions of ads, message boards and Facebook pages. Digital cameras come complete with retouching options, and anyone can learn how to use Photoshop to blend and tighten and thin. It's been estimated that girls 11 to 14 are subjected to some 500 advertisements a day—the majority of them nipped, tucked and airbrushed to perfection. And, according to a University of Minnesota study, staring at those airbrushed images from just one to three minutes can have a negative impact on girls' self-esteem. "None of this existed when I was growing up, and now it's just like, in your face," says Solomon, 30. "Kids aren't exempt just because they're young."

What that means for kids in the long term is effort and money washed down the drain each night, along with the remnants of a painted face. It's constant, and exhausting. I should know: at 27, my daily maintenance regimen takes at least an hour, and I own enough products to fill a large closet, not to mention a savings account. I have three shades of tanning lotion and \$130 Crème de La Mer face cream I use so sparingly it defeats the purpose of having it, and 34—I counted this morning—varieties of lip balm, gloss and tint. I have hair wax and cream, a balm that's made of latex, surf spray for when I want that weathered look, and grooming cream to get rid of it. And I haven't even started to look at the anti-aging products yet.

This is what the 11-year-olds of the world have to look forward to—times 10. Eight- to 12-year-olds in this country already spend more than \$40 million a month on beauty products, and teens spend another \$100 million, according the NPD Group. This trend seems unaffected by the tanking economy: cosmetic surgery procedures dipped slightly last year, but cosmetics sales have increased between 1 and 46 percent, depending on the product, according to the Nielsen Co.

### **Forever Out of Reach**

There's no evidence to prove that women who start primping early will primp more as they get older, but it's a safe assumption that they won't slow down. And what that means, say psychologists, is the evolution of a beauty standard that's becoming harder to achieve. New statistics from the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery show that cosmetic- surgery procedures performed on those 18 and younger have nearly doubled over the past decade. Dr.

Alan Gold, the society's president, says that nearly 14 percent of Botox injections are given in the 19 to 34 age group—and while his trade group doesn't break down those ages any more specifically, he's seen a significant increase in the younger end of that group, seeking treatments as preventative. "I think what we've done is level the playing field, in that someone who may not have had great exposure to these things before—say, on a farm in Iowa—has the same options available to them," says Gold, who runs a private practice in Great Neck, N.Y. "Thomas Friedman has written how the world is flat economically. Well, it's getting flatter in terms of aging and appearance, too."

But if the world is flat, and impossible standards have become ubiquitous, can a person ever be satisfied with the way they look? In Susie Orbach's new book, "Bodies," the former therapist to Princess Diana argues that good looks and peak fitness are no longer a biological gift, but a ceaseless pursuit. And obsession at an early age, she says, fosters a belief that these are essential components of who we are—not, as she puts it, "lovely add-ons." "It primes little girls to think they should diet and dream about the cosmetic-surgery options available to them, and it makes body the primary place for self-identity."

The body, of course, cannot carry the weight of that—and these days, body dissatisfaction begins in grammar school. According to a 2004 study by the Dove Real Beauty campaign, 42 percent of first- to third-grade girls want to be thinner, while 81 percent of 10-year-olds are afraid of getting fat. "When you have tweens putting on firming cream"—as was revealed by 1 percent of girls in an NPD study—"it's clear they're looking for imaginary flaws," says Harvard psychologist Nancy Etcoff.

Which can lead to very real consequences—and a hefty debt. A lifetime of manis and pedis could cover four years at a public university; hair and face treatments would pay for a private college. "I think it's a very interesting time for girls, in that what we all grew up believing—that you have to play the hand you're dealt—is no longer true," says screenwriter Nora Ephron, who has written often on women and beauty. "In some sense, you really can go out and buy yourself a better face and a different body."

If tweens can be convinced they need to spend to perfect their already youthful skin, it's hard to imagine what they'll believe at 40. And with all the time they'll spend thinking about it, it's even harder to imagine all they're missing along the way.

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