Girls Gone Wild: What Are Celebs Teaching Kids?
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Paris, Britney, Lindsay & Nicole: They seem to be everywhere and they may not be wearing underwear. Tweens adore them and teens envy them. But are we raising a generation of 'prostitots'?

My 6-year-old daughter loves Lindsay Lohan. Loves, loves, loves her. She loves Lindsay's hair; she loves Lindsay's freckles. She's seen The Parent Trap at least 10 times. I sometimes catch her humming the movie's theme song, Nat King Cole's "Love." She likes Herbie Fully Loaded and now we're cycling through Freaky Friday. So when my daughter spotted a photo of Lindsay in the New York Post at the breakfast table not long ago, she was psyched. "That's Lindsay Lohan," she said proudly. "What's she doing?"

I couldn't tell her, of course. I didn't want to explain that Lindsay, who, like Paris Hilton and Britney Spears, sometimes parties pantyless, was taking pole-dancing lessons to prepare for a movie role. Or that her two hours of research left her bruised "everywhere." Then again, Lindsay's professional trials are easy to explain compared with Nicole Richie's recent decision to stop her car in the car-pool lane of an L.A. freeway. Or Britney Spears's "collapse" during a New Year's Eve party in Las Vegas. Or the more recent report that Lindsay had checked into rehab after passing out in a hotel hallway, an item that ran on the Post's Page Six opposite a photo of Kate Moss falling down a stairway while dressed in little more than a fur jacket and a pack of cigarettes.

Something's in the air, and I wouldn't call it love. Like never before, our kids are being bombarded by images of oversexed, underdressed celebrities who can't seem to step out of a car without displaying their well-waxed private parts to photographers. Videos like Girls Gone Wild on Campus Uncensored bring in an estimated $40 million a year. And if Us Magazine, which changed the rules of mainstream celebrity journalism, is too slow with the latest dish on "Brit's New Man," kids can catch up 24/7 with hugely popular gossip blogs like perezhilton.com, tmz.com or defamer.com.

Allow us to confirm what every parent knows: kids, born in the new-media petri dish, are well aware of celebrity antics. But while boys are willing to take a peek at anyone showing skin, they're baffled by the feuds, the fashions and faux pas of the Brit Pack. Girls, on the other hand, are their biggest fans. A recent Newsweek Poll found that 77 percent of Americans believe that Britney, Paris and Lindsay have too much influence on young girls. Hardly a day passes when one of them isn't making news. Paris Hilton "was always somewhere, doing something," says Melissa Monaco, an 18-year-old senior at Oldfield's boarding school for girls in Maryland, who describes herself as a recovered Paris Hilton addict. "I loved everything from her outfits to her attitude," she says. And it's not just teenagers. Julie Seborowski, a first-grade teacher at Kumeyaay Elementary School in San Diego, says she sees it in her 7-year-old students: girls using words like "sexy," singing pop songs with suggestive lyrics and flirting with boys.
That's enough to make any parent cringe. But are there really harmful long-term effects of overexposure to Paris Hilton? Are we raising a generation of what one L.A. mom calls "prostitots," young girls who dress like tarts, live for Dolce & Gabbana purses and can neither spell nor define such words as "adequate"? Or does the rise of the bad girl signal something more profound, a coarsening of the culture and a devaluation of sex, love and lasting commitment? We're certainly not the first generation of parents to worry about such things, nor will we be the last. Many conservative thinkers view our sex-drenched culture as dangerous; liberals are more prone to wave off fears about the chastity of our daughters as reactionary. One thing is not in doubt: a lot of parents are wondering about the effect our racy popular culture may have on their kids and the women they would like their girls to become. The answers are likely to lie in yet another question: where do our children learn values?

Here's a radical idea—at home, where they always have. Experts say attentive parents, strong teachers and nice friends are an excellent counterbalance to our increasingly sleazy culture. Statistical evidence indicates that our girls are actually doing pretty well, in spite of Paris Hilton and those like her: teen pregnancy, drinking and drug use are all down, and there is no evidence that girls are having intercourse at a younger age. And in many ways it's a great time to be a girl: women are excelling in sports, academics and the job market. It's just that the struggle to impart the right values to our kids is a 24/7 proposition. It can be done, but an ancient rule of warfare applies: first, know thy enemy.

"It takes a very strong adolescent to know what's right and what's wrong and not get sucked into all this stuff," says Emily Waring, 40, a paralegal from San Diego and mother of two girls, ages 9 and 2. Waring says her "mom radar" is always on because she believes negative influences, including entertainers like Britney Spears, are everywhere. "Kids can so easily stray," she says.

Nobody wants her bright, innocent girls to grow up believing "hard-partying heiress" is a job title to which they can aspire. But does dressing like Paris or slavishly following the details of Britney's love life make kids more likely to stray? Educators say they don't believe most girls in middle school wear short skirts or midriff shirts to attract the attention of older men, or even boys. (High school is, granted, a different story.) Sixth graders dress to fit in with other girls and for acceptance in social groups. "They dress that way because that's what they see in the media," says Nancy T. Mugele, who works in communications at Roland Park Country School in Baltimore. "They don't want to be different."

Which is not to say that hearing about Lindsay Lohan's, um, "fire crotch" doesn't affect the way kids think about sex. A study published last year in the journal Pediatrics concluded that for white teens, repeated exposure to sexual content in television, movies and music increases the likelihood of becoming sexually active at an earlier age. (Black teens appear less influenced by media, and more by their parents' expectations and their friends' sexual behavior; those who had the least exposure to sexual content were also less likely to have intercourse.) Specifically, the study found that 55 percent of teens who were exposed to a lot of sexual material had intercourse by 16, compared with only 6 percent of teens who rarely saw sexual imagery in the media. That jibes with what many Americans fear: 84 percent of adults in the Newsweek Poll said sex plays a bigger role in popular culture than it did 20 or 30 years ago, and 70 percent said that was a bad influence on young people.
Many factors affect kids' sexual behavior, and it may be that kids who are already considering sex are more likely to seek out sexy shows and music. But researchers say one of the strongest predictors of early intercourse is the impression—real or imagined—that everybody else is doing it. For some teens, especially those who aren't getting strong messages about abstinence from their parents, the media can become a sort of "sexual superpeer," according to Jane D. Brown, a journalism professor at UNC Chapel Hill, and an author of the Pediatrics study. The message, says Brown, is that "you can walk around with no clothes on, you can have sex with whoever shows up, you can have a baby and not be married."

Some observers think the real effect of the Brit Pack on our culture is more subtle, but no less negative. Rather than instantly inspiring kids to rush and have sex, out-of-control celebs create a sense of normalcy about behavior—drinking, smoking, casual sex—that is dangerous for teens. Britney, Paris and Lindsay have no shortage of "boyfriends" but seem to have few real relationships. "It creates a general sense that life is about being crazy, being kooky, having fun and not carrying on serious relationships," says Christian Smith, professor of sociology at Notre Dame. But the really insidious consequence is that teenagers often consider themselves immune to these influences. "They don't have enough perspective on how they are being formed by the world around them—and when they don't realize it, it can be more powerful," he says.

Still, this seems like a lot to place on the slender shoulders of Nicole Richie and her frenemies. That some girls dress like Paris/Britney/Lindsay is empirically true. But it's difficult to draw a straight line between the behavior of celebrities and the behavior of real girls. "We certainly don't see our girls clamoring to get to downtown Chicago to the clubs," says Mark Kuzniewski, principal of Aptakisic Junior High in Buffalo Grove, Ill. And while girls may admire Britney's clothes and dance moves, her students "can't understand why Britney would wear no underwear," says Michelle Freitag, fifth-grade teacher in suburban Chicago. Their verdict: Britney is a "hootch," which is a polite way of saying "slut."

Our anxiety about girls and sex is growing just as the statistics seem to be telling a different story. Sex surveys are notoriously unreliable, but the best available data show that the average age of first sexual intercourse for girls is 17, according to the Guttmacher Institute, and hasn't changed by more than a few months in 20 years. The overall teenage pregnancy rate in 2002, the most recent available, was down 35 percent from 1990, according to the Centers for Disease Control. And while celebrity idols stumble in and out of rehab, the rates of drinking, smoking and overall drug use among teenage girls have declined in recent years, says the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan.

Girls born after 1990 live in a world where they have ready access to organized sports, safe contraception and Ivy League colleges. Yale didn't admit women until 1969; its freshman class is currently half female. In the 2004-2005 school year, women earned 57 percent of all bachelor's degrees awarded and 59 percent of master's degrees. The Congress now has 90 female members—the highest in history—with 16 in the Senate and 74 in the House, including Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Hillary Clinton, our first viable female presidential candidate, has thrown her hat into the ring.

Dan Kindlon, a professor of child psychology at Harvard and author of "Alpha Girls," calls these girls the daughters of the revolution, the first generation that is reaping the full benefit of the women's movement. "Sure, there are plenty of girls with big problems out there," he says. "Like
the *Girls Gone Wild* videos. But what percentage of the college population is that?" There is still plenty of pressure to be beautiful and thin, he adds, but now there are more options. Girls can define themselves as athletes or good students. For better or for worse, it may also be that they now feel entitled to dress as crassly as they choose, date unwisely and fall down drunk, the way men have since the dawn of time.

That's at least how long parents have worried about how their children would turn out. The text on a Sumerian tablet from the village of Ur (located in modern-day Iraq) says: "If the unheard-of actions of today's youth are allowed to continue, then we are doomed." Certainly, queens and noblewomen have long gotten away with behaving badly: in the early 16th century, Anne Boleyn not only had an affair with the King of England, Henry VIII, but helped persuade him to throw the Roman Catholic Church out of the country (although we all know how that ended). Their daughter, Elizabeth I, was the "virgin queen" who slept around.

But for most of history, average women who had sex outside the vows of marriage were subject to banishment, beating or death. When Jesus said, "If any of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her," he was protecting a woman caught in adultery. In her book *Promiscuities*, Naomi Wolf recalls a searing image she came across in her research: a photo of the mummified remains of a 14-year-old German girl from the first century A.D.: "Her right arm still clutched the garrote that had been used to twist the rope around her neck. Her lips were open in an 'O' of surprise or pain ... " Historians had concluded that the girl had been blindfolded, strangled and drowned, most likely as retribution for "adultery," or what we would now call premarital sex.

Until after the Civil War, women didn't have enough freedom to create much of a public scandal. By the turn of the century, however, the Industrial Revolution had transformed the lives of adolescent daughters of working-class families. Once confined to home, young white women could now work in offices, stores and factories, where they enjoyed unprecedented social freedoms—much to the chagrin of their parents and social critics. Young African-American women didn't have the same economic opportunities, but did gain new autonomy as they fled farms in the South to live and work in Northern cities.

Meanwhile, improved literacy along with technological advances like the wireless telegraph and radio gave rise to a national media. By 1900, there were more than 16,000 newspapers in the United States; circulation numbers at the biggest topped 1 million. Keeping a dirty little secret had become much, much harder. By the time the 1920s rolled around, bad girls could grow up to become not just the destroyers of men (in the tradition of Salome and Delilah), but also to be rich and famous.

Mae West, best remembered for one-liners like "If you don't like my peaches, why do you shake my tree," may have been the original bad girl of the 20th century. Born in Brooklyn in 1893, she wrote and starred in bawdy theatrical productions, delighting and scandalizing audiences. She went too far, however, when she wrote a play called *Sex*, about waterfront hookers and pimps, which became a national hit. In 1927, the New York production was raided and she was arrested, convicted of a performance that "tended to corrupt the morals of youth and others," and sentenced to 10 days in jail, according to *The New York Times*. Seven years later she was featured on the cover of *Newsweek* for a story titled "The Churches Protest," which called her the "personification of Hollywood's sins."
Gypsy Rose Lee, born in 1914, followed closely on Mae West's spike heels. A burlesque superstar, Lee's shows at Minsky's Winter Garden in New York in the 1930s were a sensation. Before a congressional committee in 1937, Herbert Minsky, who co-owned the theater, called Lee "one of the most highly publicized stars in the country." According to a Washington Post account, "A momentary hush fell on the hearings ... The name of Gypsy Rose Lee had been mentioned." Despite her fame—and $2,000-a-week salary—Lee was arrested numerous times by the NYPD for public indecency, once allegedly protesting, "I wasn't naked. I was completely covered by a blue spotlight."

By the '50s, both Hollywood and the public took a harsh view of female stars' off-screen indiscretions. In 1950, Ingrid Bergman was America's sweetheart, having starred in The Bells of St. Mary's and Notorious. But when Bergman, then married, had an affair with director Roberto Rossellini, who was also married, and gave birth to their child, she was shunned by Hollywood and called "a powerful influence for evil" on the floor of the Senate. (Hollywood "forgave" Bergman a few years later by giving her an Oscar for Anastasia.) After news broke that Marilyn Monroe would be featured in a nude calendar, Hollywood proclaimed her career DOA. (She was on the cover of Life magazine a month later, and went on to the biggest roles of her career.)

America was scandalized in 1962 when Elizabeth Taylor cheated on Eddie Fisher with Richard Burton during the filming of Cleopatra. The Vatican denounced her as "a woman of loose morals." When "Dickenliz," as they were known, checked into a Toronto hotel, protesters marched outside with signs that read DRINK NOT THE WINE OF ADULTERY, according to a 1964 Newsweek article. But soon America's priorities shifted. The Vietnam War was on television; the civil-rights movement was in the streets, and the national mood had been sobered by the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy. The '60s also brought reliable contraception in the form of the birth-control pill and ushered in the sexual revolution. We no longer needed to look to Hollywood for bad influences; the girl next door, the one with birth-control pills and a couple of joints tucked into her fringed purse, became the new object of our anxiety.

America had become harder to shock—until 1984, that is, when Madonna showed up in a wedding dress at the first MTV Video Music Awards and sang "Like a Virgin" while writhing on the floor. When her "Virgin" tour opened a year later, parents fretted over the hordes of Madonna wannabes who thronged her concerts dressed in tatty lace, spandex and armfuls of black rubber bracelets. The Material Girl went on to outrage both Planned Parenthood and the Catholic Church in 1986 with her single "Papa Don't Preach," about a pregnant teenager. The 1992 coffee-table book called Sex, which glorified nearly every sexual fetish you can think of, cemented her title as the Queen of Bad Girls. Eleven years later she passed on her crown to Britney with a lingering French kiss on the stage of yet another MTV Video Music Awards ceremony.

And Brit, as we know, has run with it. One-day marriages aside, why wouldn't girls be fascinated by her and her celebrity pals? These 21st-century "bad influences" are young, beautiful and rich, unencumbered by school, curfews or parents. "They've got great clothes and boyfriends. They seem to have a lot of fun," explains Emma Boyce, a 17-year-old junior at Louise S. McGehee School in New Orleans. But fascination and admiration are two very different things. As they get arrested for driving drunk and feuding with their former BFFs, the Brit Pack makes it easy for
young women like Boyce, a top student and accomplished equestrian, to feel superior to them. "My friends and I look at them to laugh at them," adds Boyce. "Our lives seem pretty good by comparison. We're not going to rehab like Lindsay."

Boyce says she and her friends have simply outgrown their devotion to celebrities. Twelve- to 14-year-olds are probably the most vulnerable to stars' influence. "Clearly it is at this age for girls that they are trying to find an identity to associate with," says Kuzniewski, the junior-high principal from Buffalo Grove, Ill. "It seems desirable to be Lindsay Lohan." Now that's a legitimate cause for parental concern. But it may very well be fleeting. After all, have you read your junior-high journals lately? Like us, you were probably obsessed with trivial things that had little bearing on the person you became at 24 or 34. Even if your daughter does dress like Paris or behave like Lindsay, that doesn't mean she's doomed to a life on the pole. Plenty of high-school bad girls (us, for instance!) grow up to be successful professionals with happy home lives.

And as much as we hate to admit it, we grown-ups are complicit. We're uncomfortable when kids worship these girls, yet we also love US magazine; we can't get enough of YouTube videos or E! True Hollywood Stories. So rather than wring our hands over an increase in 17-year-olds getting breast implants, what if we just said no? They're minors, right? And while we worry that middle-schoolers are dressing like hookers, there are very few 11-year-olds with enough disposable income to keep Forever 21 afloat. The greatest threat posed by these celebrity bad girls may be that they're advertising avatars, dressed by stylists and designers, who seem to live only to consume: clothes, cell phones, dogs and men. But there's good news: that problem is largely under the control of we who hold the purse strings.

And even if our adolescents pick up a few tricks from the Brit Pack, we have a big head start on them. We begin to teach our kids values while they're still in diapers. "Kids learn good morals and values by copying role models who are close to them," says Michele Borba, author of "Teaching Moral Intelligence." Experts say that even the most withdrawn teens scrutinize their parents for cues on how to act. So watch your behavior; don't gossip with your friends in front of the kids and downplay popularity as a lifetime goal. Parents need to understand and talk about the things that interest their kids—even if it's what Paris is wearing—without being judgmental. That makes it easier for kids to open up. "The really subtle thing you have to do is hear where they are coming from, and gently direct them into thinking about it," says Borba. That means these celebrities gone wild and all their tabloid antics can be teachable moments. Lesson No. 1: wear underwear.

With Jamie Reno in San Diego, Karen Springen in Chicago and Susannah Meadows, Anne Underwood and Julie Scelfo in New York

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