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# A Line Between Sweet and Skimpy

By BRUCE FEILER

It first happened to me this spring. My daughters, who had just turned 8, came bounding into the room to show off new outfits they were wearing to an extended-family gathering. My eyes bulged. The dresses drooped provocatively off the shoulder and offered other peekaboos of their bodies. Sure, as a parent, I figured I would one day face clothing battles with my children. Politicians aren't the only ones who draw red lines.

But so soon?

As a father, I find these conversations particularly challenging. On the one hand, I've internalized all the messages that I should not criticize my daughters' bodies, compliment them merely for their looks, or in any way stifle their emerging sexuality. On the other hand, I don't want them to leave the house dressed as pole dancers.

For years, I had what I thought was a sly way of handling this issue. Whenever my daughters modeled a new piece of clothing, I would say: "I don't care what you wear. I care who you are." But recently they've begun throwing my line back at me: "But I thought you didn't care what we wear!"

Time to get some new lines.

The issue of appropriate clothing for girls has been the subject of increasing academic and popular scrutiny, fed by skimpy panties printed with "wink wink" or skinny leggings that say "cute butt sweat pants." In 2007, Walmart bowed to parental pressure and [pulled pairs of pink girls' underwear off its shelves](#) because they were printed with the words "Who needs credit cards ..." on the front and "When you've got Santa" on the back.

[Sarah K. Murnen](#), a professor of psychology at Kenyon College, said parents today face greater challenges than those in the past because girls' clothing has become more sexualized. "Some people say it's due to an increased pornification of culture," Professor Murnen said, "where the easy availability of pornography on the Internet has made its way into styles and popular culture." She cited thong underwear, push-up bras and leather miniskirts for first to fifth graders as examples.

[In a 2011 study](#), Professor Murnen evaluated 5,666 items of girls' clothing on 15 popular Web sites

to determine whether they were “childlike,” “sexualizing” or “adultlike.” She found that 29.4 percent of items were judged to have “sexualizing characteristics,” including more than half of dresses and two-thirds of swimsuits. In a separate study of girls’ magazines, she found that the percentage of provocative clothing had more than doubled since 1971.

Professor Murnen said that this trend was particularly alarming because her research indicates that when adults look at girls dressed in sexualized clothing, they take them less seriously. “Teachers are looking at these girls and assuming they aren’t intelligent,” she said.

[Joyce McFadden](#), a psychoanalyst and the author of “Your Daughter’s Bedroom,” said girls today are unprepared to withstand sophisticated efforts by corporations that prey on girls’ desire to be popular. “As parents, we’re so afraid to talk honestly with our daughters about their sexuality that we end up leaving them out in the cold,” she said.

The American Psychological Association grew so alarmed with the objectification of girls in popular culture that in 2005 it [set up a task force](#). [Sharon Lamb](#), a psychologist at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, and a member of the task force, said her hope was that their two reports “would bring attention to marketers and media to be more reflective about the kinds of girls they were presenting.”

Unfortunately, she said, the reports added pressure on parents to be more vigilant. “I don’t think it’s parents’ fault that they are ‘allowing their kids to walk around like this,’ ” she said. “There’s so much being done through peer culture that it’s a real struggle for parents not to be meanies and come across as antisexuality.”

So what is a worried parent to say? I suggested five possible retorts from girls and asked for guidance.

**“EVERYBODY DOES IT.”** “Ooh, that’s a rough one,” Ms. McFadden said, “because it’s the precursor to ‘Well, Johnny is freebasing’ or ‘So-and-so gets to stay out until 4 in the morning.’ You have to say, ‘Well, in our family we do things differently.’ ” The critical step, she said, is for parents to make sure they are on the same page before approaching their children. “You’re going to have to compromise on some pieces of clothing,” she said. “I had to give in on push-up bras with my daughter. But don’t let these items take over her wardrobe.”

**“IT’S THE ONLY THING THEY SELL.”** Ms. Lamb, co-author of “[Packaging Girlhood](#),” said children who make that observation have a point. “Still, you have to state your values,” she said. “You have to say: ‘I don’t want to see you and your friends buying into these marketers’ schemes to

sell teenage stuff to younger and younger kids. It's like "Invasion of the Body Snatchers." The marketers are the body snatchers, and I'm going to fight them.' "

**"YOU'RE SUCH A SQUARE."** Professor Murnen agreed that parents need to embrace their old-fashioned standards. "I'm not a conservative person," she said. "But when it came to my daughter, I told her I hope she developed a wonderful body image and a healthy sexuality but that I didn't think that's what sexy clothes were doing." Professor Murnen said she even adjusted her own fashion choices. "I personally like attractive clothing," she said, "but I'm careful not to wear clothing with sexualizing characteristics, because I do feel like I need to be a role model for my students."

**"MOM WEARS THESE THINGS, WHY NOT ME?"** Ms. McFadden said it's fair to point out to girls that as they get older, they will have more freedom to make their own decisions. "Our generation of parents are such sissies when it comes to setting boundaries," she said. "Parents concede to their children's whims to make their children happy, but those children don't grow up to be happy, because they have no internal compass. These limits are what make healthy, happy adults possible."

**"FINE, BUT I'M JUST GOING TO CHANGE WHEN I GET TO SCHOOL."** Ms. Lamb said her response to girls who threaten to peel off layers once they leave the house would be to redirect the conversation. "I would say, 'I'm not interested in controlling what you wear,' " she said. " 'I'm interested in getting you thinking about what it means to be an attractive person.' " She said she often tells her teenage students that the species would die out if boys only wanted to have sex with girls who looked like Victoria's Secret models. "We're built to be attracted to people with different looks, with different personalities, with different talents, senses of humor and lots of wonderful things," she said.

As for us, the night my daughters first flashed their approaching tweendom, my wife quickly heeded the message. Shawls were procured, and those once-revealing dresses soon became more age appropriate. With a little hunting, my wife and daughters located some Web site that sold attractive clothes with more modest, yet trendy-enough slogans: "I Love Music" and "Bee-You-Tiful" with a bumblebee.

Still, we had been warned. The big battles are yet to come. Ms. McFadden said we should stay strong. "You have to remember," she said, "you're raising a person who's going to live a whole life. Just because one episode doesn't go well doesn't mean an accumulation of similar messages won't somehow trickle down. You just have to be brave, let them have the freedom they deserve, but still

set guidelines that represent your family's values.”

*Bruce Feiler's latest book, "The Secrets of Happy Families," was recently published. "This Life" appears monthly.*



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