

Is 6 The New 13?

FOUR-LETTER WORDS. PROVOCATIVE CLOTHING. ATTITUDE WITH A CAPITAL A.

By Debbe Geiger

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July 15, 2003

Little girls just aren't the way they used to be, says Michele Mulé, 39, of Seaford.

Most of the girls at a recent roller-skating party attended by her daughter Alexandra wore "hip huggers and low peasant tops," she says. "The little girls didn't look like they were 8 years old. There is a big gap in the way I acted at that age and what I see in little girls today."

It's apparent, she says, "in their dress, in their demeanor, their music. They're exposed to a lot more."

Nancy Daniello, 38, of Dix Hills says her daughter Jessica, who just turned 6, "is not like when I was 6. Her whole attitude is different. She's a lot more mature than I was. I got her ears pierced last week; I was 16 when I had that done."

Kids definitely are growing up faster these days, experts say, pointing to several reasons: More children are entering social situations at earlier ages, the media in all forms are a powerful influence, many parents are lax in their demand for respect, and society as a whole has speeded up. Children's development, says Rona Novick, coordinator of child and adolescent psychology at Schneider Children's Hospital in New Hyde Park, is simply keeping up.

"By the time they are in first or second grade, they've been in school for five years. With that," she says, "comes an earlier entry into the social world. Children have play dates at younger ages; they're going to sleep-over camp at younger ages. They have more social experiences under their belt by the time they reach 6 or 7 as the same child 20 years ago."

The trend emanates from parents who grew up in the '60s and '70s, says Benjamin Mankita, a social worker and psychoanalyst from Bellmore. "We're from a generation that did a lot of liberal things. We broke many limits ourselves. A lot of that is coming to fruition now."

Earl childhood experts say a greater degree of independence is expected of youngsters. "With two parents in the workforce, parents work hard and focus on early independence," says Laurie Segal of Williston Park, who runs a national psychological wellness program called Face It. As a result, "there is more unsupervised time. Parents try to recuperate from their long day while the kids watch who-knows-what on TV."

Novick singles out television and movies: "Look at the language and shows for children. Children are exposed to our culture of put-downs and humor that is largely at the expense of others." Although movies such as "Spy Kids" and "Agent Cody Banks" are geared to young children, "parents are portrayed as inept or bumbling," she says.

"Kids are basing their personalities on these superficial images of adolescence through the

media," says Lee Chasen, a psychotherapist and director of Kid Esteem, an emotional intelligence training program for children and families in Babylon. And programming that features precocious characters makes it harder for normal children to understand their place in real life.

In addition, "until we have boy teenage pregnancies, the sexuality and development and activities of girls will be treated differently than those of boys," Novick says. "Are there little boys dressing like punks? Absolutely. But people don't worry about it in the same way as when little girls dress like hookers."

Suggestive language can be another problem. Robin Jaslow of Roslyn says her 6-year-old son, David, has picked up some words she'd rather he not know from "Rugrats" on the popular Nickelodeon cable network. "The language rises to the level of everything but cursing," she says. "He will use inappropriate language when he doesn't even know what it means. There are mature themes that are not appropriate, but I let him watch it ... because everyone around him is watching it."

Such resignation is common, says Robert Butterworth, a licensed clinical psychologist in Los Angeles. "When you're exposed to all this, be it music or fashion, even if you're not ready, it seems like everybody else is so you should be, too."

Themes once considered adult are pervasive on children's programming. Radio Disney, for example, routinely plays songs about love and angst that may be beyond the emotional development of many listeners. Mulé says her daughter Nicole, 3, often the "third wheel" when it comes to playing with Mulé's 8-year-old daughter and friends, already knows the words to songs by "tween" pop star Avril Lavigne.

Danielo's husband, Dana, realizes his daughter and 8-year-old son, Michael, are learning a lot from pop culture, but he says, "It's our job to get them back to reality. I wonder if it's all relative, and people were saying this 20 and 30 years ago, too. I don't think kids have changed; I think parents have changed. Kids have always tried to force the issue, and it's our job as parents to resist and hold our ground."

His wife agrees. "Their natural tendency is to be disrespectful. They're kids. They are supposed to challenge you. I don't like them talking back to me. I don't allow that. If you don't nip it in the bud, it will just be worse when they are 13."

Setting such limits is important, Mankita says. "From the beginning of time, kids are pushing the limits. They're looking at what they can get away with. ... If it doesn't work, they stop."

It's important for parents to guide their 6- to 8-year-olds. For example, it's OK for young girls to put on makeup, Segal says, and pretend they are rock stars by singing to a Britney Spears song. "That is age-appropriate. But when playacting turns to pretending to drink and smoke, parents need to set limits."

Just because the parents are good people doesn't mean the children's behavior will follow suit. "There needs to be a conscious teaching of respectful behavior with clear expectations," Chasen says. "There is an expectation that it will happen naturally." But it doesn't, he says. "It needs to be taught."