

The Clothes Crisis

Skin-tight T-shirts and hip-slung jeans are the hallmarks of fashion for teen girls. Here's how you can help your daughter make choices that show off her heart, not her body

By Dannah Gresh

What's the number one thing that causes you to feel sexually tempted," my husband asked a roomful of lanky teenage boys. They wasted no time answering. "I think the worst thing by far is the way girls dress in church," one boy replied. A room full of bobbing heads affirmed his answer. "It's like church is supposed to be a place where you don't have to face temptation and you walk in and Bam! There it is. How do you avoid that?" They all turned their eyes to my husband, pleading for a good answer.

You've undoubtedly noticed it, too. The crop tops, the visible bra straps, the low-slung jeans that make up today's fashions for girls are everywhere. The discomfort we feel when we look at these clothes isn't just the result of our age. Fashion today really is all about sex.

If you're not convinced, consider the images our daughters face every day. Candies, a popular teen clothing and shoe label, is currently running an abstinence campaign. It's promoted by the sale of T-shirts—teeny, tiny, belly-revealing, breast hugging T-shirts that read "Be SEXY: It doesn't mean you have to have sex." The "virginal" Britney Spears pairs an attitude of coy purity with revealing costumes. She teaches girls how to tease and tempt with their bodies, even as they play sweet and pure with their words.

These messages have convinced our daughters that this kind of sensual exposure is merely fashion. They don't understand that what's really being promoted is the idea that their bodies are for show, for the pleasure of others, not sacred temples meant for God's glory.

The Sex Connection

Surprisingly, it isn't just Christians who are growing concerned over this trend of sexualized fashion. An editorial in the Indianapolis News stated that, "Those who minimize the correlation between immodesty and sexual promiscuity deceive themselves and others."

Studies that analyze the risk of teen sexual activity consistently point out that a girl who looks older than she is has a greater risk of becoming sexually active. And puberty isn't the only thing that makes a girl look more mature. Clothing and make-up can help a 12-year-old look 15 in minutes. Nor is this just a girls' issue. As the boys my husband spoke with point out, the mixed messages sent by girls who look sexy but claim purity are a major stumbling block in the boys' efforts to live godly lives (see "Helping Boys Stay Pure," p. 48). When the girls look easy and the boys are tempted, their young hearts and hormones can easily get carried away. It's also not simply a teen issue. Even little girls' clothing stores stock outfits that carry a whiff of sex: jeans

that ride well below the waist, tight T-shirts that say "Sassy" in glittery letters, short shorts, and platform shoes.

The issue of modesty is one that every parent needs to take seriously. The real question is how to do so in a way that our daughters will listen to and take seriously. We don't want to create a spirit of rebellion by coming across as unreasonable, or rob our daughters of their innocence by introducing issues of sexuality that they might not be ready for. In my work with teenage girls, I've found that the best approach is to arm girls with the information they need to make a godly decision and encourage them to reflect God in the way they dress. Here's how to do just that:

Affirm your daughter's female allure. Advertisers have spent millions learning what makes a person spend time looking at an ad. They've learned that if you really want to stop the reader, use a woman. It seems a photo of a woman will increase the length of time someone spends with an ad by 14-30 percent. What power!

God's word affirms that power. Proverbs 5:18-19 says, "Rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer—may her breasts satisfy you always, may you be ever captivated by her love." That word "captivated" could also be translated as "intoxicated." The God of the universe looks down at a woman and comfortably acknowledges the power she has to intoxicate a man.

Short, tall, thick, thin, freckled, or fair-skinned, your daughter is created with an incredible power. I like to call it the female allure. It is a power that your daughter must use wisely.

Flip through a few magazines with your daughter and point out the way women are used in advertising. Talk with her about the beauty God has placed in her and the power that gives her. When you tell her about the power, you'll also need to tell her specifically what God had in mind when he gave it to her.

Point to the purpose of her power. Check out that Scripture passage once again. It tells a man to "rejoice in the wife of your youth." In other words a man is to be intoxicated by just one woman. Again and again the Bible confirms that this intoxication is only to be shared with one man, within the context of marriage. Until then, it's under wraps—a secret to be shared only with her husband.

As you might have noticed, girls today aren't the best secret keepers. They are clearly missing the mark of God's intended purpose for their allure. Instead of intoxicating one man with her beauty, she intoxicates many men. For many girls, that feels like power in itself. It feels good to gain the attention of a boy. It feels good to know a boy thinks she's attractive. But what girls need to understand is that a teenage boy's attraction typically has little to do with what's special or lovely about her. It's based on his curiosity. By using her body to attract the attention of an eager boy, she is wasting the power God's given her.

Explain the male mind. Most young girls wear fashion with much naiveté. They have no clue how their appearance impacts boys. That doesn't mean that there are not the occasional young girls who understand fully what they are doing when they flaunt their bodies, but I find them to be the exception.

To help girls understand how the male mind works, I use a visual design theory called The Gestalt Theory. Graphic designers employ this theory to control the length of time a person looks at an image by using an incomplete image to draw the viewer's attention. Completing the incomplete intrigues the human brain, so a person will always pause to finish an unfinished picture.

When a guy sees a girl walking down the street wearing a tight shirt with her belly bared, he completes the picture. A low-cut blouse, a tight T-shirt, a long slit in a long skirt, or a mini-skirt are just enough of a peek at the body to cause a guy to finish the picture.

If a young woman wants to use the power of her allure as God intended it to be used, she needs to be cautious not to awaken the imagination of many men by inviting them to complete the picture of her body. Again, it might feel great to attract attention from men, but that attention is based on something completely random. It has nothing to do with her. When a girl understands that male attention—particularly teenage male attention—has nothing to do with her, she'll begin to see that she only cheapens herself by playing into this male impulse.

Establish dialogue and expectations early. If you explain these simple principles to your daughter when she is 8, 9, or 10—rather than after she's fully developed—she is more likely to embrace them. Talking to her before she develops also allows you to avoid making her feel like her new curves are "bad." The issue is not her body. God made it and it is beautiful. The issue is the clothes. When we wait until our daughters develop to address modesty, they often feel self-conscious and guilty about the beauty that's growing in them.

My daughter, Lexi, is 8. Last summer we said "good-bye" to tiny spaghetti strap T-shirts. We've encouraged her to sit in front of the mirror with her legs crossed before she leave the house in shorts or a skirt so she can check to make sure her underpants don't show when she sits down. She likes the responsibility that comes with these mature guidelines. And she's quick to ask me if I've tested my fashion choices. Because I've introduced this issue early, it's kind of a neat "girl thing" for us to share, not some rule that causes friction between us. My hope is that she'll see the benefits of these choices and keep making wise decisions as she moves into her teen years.

Remember, the battle is not just about clothes. At the heart of the modesty issue is something precious—your daughter's sense of worth. Sexy clothes might grab attention, but for all the wrong reasons. When a girl discovers how easy it is to attract boys with her body, she'll be less likely to invest in developing the inner qualities that will make her truly beautiful. In time, she'll recognize the shallowness of the attention she's received, but may doubt she really has much more to offer.

Girls also need to know that they invite a host of assumptions about their character when they dress in a sexual way. Sadly, teenagers are not always kind to girls who appear to be open to sexual activity. And once a girl is labeled with a poor reputation, it can be hard to convince people she's a "good" girl.

Help your daughter discover the gifts for which she wants to be recognized and give her the opportunity to explore those gifts. And help her understand that, while it might be unfair, people really will judge her by how she looks.

If you find yourself in a moment—and you will—when you wonder if this is a battle that's really worth fighting, think about the innocence God places in children. That precious little girl of yours is worth a few arguments over bra straps.

Dannah Gresh is the author of *And the Bride Wore White: Seven Secrets to Sexual Purity* (Moody) and the newly released *Secret Keepers: The Delicate Power of Modesty* (Moody) which is the first resource to teach teen girls to embrace modesty.

Helping Boys Stay Pure

By Bob Gresh

Girls in sexy clothes are a major source of temptation for boys. If you've got a son, here are some ways to help him take responsibility for his own purity.

Explain that the way a girl chooses to dress is not his sin, but it will be his battle. When you see your son begin to notice the beauty of a woman, that's a good time to begin a dialogue about visual temptation. Don't ignore the issue. That only makes him feel alone when he feels tempted to sin. Explain that his thoughts only become sin if he fixates on a girl's body or lets his imagination take over.

Teach him to "bounce" his eyes. The book *Every Man's Battle* (WaterBrook) encourages guys to "bounce" their eyes from an immodestly dressed girl to a neutral object. At first this is an act of sheer will, but eventually it will come naturally and help your son avoid the sin of fantasizing. Introduce this technique when he lets you know this is a struggle for him. And Dad, make sure to model it yourself!

Make a father/son covenant of the eyes. Dad (or another respected adult male) can introduce Job 31:1 that says, "I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl." This covenant should include specific commitments to avoid or righteously respond to visual temptation. When a boy knows that Christian adults struggle with these issues, too, it reduces their sense of shame and loneliness.

Pray for girls who are consistent sources of temptation. God's Spirit is the source of your son's ability to say no to worldly passions (Titus 2:12). Access that power together. This also allows you to talk constructively about the girl's need for God's Spirit in her life, rather than to speak badly about her.

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