

The eReview provides analysis on public policy relating to Canadian families and marriage. Below please find a book review of *So Sexy So Soon*.

Levin, D. and Kilbourne, J. (2008). *So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood and What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids*, New York, Ballantine Books.



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## **Communication critical: Want to help your children navigate a sex-saturated culture? They'll need to learn your beliefs—not those all around them**

**Rebecca Walberg, a Winnipeg-based writer and policy analyst, reviews *So Sexy So Soon*.**

For a generation, conservatives have discussed the dramatic and oftentimes negative effects of cultural changes on our kids. In *So Sexy So Soon*, liberals join in and talk about the pernicious effects of the “new morality” on children from the perspective of the other end of the political spectrum. [1] Diane Levin, professor of education at Wheelock College, and Jean Kilbourne, a senior scholar at the Wellesley Centers for Women, highlight the gravity of a hypersexual consumer culture: the insidious way in which advertisers and the media use sex to drive a wedge between children and parents, to create demand among children for provocative toys and clothes, and to redefine even kindergarten to include “sexiness.”

The authors describe a six-year-old, who asks his parents about pornography seen at a friend’s house, and a seven-year-old who cries in the bath because she thinks her body isn’t skinny or sexy enough. Issues that previously surfaced in adolescence are percolating down to kindergarten, and Levin and Kilbourne place the blame for this phenomenon squarely upon mass consumer culture.

Their response is a call for expanded government regulation and more time spent on “media awareness” at school. They also suggest scripts for opening conversations about how to enlist teachers and principals in the effort to keep classrooms and playgrounds free of sexual innuendo. Readers won’t agree with every suggestion, but common ground can be found with their emphasis on good parenting and good communication with kids.

Few parents are prepared to react appropriately to fairly explicit questions about sexuality from their kids in grade school—or younger. But parental response is crucial. Parents, horrified to hear that their five-year-old told a friend he wanted to have sex with her, (when asked, the child said he thought that having sex was the same as giving a hug), should use this as a springboard to a calm and loving discussion—one that builds the kind of relationship that will help transmit values.

If parents erupt in anger, children will still have the same questions and instead go looking to find explanations on TV and in the playground, the very places that presented poor information in the first place. Respectful but firm discussions with parents of children's friends about media exposure for younger children during play dates and parental supervision at parties when children are older are also important.

Even the most cloistered upbringing cannot fully prevent exposure to popular culture. In fact, especially as children grow up, Levin and Kilbourne argue that this isn't even really desirable, since young adults can only navigate successfully on their own if they have internalized their family's values about sex, sexuality and moral behaviour. Children raised in a home with no television or internet connection are part of the broader, and increasingly vulgar culture. Billboards and ads on buses are sexually suggestive when they are not actually explicit, as are magazines in grocery stores. Children internalize values more readily from their peers than from their families, and new research shows how powerfully media acts as a "superpeer," shaping attitudes and behaviour among teens.[1] Levin and Kilbourne attribute weakening parental influence in part to the thorny nature of most discussions of sex and sexuality between parents and children.

Levin and Kilbourne are certainly liberal—they point approvingly to parents who take their daughter to a same-sex commitment ceremony as an example of open-minded parenting, for example. But as such, they are carrying a message to those who most need to hear it, those who have outright dismissed cultural concerns, pretending they are part of some conservative conspiracy. In the end, an increasingly sexual world affects all of us. "Culture warriors" must partner with liberals in order to effect change, whether in private life or public policy. *So Sexy So Soon* highlights some of the elements of the culture wars in which traditionalists and liberals can partner for the benefit of our kids.

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## Endnotes

[1] Brown, J., Tucker Halpern, C. and Ladin L'Engle, K. (2005). Mass media as a sexual super peer for early maturing girls. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 36: 420–427.