Beauty Pageants for Children

Heather Sweeney

Saginaw Valley State University

Abstract

Child beauty pageants are currently causing a great amount of controversy. It has been determined that young girls who participate in beauty pageants are at a great risk for experiencing social, emotional, and physical consequences. These consequences include but are not limited to high stress, unhealthy competition, envy, low self-esteem, depression, eating disorders, a loss of childhood, and a corruption of values. On the other hand, some parents and other advocates for child beauty pageants argue that pageantry actually benefits the child’s self-esteem and experience with competition and public speaking. However, it has been determined that these “benefits” do not outweigh the dangerous negative effects and may actually be achieved through other methods of parenting. These two perspectives will be further analyzed, supported and explained throughout the rest of the paper. It is important that beauty pageant advocates and society as a whole realize that abolishing or reforming child beauty pageants is absolutely crucial. Society needs to start encouraging inner beauty, intellect, talent, and traditional values.

Lebanese-American poet Kahlil Gibran once said, “Beauty is not in the face; beauty is a light in the heart.” Gibran truly believes that beauty is not a physical quality. Instead, it comes from within one’s own heart and soul. It is important that people understand that inner beauty is what is truly important, not one’s appearance. Beauty pageants originated in the 1920s. Pageants began as mostly young female adults who participate in modeling, interviews, and performing their talent. The participants were judged on beauty, poise, talent, and audience impact.

In the 1960s, beauty pageants became an attraction for young kids, mostly little girls between the ages of two and ten (Grosaru, 2011). Many parents pressure or force their children to participate in child beauty pageants, believing that it will increase their self-esteem, help them gain confidence, give them experience in competition, and better their public speaking skills. However, it has been theorized and proved that child beauty pageants also have a great number of negative effects on the young girls. Therefore, it is important that beauty pageants are reformed and awareness is raised about the risks associated with current child beauty pageants.

Children who participate in beauty pageants often experience extreme negative consequences. The young girls are put under a great amount of pressure to be the best and to win. This leads to a high stress level. Some are also put through strenuous and tiresome practice sessions. Some parents hire a professional coach to teach their child how to walk, stand, act, etiquette, etc. There are also speech coaches that try to teach the children how to speak clearly and effectively. Many of the girls are forced to memorize pre-written answers for the interview questions. Christine Von Wangenheim (1997) suggests that the pageants are meaningless and foolish. She points out that since the answers to the questions are rehearsed, they are not genuine answers that come from what the child actually thinks. Some children are also forced to meet with a physical trainer. This trainer will make the child do strenuous work outs and be on a strict diet. It is absolutely ridiculous to force a child to lose weight and undergo intense workouts when it is unnecessary. It is also irresponsible to force a child into a hobby. Many mothers enter their children into pageants because they used to be in pageants themselves or they always wanted to and never had the opportunity (Grosaru, 2011). Therefore, it is important to allow children to follow their own dreams and make their own choices.

The morals and values of the young girls are also corrupted. Instead of learning traditional values such as respect and compassion, the girls learn to value material objects. They are encouraged to value and glorify physical beauty. This leads them to start believing that in order to be successful or to “win” in life they must be beautiful. However, it is more important for them to focus on learning how to respect their own bodies and minds. People should not base their self-worth off of how much money they have or how beautiful they are. Self-worth should be based off of personality and inner beauty.

The girls also suffer from a great amount of unhealthy competition and envy during the pageant. They constantly feel the need to compete and win every time. If they do not win, they become envious of one another. The girls are not encouraged to act friendly toward each other. Sometimes, parents even discourage their child from speaking with other participants. This leads to a loss of childhood interaction and time of growth. Young children are supposed to learn how to share and make friends while they are little, not be hostile and jealous. This impacts their social life immensely.

The children are also affected emotionally. If they do not win the pageant, they often suffer from emotional distress such as crying and temper tantrums. Cases of depression ranging from mild to severe have also been reported as a result of losing the pageant. This also leads to a destroyed self-esteem and a negative, false self-image. Some girls begin to think that they are not beautiful or good enough for society, which leads to believing in the “beauty myth.”

The beauty myth occurs when a girl believes that she must be attractive and appealing to men in order to be happy. If a girl does not feel beautiful, unhealthy behaviors such as eating disorders become extremely common. Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia are the most prevalent. Their false self-image makes them believe that they are heavier than what they actually are. This leads to them binge eating and vomiting or starving themselves in order to become “beautiful” (Wolf, 2011).

It is heartbreaking to see a child of such a young age have that kind of mentality. Children should never feel like they are not beautiful or good enough. They also should not have to worry about their weight, unless they are experiencing health problems. Young girls should be encouraged to love themselves and the body that they have. They also need to be aware of the importance of having inner beauty. Parents need to emphasize that it is more important to have a good personality and be a better person than to just be considered “beautiful.”

Pageant girls are also affected negatively in a physical way just by preparing for the pageants. Several girls choose to or are forced to undergo tanning sessions. This may be done through spray tans or regular (indoor or outdoor) ultraviolet tanning. Ultraviolet tanning is extremely dangerous. It may potentially cause skin cancer and other related health issues such as eye damage, premature aging, and immune system suppression (“Tanning: The risks,” 2010). The girls also experience unnatural hair treatments and styling before the pageants. Some are exposed to harsh chemicals or dyes in preparing a specific hair color before the show. They also have to get their hair styled on the day of the pageant. This includes intense heat treatments such as curling irons, straighteners, etc. and large amounts of hair spray and other chemicals. These treatments often damage one’s natural hair by creating split ends and making the hair weak and brittle. Some are also forced to wear fake eyelashes and fake teeth called flippers. These mouth pieces create the perfect cosmetic smile for the child and cover any gaps from lost baby teeth.

Before entering the pageant, a wardrobe must be chosen. Most pageants require a bathing suit, evening gown, and sometimes a themed outfit. Although these articles of clothing sound innocent, many parents choose to sexualize them. Several girls end up wearing revealing and provocative clothing. Some are also forced to wear padded bras or underwear in order to increase their bust or bottom. For example, on TLC’s show Toddlers and Tiaras, a little girl was forced to dress up as Dolly Parton. Under her dress she wore these pads to help symbolize Dolly Parton’s breast cleavage and bottom. This caused much controversy as the little girl had become sexualized ("Toddlers & tiaras," 2012).

There are already too many influences such as the media, products, peers, and self-objectification that encourage young girls in our society to try to be and act sexy (“Sexy Babies,” 2010). Therefore, beauty pageants and parents should not be adding to the huge problem that already exists. Sexualizing children does not only have psychological effects such as a low self-worth, but it is also very dangerous. Sexualizing children often entices pedophiles and sex offenders (Henson, 2011). It is important to keep our children safe and encourage them to realize that they do not have to be sexy in order to be beautiful.

Beauty pageants also have people wondering what beauty is. What color hair should the children have? Should they wear heavy make-up? Should their skin be pale or tan? There are so many variations and differences between people and characteristics. Therefore, it is extremely important to realize that all people are beautiful. There should not be a set standard for what is considered beautiful. According to Webster’s New Dictionary beauty may be defined as, “the quality or aggregate of qualities in a person or thing that gives pleasure to the senses or pleasurably exalts the mind or spirit.” (2003). There is not a single word in that definition that states that beauty is a physical aspect and has a specific standard. In fact, it states that the quality is present *in* a thing or person… Beauty is not skin deep; it comes from within. Parents should be teaching their children that everyone is beautiful in their own way.

Therefore, what are real children supposed to look like? Are they supposed to have perfect hair, perfect smiles, toned bodies, and provocative clothing? No, *real* children are supposed to have big, cheesy, gap-filled smiles, wild hair, and chubby little bellies. They are not supposed to be afraid to get dirty and play in the mud. They are supposed to always be giggling and having fun with their friends. Kids are supposed to be able to act like kids. Today’s society is forcing children to grow up too fast. Let them enjoy their childhood. It is unfair for parents to force their child into such a high stress and demanding activity.

Child beauty pageants do not only affect the children emotionally, socially, and physically, but they also affect the parents financially. Many parents find themselves caught up in the hype and competition of the pageants, that they do not realize how much money that they actually spend. In order to have their child(ren) participate in a beauty pageant, they must pay the entry fee. Entry fees vary in cost depending on where the pageant is located and range from $50 to $500 per show ("Toddlers, tiaras -," 2011). Buying new clothes for the pageant also adds up quick, as there are several different articles of clothing that are needed. Aside from the basics, parents also choose to splurge on several expenses are not necessary. Some families hire a professional pageant coach, physical trainer, and speech coach to ensure that their child is fully prepared for the pageant. Expenses such as etiquette lessons, gym memberships, salon services, tanning, and extra cosmetics are also often considered. Families spend an average of $1,500 per pageant. However, this depends on the level of the pageant and where it is located ("Toddlers, tiaras -," 2011).

As previously mentioned, Toddlers & Tiaras is a controversial, reality television show on TLC. This show expresses the preparation and outcome of families and children who participate in child beauty pageants. The children are judged on beauty, personality, and their outfits. Families on this show take pageants to the extreme. They have no problem spending a lot of money, sexualizing their child, and glorifying “beauty” in an attempt to win. The winner of these beauty pageants receives a crown, money, and bragging rights. This show has become so popular because of the high amount of drama that these people face. This becomes a source of entertainment to the audience as they watch how crazy these parents and children are when it comes to beauty pageants.

However, people are influenced differently when it comes to watching a show such as this. Some viewers notice the negative effects and controversy that these glitz pageants have on the kids and realize that their children should not be exposed to these issues. On the other hand, some viewers watch the show and begin to crave the attention and desire to be famous. They may consider it to be entertainment and start registering their child for pageants whether the child wants to or not.

Although there are several negative consequences for entering children in beauty pageants, some people actually support them. Parents suggest that performing on stage and speaking in front of each other serve as an experience of real world competition and public speaking for their children (Inbar, 2009). They believe that their children will benefit later in life when it comes to college and jobs if they learn how to be competitive and have ample communication skills at a young age. Supporters also point out that if the girls are allowed to get all dolled-up and feel beautiful, then it will increase their self-esteem, self-worth, and confidence.

However, who says there are not alternatives? There are several ways that these benefits may be achieved through healthier and less risky activities. For example, allowing child to join a sports team or playing games with them will evoke friendly competition. Child beauty pageant advocates are correct in stating that children will experience competition later in life. However, there are better and more practical ways of helping children experience competitiveness than being involved in beauty pageants. Joining a team, organization, or social group will also help better the child’s communication skills. Interacting and speaking with one another within a group will be a lot more efficient at inducing communication skills than reciting memorized answers on stage.

Also, spending quality time with children will help improve their self-esteem and self-confidence. Teaching them how to do things or letting them help complete a project, cook dinner, wash the car, etc. will help instill a sense of pride since they know that they have accomplished a task. It is also important to let the children know how much they are loved and how adorable they are. This helps them feel better about themselves and will keep values traditional instead of materialistic.

It is absolutely necessary for child beauty pageants to either be reformed or completely abolished. The negative consequences far outweigh the few benefits for the young participants. In order to reform the pageants the ideals of natural beauty, inner beauty, intellect, talent, and friendliness between contestants must be encouraged. It is important that people become aware of the social, emotional, physical, and financial risks of becoming involved in beauty pageants. We are also reminded by Kahlil Gibran’s statement, “beauty is not in the face; beauty is a light in the heart,” that beauty is not what is on the surface, but rather comes from within. As a society, we need to remember this statement and let kids just be kids.

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