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‘Pretty Baby’: The Conundrum of Child Beauty Pageants

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“Winners never quit. We are the dream team.”

The words of a pageant mom

Introduction

The research question that drives this study is: If child beauty pageants may have dramatic and negative effects on some young girls, why do pageant mothers insist on having their daughters compete?

In this poster, I explore both the pros and cons of life in the world of childhood pageant competitions using the television show, *Toddlers and Tiaras* as a backdrop for the discussion.

Fantasy Islands

In many child beauty pageants, young girls wear accessories that make them look much older than they are. These enhancements include: 1) Wigs, 2) Excessive makeup, 3) Fake teeth, and 4) Provocative costumes.

Child pageants objectify young girls and hold them to unrealistic and unattainable beauty standards. This encourages self-deprecation in children that undermines healthy self-esteem.

All the World’s a Stage

Child beauty pageants consist of performances, creating and saving “face”, and socializing young girls into what it means to be a woman long before they are ready for that.

Mothers teach the pageant girls how to present themselves in a way that will excite viewers by embodying a mature, poised, and dazzling persona.



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Positive Outcomes

Some people believe that pageants have positive effects on young girls. Some of these outcomes cited in the literature include the following:

- Increasing self-esteem
- Building confidence
- Promoting healthy competition
- Developing social capital for financial and social gain



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Negative Outcomes

Critics of childhood pageants believe there are more negative outcomes than positive outcomes. Some of the negative outcomes include the following:

- Potential for physical abuse
- Potential for emotional abuse
- Lowering of self-esteem in some girls
- Body dissatisfaction
- Distrust in others

Some Quotes

According to Kelly (2016), many pageant mothers admit to giving their child Pixy Stix, also known as pageant crack in order to keep them awake and energized during the competition.

Former contestant, Brooke Breedwell (2017), warns mothers against pushing their child into competing in these pageants because of ongoing tensions with her mother who pressured her into pageant life from the age of six months.

Conclusion

Child beauty pageants in America today are aimed at an adult audience rather than a child audience. Young contestants experience unrealistic expectations and are at risk of being abused to get the prize.

If child pageants continue, they must refuse objectification, sexualization, and harmful standards and instead promote a child’s empowerment and confidence.

References available upon request.