

# Orlando Sentinel

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## **For little girls, Halloween is no time to vamp**

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As is gilded tradition, kids will be out in full spook Monday, dressed as phantoms, poltergeists and phantasmata.

But any goosebumps those costumes produce will pale to the chills candy-givers will suffer when they open their doors to brigades of candy-starved Sexy Soldiers.

Skin is in this Halloween, marketers declare, and shameful as it is, we're seeing the latest scene in our Field of Bad Dreams unreel. In the relentless precocious sexualization of kids, marketers have adopted a "build it and they will come" mantra and are peddling teenybopper teasers that would make Playboy Bunnies blush.

"We were afraid of witches and ghouls," says child psychologist Robert Butterworth, but "it seems our culture is coming back to bite us back."

I have the teeth marks to prove it. Browsing the Internet for an ensemble my rangy 13-year-old daughter could wear to our church's "Fall Festival," I found a category listing I'd never imagined: Sexy Teen costumes.

Choices included Moonlight Vixens; Naughty Officer, including a jacket with a décolletage and skimpy shorts that cross the thin blue line of modesty; and Sexy Soldiers, suited in dog tags and crop tops and mini-skirts that camouflage little.

Blinking at teen-targeted costumes that seemed best suited for girls who turn tricks for monetary treats gave me the creeps. Damning marketers would be easy, only, as the O'Jays once sang, they're just giving the people what they want. Shopping.com noted a 30 percent jump in searches for "sexy Halloween costumes."

One has to wonder why we encourage our girls, as essayist Diane Levin put it, to become "so sexy, so soon."

Gary Cross, author of *The Cute and the Cool: Wondrous Innocence and Modern American Children's Culture*, sees sexy teen get-ups as stoking the "baby-beauty show trend of adults [who] see the 'cute' in the 'innocent' sexualization of the 'pre-sexual' girl."

Expect to see ever-younger girls at the sexy party. In an online survey reported in the *Windsor Star* in Ontario, Lyn Mikel Brown, co-author of the forthcoming *Packaging Girlhood*:

Rescuing Our Daughters From Marketers' Schemes, asked 600 girls about Halloween. She received eerily similar responses, including this 10-year-old's reply: "I wore a devil outfit [for Halloween] because it was simple and looked really sexy on girls."

It's one thing for adults to indulge their inner freak in Naughty Nurse togs. It's quite another for naughty candy strippers to tramp for treats.

Levin, a child-development expert at Wheelock College, says parents must help kids reject "the narrow stereotypical images they often get from the media and commercial culture."

My teen will pose as Emily the Strange, an eccentric but demurely dressed comic-book heroine.

There's a scene in the teen movie Mean Girls where fish-out-of-water former home-schooler Cady reflects on the Halloween antics of the plastic in-crowd that she tries to infiltrate:

"In the regular world, Halloween is when children dress up in costumes and beg for candy. In Girl World, Halloween is the one night a year when a girl can dress like a total slut and no other girls can say anything about it." Embarrassed in her living-dead get-up, Cady laments: "Unfortunately, no one told me about the slut rule."

It isn't spooks, but Girl World thinking -- on Halloween and beyond -- that should scare the hell out of us.