



Bra wars

Shoehorning little girls into adult concepts . . .

by Geraldine Mellet

I think I was the only teenager in my group who wasn't hanging out to get a bra, both literally and figuratively speaking. Until the age of fourteen and a half I was what the ladies in Lingerie condescendingly referred to as 'a late developer', more simply known in the schoolyard as a flat chested wonder. When a friend recently relived rose coloured memories of her first flimsy pink gingham number I experienced flashbacks of being wrangled some years later into a beige steel iron girder by one of those formidable department store Brunhildas whose hefty Madonna like cones could take out your eye in an instant.

So with that background of arrested development I assumed I had years to prepare for 'that' conversation with my own daughter. Like most of my other memorable mothering moments I was caught with my mental lingerie around my ankles when reality hit last week and my pre primary angel asked for a bra, adding the mandatory kicker that one of her best friends had one. My involuntary response was to chortle given that my daughter and her friend are five and a half. But looking into her earnest little face and picturing her twenty years hence in some therapists chair blaming her body neurosis on my insensitivity I caught myself mid snort. I then muttered my lifesaving phrase that I would have to think about it, which I have been doing ever since, with budding disquiet.

For research I visited the childrens lingerie section at my local Target. Even the word lingerie (which my dictionary defines as being worn by women) sits uncomfortably with minors. What happened to good old functional underwear? I traversed three aisles of midget bras and pants that would have done Elle McPherson proud. Did I mention that there were padded bras for 8 year olds? I kid you not. They may not be huge but if you ever needed a 3d metaphor that we are moulding our girl children into acceptably homogenised shapes its there in fluoro with flowers on. Not only that but one of the brands belongs to two Hollywood teen stars, one of whom is modelling anorexia along with their co-ordinated range.

Add to that the headline grabbing research from Hayley Dohnt at Flinders University that girls develop a desire to be thinner (whatever their actual body size) somewhere around 6-7 years of age because of their awareness of its social acceptability, and you start to see the diet of body confusion and dislike our girls are imbibing. It may only be a flimsy less than handkerchief sized piece of material, or two, in the case of the childrens bra, but it has now morphed into a much bigger symbol for me of shoehorning little girls into adult concepts. And I'm grateful we've had the conversation this early so that I can get my thoughts together, although I know the answer will not win me any popularity contests.

About Geraldine . . .

Geraldine Mellet has over twenty years experience as a radio and television broadcaster for a number of prime time current affairs, magazine and music programs primarily for the ABC (both local and national). Geraldine has also produced and presented documentaries and written scripts for childrens dramas plus features and columns in both newspapers and magazines. She has conducted media training for many organisations including UWA, The Dept of Education, The Health Consumers Council and Western Power.