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Little Ladies on Parade

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Title: Little Ladies on Parade

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Envision a girl putting on a gorgeous, red bikini that looks marvelous on her spray-tanned skin. Next she applies her make-up; false eyelashes and hair extensions included. Lastly, she takes a few sips of her favorite alcoholic beverage to ensure that she conserves her courage as she heads to the stage to perform. She has to be the most beautiful and entertaining in order to maximize her earnings. Many readers would assume I am describing an exotic dancer who is twenty-one years old, but Alana Thompson is neither. Alana Thompson is seven years old, yet replace the alcohol with an energy drink and the routine of these two girls is almost identical. Alana Thompson is a participant in child beauty pageants (“Precious Moments Pageants”). My essay, "Little Ladies on Parade" argues that child beauty pageants promote the sexualizing of young children, negatively alter a child’s personality, discourage children from establishing good behavior, and encourage bad parenting. In my presentation, I will assess the conduct of both the parents and their children while discussing the problem with child beauty pageants and some possible solutions.

A child beauty pageant is a competition including contestants with ages ranging from infancy to eleven years old. After child pageants, contestants may go on to junior teen, teen, and adult competitions. Child beauty pageants are very controversial competitions and the parents of the contestants are often scrutinized and criticized for their participation. A parent should not be allowed to force his or her child to wear, do, or say anything that could potentially be harmful to

the child.

Every child pageant is different; however there are some basic similarities between them all. In the pageants there are several categories. Categories most often include swimwear, casual wear, evening wear, talent, and an outfit relating to the theme of the pageant. In almost every case, the parent or guardian chooses what he or she wants his or her child to wear. Rarely, the parent or guardian will allow the child to choose his or her own outfit. The judges or any of the pageant staff never choose the outfits for the children outside of creating and enforcing the guidelines in relation to the dress code. One of the most controversial of these categories is evening wear. In this category, the children are to wear their most beautiful dress and exhibit all of the most elegant behavior on stage; but this is not what critics of child pageants see as an issue. To prepare for evening wear, parents pile make-up on top of make-up on top of spray tan to ensure that their child is the most beautiful. The parents add large hair pieces, false eyelashes, acrylic nails, and colored contacts to further enhance the beauty of their children. Lastly, the parents give their child a set of false teeth, or “flippers,” just in case the judges don’t like the child’s natural smile. (Many of the children are still losing their baby teeth.)

Applying make-up to a child at such a young age teaches them that their natural beauty is not enough. These embellishments say to a child, “Your hair is not long enough. Your smile is not nice enough. You are not pretty enough. You, as a person, are not enough.” This accepted method of preparation for the evening wear category of the beauty pageants lowers a child’s self-esteem and causes a child to have a negative body image. Because the parents attempt to make their children look as perfect as possible, the judges result to focusing on trivial details when judging the contestants. This, sequentially, can cause a child to scrutinize the appearance of

themselves and others in search of flaws. This category gives children the idea that, as one pageant parent stated, “Beauty on inside is what ugly people say” (*Toddlers and Tiaras*, S05E22).

Many parents have highly debatable routines for preparing their children for all categories. Of these routines, one most common step is making sure that the children are tanned. Pageant parents say that they tan their children because the tan improves the appearance of all gowns, costumes, and bikinis. Few participants have natural tans. Most pageant parents find that the use of methods such as spray tanning, tanning beds and bronzing lotion works best for them. One parent went so far as to prohibit her overweight daughter from playing outside with her brothers because she feared that sunlight would ruin the “natural golden skin tone” her daughter was “blessed” with (TheSelenaCruz). Some parents remove unwanted body hair from their children to ensure that tans are applied smoothly. They most commonly remove leg hair and facial hair by way of shaving, threading, plucking, and even waxing.

Outside of improving the physical appearance of their children, parents encourage their children to practice pageant behavior and routines for hours. Many of the children only participate in activities that directly relate to their participation in pageants such as voice lessons, tumbling lessons, dance classes, and more. Children rarely ever seem to enjoy any of the preparations or practicing. As one might imagine, this lifestyle proves to be a little more than overwhelming for some of the children, but pageant parents always have a few tricks up their sleeve. Parents and guardians bribe the children with promises of sweets, toys, electronics, fun trips, and more. If a child smiles hard enough and blow kisses to the stuffed judges (Children often pretend that their stuffed animals are the judges when practicing.) at all the right times, that

32 inch flat screen television she's been begging for will be in her room when she wakes up tomorrow morning. In the case of contestant Carley, it was a kitten. Carley complained to her mother that the false lashes being applied to her eyes were uncomfortable. Her mother reminded her, "If you want the cat, you'll wear them" (*Toddlers and Tiaras*, S05E22). This form of reward system spoils children. It puts them into a position where they learn that they can get anything they desire if they whine long enough.

While spending all this time and effort on their pageant stars, parents can emotionally neglect their other children. They cause their pageant star to be conceited while the other children are left feeling unloved and unwanted. That certainly seemed to be true in the case of the Sterling twins. One twin, constantly winning high titles when competing against her fraternal twin sister, seemed to be favored more by her mother than the other twin who consistently won lower titles. The mother even went so far as to imply that one twin was obviously more attractive than the other ("Top 10 Most Controversial Parents").

In the midst of paying for preparations and purchasing outfits or rewards, parents may lose track of how much money they are spending on child beauty pageants. One must also take into account the cost of traveling, hotels, admission fees, photo shoots, and more. The costs of child pageantry can be high and almost never adds up to the amount of prize money a contestant can win. In some instances, parents have found second jobs, ignored important bills, or have even lost their home in an attempt to continue living the pageant lifestyle. Just for dresses alone, parents of child beauty pageant contestants have paid anywhere from ten to \$10, 000. One pageant mother reports that all of her money goes towards pageants, including her retirement fund; while another mother confesses that pageant spending is the reason that she and her family

have not been able to move into a larger home (*Toddlers and Tiaras*, S05E22). A parent spending so much money on pageants not only puts pressure on the participant to win, but it also hurts the entire family.

Parents and other pageant supporters declare that said behavior is not reflective of all pageant parents. They claim that they are being stereotyped based solely off of what viewers see on the TLC show *Toddlers and Tiaras*. Supporters insist that child beauty pageants are just like all other sports and activities, including your occasional fanatic parent. Contrastingly enough, other activities are based on the skill, knowledge, and/or talent that a child has opposed to how beautiful she can be. With other activities, children may practice and improve. A child beauty pageant contestant cannot practice and improve being beautiful.

Although they are greatly outweighed by the negative aspects, there are some positive aspects to child pageantry. Parents of child beauty pageant contestants like to assert that the pageants are very beneficial to their children. They claim that participating in pageants is a confidence booster for many of the children and that through the pageants the children learn that they are beautiful, talented, and can do anything if they work hard enough. Parents and other supporters of child beauty pageants also claim that through pageantry, the contestants learn social skills and life lessons that will be useful to them in other areas of their lives. In addition to this, the parents state that pageants serve as valuable bonding time for their families.

Though these statements may all be true, there are many activities that can teach a child positive life lessons. Child beauty pageants often teach children the opposite. Children can learn confidence, social skills, sportsmanship, self-confidence, and life lessons through plenty of activities that do not come with any of the negative aspects of pageantry. This can lead one to

believe that parents' main goal is simply for their child to win; not to gain skills, knowledge, prizes, or money for college. This is evinced through the behavior of a parent whose child does not win, the many alternatives to beauty pageants, and the type of prizes parents know will be received. Many of the parents are more upset than their children when they feel that their child did not receive an adequate title. Parents throw tantrums, destroy crowns, leave prizes behind, and storm out of pageants. For many pageants, children who win the highest titles win prizes that a child under the age of thirteen does not find useful, such as a brand new car or trip to the Bahamas. As for the prize money, many parents can relate to the mother of one contestant when she says, "If we ever win money, I would probably put away for a new dress instead of college" (*Toddlers and Tiaras*, S05E22). Much of the prize money goes right back into the pageants, not towards college. The money that many parents spend on child beauty pageants is enough to pay for a college education several times over.

The parents' rarely mentioned motive for participating in child pageants is also shown through the parents deciding to enter their children into glamour (glitz) beauty pageants opposed to natural beauty pageants. Glitz pageants are more focused on beauty than anything else while natural pageants focus on intelligence. In natural pageants, similar to Miss America pageants, contestants are required to participate in an interview portion and an on-stage question portion. In these pageants, if a child under the age of twelve wears make-up, points are deducted. Some natural pageants even require children to have a platform, or an issue they stand for, and to participate in volunteer work and extracurricular activities. Natural beauty pageants seem to be the perfect solution for parents and children who love pageants, so why would any parent choose a glitz beauty pageant over a natural beauty pageant? According to Dr. Martina Cartwright, one

possible reason is that the parents have a medical condition that she calls “Achievement by Proxy Distortion” which motivates parents to take advantage of and exploit their child in an attempt to live indirectly through the child (Cartwright 1105-7). These parents enjoy interacting with their children as if they are pets or dolls and pageants often come down to a competition of “mine is prettier than yours” (*Toddlers and Tiaras* S05E22).

Parents seem so determined for “theirs” to win that they are willing to do almost anything to guarantee that it happens. That is certainly the case for mother of Paisley Dickey, whose three year old daughter won a high title in a pageant after she was dressed to look like the prostitute played by Julia Roberts in the film *Pretty Woman*. Paisley was seen on the reality show *Toddlers and Tiaras* in a blonde wig, black knee-high boots, and a white tank top connected at the belly button to a blue, form-fitting miniskirt. Paisley’s mother’s decision was negatively received by both critics and supporters of child beauty pageants. The mother later on stated that she realizes that the prostitute outfit may have gone too far, but other parents make no excuses for their choices. Mother of beauty pageant contestant Emma is clear when she tell viewers that she, “decided to do Marilyn Monroe for [her daughter’s] outfit of choice because [Marilyn Monroe] was a sex symbol and [she] just thought that would work great with Emma and her personality” (*Toddlers and Tiaras*, S05E22). Another parent is unashamed when she admits that she dressed her daughter in a Dolly Parton costume, equipped with breast and butt pads, in an attempt to please the judges. These are examples of the blatant sexualizing of toddlers, but all pageant parents are guilty of encouraging their daughters to imitate adults while on stage. In almost all routines, parents require their child to bat her eyelashes, wink, switch her hips, and blow kisses. Young children learn that this behavior is necessary to get attention. When the

children learn otherwise, they are often redirected as one child was when she told her mother that her fishnet stockings were inappropriate. Her mother responded with, “They’re appropriate. You’re in a pageant. That’s fine” (*Toddlers and Tiaras*, S05E22).

“She is in a pageant” is an excuse used by several of the parents. The parents and supporters assert that they would never purposely sexualize or exploit their children and that pageants are nothing more than a game of dress-up. They place the blame on sexual predators, saying that if someone decides to look at their child in a sexual way then that person is sick. It is, however, possible that critics who believe that these children are being sexualized are looking at them in the role of a protector, not a predator. Perhaps it is even possible that parents and supporters only make these claims in an attempt to rationalize their behavior.

There is no excuse for a parent subjecting his or her child to the many negative aspects of child beauty pageants in hopes of that child becoming the next Oprah Winfrey. While many parents and pageant supporters may find it funny now when Alana Thompson exclaims, “A dolla’ make’ me holla’ honey boo boo child,” that line won’t be so funny ten years from now when she is still sliding her tanned body into that gorgeous red bikini and heading to a stage (“Precious Moments Pageants”). With beauty pageants’ focus on the importance of appearance and money, it is much more likely that a parent’s beauty pageant star will become the next great exotic dancer than it is that she will become the next Oprah Winfrey.

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