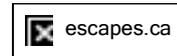


# 'Sexy' costumes come under fire

## Halloween: Boundaries need to be set to ensure appropriate attire, organization says

BY DAN FUMANO, THE PROVINCE    OCTOBER 16, 2013



A children's advocate warns that the frightening trend of dressing younger and younger women in "sexy" Halloween outfits is inappropriate - and experts agree it can even be harmful.

"Sexualizing a child or youth is inappropriate. And Halloween shouldn't be an excuse to be able to sexualize children or youth further," said Diane Sowden, executive director of the Children of the Street Society.

Sowden's society engages in education programs to fight against sexual exploitation of children and youth. For the past six years they have sent news releases to schools in the Lower Mainland, advising schools to set guidelines and "encourage socially responsible Halloween costumes."

This year, for the first time, the society is taking their message provincewide.

"We have to set boundaries for youth and make sure they understand the sexualization of children and youth is not appropriate and that it actually puts themselves at risk," Sowden said. "We want particularly preteens and teens to take a stand and say 'No. We're not going to take that.'" Sowden is especially concerned about any costumes that glamorizes the sex trade, having seen the disturbing trend of teens dressed in a so-called "pimp-and-ho" couples costume.

The society's letter to B.C. schools this year reads: "Costumes geared toward children and youth have increasingly become sexualized. Costumes such as 'sexy teacher's pet,' 'prisoner of love' and 'pimp and ho' create false perceptions of the perpetrators and victims of sexual exploitation and human trafficking."

"We have dress codes in the school, and those standards should be the same, no matter if it's Halloween or it's not Halloween," Sowden said. "I just can't see the connection between Halloween and having a child dressing up in a sexual way."

Sexy costumes for adults remain perennially popular, said Rhona Segarra, general manager of Party Bazaar.

"Sexy is never going to go away. The sexy nurse and the French maid, those are still popular," Segarra said.

But while The Party Bazaar stocks several risqué costume choices for adults, Segarra said the company tries to be mindful of this issue, and tries not to stock children's costumes that could be seen as racy.

One reason it's challenging for parents, Segarra said, is that if you take away racy costume choices for girls, there aren't nearly as many options as there are for boys.

"The other thing is little girls want to grow up to be big girls as quickly as possible," said Segarra.

Dr. Shimi Kang is a youth psychiatrist who has worked with young women and girls for more than 10 years, and has seen the ill-effects of a society that overvalues sexual appeal.

"The sexualization of girls is a real phenomenon," Kang said. "And it has real consequences. Mental health, physical health, emotional health, societal health consequences."

Kang said the sexualization of young women has been linked to eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression and can have negative impacts on later relationships.

"Sexualization of young girls is a very complex issue. However, one example could be the increasing sexiness or sexualization of Halloween costumes towards younger and younger girls," Kang said.

"This is not something you would find 20 years ago or even 10 years ago."

A walk through a costume store shows the wide range of sexy-costume choices for adults. Many of the women's outfits are sexualized in some way, and even the girls' choices in the children's section show this trend. There's a revealing low-cut top on a superhero costume, a lacy nurse's uniform and a short, frilly skirt on a policewoman outfit.

Meanwhile, in the boys' section, the counterparts for those costumes are a straightforward superhero, doctor or police costume.

"A message I would give to parents, and people who are caregivers of children, is try to resist the trend," Kang said. "First of all, be aware that it is a real trend. And ... try to encourage positive role-modelling of female empowerment and value beyond just a sexual, physical image."

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