

What's a mom to do?

Exasperation rises as suggestive clothing for girls spreads from teens to toddlers

By Lisa Nicita
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From spaghetti straps for preschoolers to ultra-miniskirts on tweens, girls clothing is getting noticeably skimpier.

Kid-magnet chains, including Limited Too and Abercrombie Kids, as well as discount stores such as Target are focusing their marketing efforts on a much younger demographic, luring young girls into ensembles that in years past had been reserved for their teenage sisters.

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GapKids recently featured a white, crocheted

string bikini you'd likely see Anna Kournikova wearing on the cover of the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue. The bikini was for a 12-month-old.

Racks at Target held several bathing suits perfect for a Hawaiian Tropic bikini competition. The crocheted and camouflage-designed suits started at Size 4 in the little girls' section.

Inseams on "classic" shorts at stores such as Abercrombie Kids and Hollister Co. are microscopic. And halter tops, shirts often lauded by fashion consultants for their ability to enhance a less-than-voluptuous chest, are everywhere for every age.

Moms hoping to find anything even mildly modest have to be happy Bermuda shorts are trendy again.

"It's a very scary phenomenon," said Patricia Leavy, a sociology professor at Stonehill

College in Easton, Mass. "I don't think it's going to go away. I think it's going to get worse before it gets better."

Leavy said the clothing trend is only piggybacking off pop culture and the toy industry, where Bratz dolls have spun off Baby Bratz and celebrities such as Britney Spears and Lindsay Lohan have grown up much faster than the fans who follow them.

"The reason it's really happening is money," Leavy said.

There's serious money at stake. From clothing to games to snacks, kids 12 to 19 spent \$179 billion in 2006, according to Teen Research Unlimited. Retailers want a piece of that pie, and they are looking for lifelong shoppers. The younger they snag them, the longer they'll have them, Leavy said.

As if shopping for a teen or tween wasn't difficult enough, there now is a new category: the pre-tween.

Yes, your child goes from toddler to pre-tween, skipping the "plain old kid" level altogether.

Cindy Istook, a professor of textiles at North Carolina State University, said retailers aren't designing clothes for kids. They are simply making mini adult clothes.

"We all think about the Jon-Benet Ramsey thing (the 6-year-old beauty-pageant veteran whose killing remains unsolved) and look at how obscene it was," Istook said, "and we're all shocked, but, really, it's pretty

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"When you wear these things, you are sending a message, whether you think you are or not."

Chris Frueh

Owner of U Go Girlz, which produces T-shirts with positive messages, on innuendo-stamped T's for girls



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How's this one, Mom? As Jamie Silberlicht (rear) looks on, 6-year-old daughter Dora is trying on clothes with the help of Lila Metcalf, owner of the Urban Kidz boutique in Scottsdale.



Lila Metcalf (left) helps an expectant mom select outfits for her unborn daughter. Metcalf's shop offers trendy yet modest girls clothing.