

# Let's Deglamorize Our Youngsters!

It's time to take a hard look at children's fashion shows, sophisticated parties, and athletic spectacles so much in vogue today **By THEODORE IRWIN**



**I**N LOS ANGELES not long ago, 200 girls, some as young as 12, competed in a Brigitte Bardot resemblance contest. Wearing towels, bikinis, and the proper pout, they did their best to emulate the celebrated French "sex kitten."

Harmless fun? Not when viewed with the spate of other glossy, glamorous activities boys and girls are participating in—often with the blessings of their parents.

One of the gaudy, prematurely sophisticated roles that young girls play these days is modeling in small-fry fashion shows, where mothers dress them in scaled-down versions of strapless evening gowns and high heels. Pre-teen beauty contests, in a carnival atmosphere, also are staged, often sponsored by service organizations and even mothers' clubs.

Particularly in suburbs, social dancing is increasingly being pressed upon children as early as the fifth grade. Pint-sized children compete to be the best dressed. "Pairing off" is apt to be encouraged, and the tendency is for boy-girl

parties to start at around the age of 11. Dating begins early. According to a survey by Dr. Winston Ehrmann of the University of Florida, one in four girls dates regularly before she reaches 13.

Junior-grade mixed parties, sponsored by parents in this affluent era, may include hired entertainment. For the "younger" element, a magician or games leader may star at a catered birthday party. In St. Louis, an eighth-grade graduation party was held in the city's best night club—and one high-school Valentine's Day dance cost each boy a minimum of \$30.

Athletics, too, are being glamorized. Small boys are being handed flashy uniforms, unnecessary warm-up jackets, and sweat pants. Baseball diamonds are laid out like replicas of big-league ball parks, sometimes with grandstands, dugouts, scoreboard, even a built-in public address system for elaborate pregame ceremonies.

"The basic idea of athletics is being lost in the trimmings and gadgetry," says Joseph E. Curtis, recreation commissioner of White Plains, N. Y. "It's not baseball itself that seems to count, it's showmanship and glamour. A kid is involved with so many distractions that he plays for the accouterments as much as for the game. All this distorts his sense of values."

**S**OME OF THE glamorizing can be downright dangerous. Consider the "go-cart" craze.

One afternoon in Spartansburg, N. C., a 12-year-old boy driving a motorized "go-cart" on a drag strip suddenly lost control. He smashed into a group of spectators, injuring 16 and sending four to a hospital. This was not an isolated incident. A survey of 1,500 cities reveals that at least 33 deaths and 193 serious injuries have been caused by these "toy" cars. Yet more than a quarter-million go-carts are now being driven around, each at a cost of several hundred dollars to pampering parents.

Educators and social scientists observing various aspects of the glamorizing phenomenon maintain that in many cases the children are pawns for their parents' frustrated ambitions. These parents are overanxious for their offspring to be "popular."

But American youngsters really don't want

the razzle-dazzle, says Joseph Prendergast, executive director of the National Recreation Association. He cites this example:

"A recreation department in Oklahoma offered a stargazers' program to youngsters who were willing to lug bedrolls to chilly hillsides, keep careful records of the constellations they saw, and construct their own scale models of the solar system. Perhaps a dozen takers were expected. More than 100 responded. The only razzle-dazzle in the program came when nature let go with a shooting star."

Instead of high-powered go-carts, fashion shows, sophisticated parties, and athletic spectacles, the consensus of thoughtful recreation directors is that our children would be much better off with some old-fashioned diversions.

**"K**EEP THEM simple and honest," Curtis suggests. He strongly advocates bicycling, for instance, and would like to see a network of community bike paths. From the third grade on, youngsters can go in for roller skating, ice skating, swimming, and basketball, he says. Softball can start in the fifth grade. Beginning in kindergarten, gymnastics can be enjoyed if mixed with games and stunts (these can be performed in your home playroom, too, with a layer of blankets or a mat). Touch football develops such skills as kicking, feinting, passing, and playmaking. Family recreation could include hiking, camping, and picnics.

In Curtis' view, we should also go back to folk dancing, musical games, and homespun fun. The finest home recreation device ever invented, he believes, is the living-room piano.

Heads of youth organizations point out that children do like vigorous sports and real hikes. It's usually a timid adult who is reluctant to let a child sleep on the ground or who fears he'll be hurt if he plays a "rough" game. Our children should be encouraged to participate rather than grow up to be victims of what President Kennedy has called "spectatoritis."

"Let's stop making jaded adults of youngsters bursting with energy," says recreation expert Prendergast. "It's fun to be active and fit. Let's give fitness and fun—without gaudy frills—back to our children."

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN WOOLHISER

## COVER:

Actress Shirley Jones, photographed by Peter Basch, had to shed sweet-girl roles to win an Oscar—and her husband shares much of the credit for her success. See: "Shirley Jones and How She Grew," p. 14.

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