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## Grade-School Girls, Grown-Up Gossip

By [STEPHANIE ROSENBLOOM](#)

WHEN [Britney Spears](#) shaved off her signature blond locks, Alexis Gursky, 9, found herself wondering not why Ms. Spears picked up a razor in the first place, but why she did not do more with the hair she shaved off.

"I just thought it was a little weird to just do it and not to give it to people who have cancer," said Alexis, a third grader in Manhattan.

And while scores of people were petitioning Gov. [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#) of California to keep Paris Hilton from having to report to jail on June 5, Jessie Urvater, 8, could not muster any sympathy.

"I don't like Paris," said Jessie, of Manhattan, who was quick to point out that hotel heiresses are not above the law. "I think she should go to jail."

Well before they experience puberty, children today are deeply immersed in the dirty laundry of celebrities — their eating disorders, bouts with drinking and drugs, and run-ins with the law (and one another). The gritty details are all around them: on the Web, on cable, at the top of the network news and splashed across the covers of magazines.

The prevailing wisdom is that exposure to vast amounts of gossip, particularly about Hollywood's so-called bad girls — Ms. Hilton, Ms. Spears and Lindsay Lohan, to name the most frequently chastised — is leading America's impressionable 8-to-12-year-old girls into the gutter. But the reality is more complex.

In interviews, tweens tend to be highly judgmental of the much-publicized antics, turning them into age-appropriate morality tales that would make their parents proud and bring comfort to those who fear the next generation will be made up of pantyless party girls known more for their D.W.I.s than their G.P.A.s.

Ms. Hilton, said Jamie Barton, 10, of Mobile, Ala.: "spends all this time acting like everyone else doesn't mean anything. It's just me, me, me."

Said Diamond Martin, 12, of Parlin, N.J.: "I don't see her as a role model. I'm not sure what she's really ever done, actually."

That tweens are not traipsing after the drunken pied pipers who erupt in the gossip headlines is not surprising to child behavior experts.

"I would be shocked if they did," said Dr. Ritch C. Savin-Williams, a professor and chairman of the human development department at [Cornell University](#). After all, he said, 8- to 12-year-olds are by and large "really heavily under the influence of their parents."

That does not mean, though, that gossip culture is harmless. "There may be a delayed effect," said Dr. Richard Gallagher, the director of the Parenting Institute at the Child Study Center of [New York](#)

**University.** “When kids know that some behavior is possible and that it doesn’t lead to total ruination of your life, they may, as they get older, be willing to entertain that.”

But until then, many children view the unseemly behavior through a lens of common sense that some celebrities themselves appear to lack.

“They should really do good things that they want other people to do,” said Rachel Steir, 11, of Manhattan, “not smoking, taking drugs, thinking that they need to lose so much weight.”

That children today are exposed to much more scandal than those of previous generations is not in dispute. Like many girls, Courtney Barton, 12, of Mobile, Ala., said she does not seek out celebrity gossip, but encounters it everywhere: “I hear these things about all of them on the radio, Internet and TV.”

According to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, the death of [Anna Nicole Smith](#), on Feb. 8, constituted 9 percent of news coverage the week she died (she died midweek). That same week, 8 percent was devoted to the 2008 campaign and 3 percent to the Super Bowl. Pew also found that in the two days following Ms. Smith’s death, “nearly a quarter of the news from all sectors (24 percent) was devoted to this story, and fully half of cable news.”

Of course, Ms. Smith’s accidental drug overdose is old news by now. Children have moved on to *Us* magazine, where they can read about Ms. Lohan reportedly snorting cocaine, or to [People.com](#), where they are informed that the estranged husband of Anne Heche, the actress, “craves porn, poker and money.”

Gone are the days when children who wanted to learn the meaning of a naughty word or slang term had to find a dictionary or a more worldly pal. Today, Wikipedia can explain in a matter of seconds that badonkadonk is a term for a woman’s buttocks.

Michelle Dale, a second-grade teacher in Brooklyn who works with the youngest of the tweens, said she is “always blown away” by all the things her students know about. “The movies that these little second graders have come in and watched,” she said, “I’m like, ‘Oh, my goodness.’ ”

In interviews, children expressed their detailed knowledge of Angelina Jolie’s penchant for adoption (though they never mentioned her previous marriage to Billy Bob Thornton or the vial of his blood she wore around her neck). They knew about Ms. Hilton’s sex tape, Ms. Lohan’s dramatic weight loss and Ms. Spears’s underwear-free club outing. Saturated with such gossip, they had formed some very strong opinions about what is good, bad and just plain weird.

Caroline Lee, 11, of Greenwich, Conn., pointed out Ms. Spears’s public parenting blunders, including driving with a baby in her lap: “I feel kind of like she’s a little young and she’s not the right kind of mom,” Caroline said.

But Ms. Jolie, Caroline said, is “a good mother. She takes care of her kids.”

“She’s not as strange and bad as Britney and Paris and Lindsay,” she said, adding that “she adopted so many kids and she also helped places that needed help.”

Of Ms. Lohan, Sophia Ambrosino, 12, of Manhattan, lamented the passing of the young actress’s red-haired, reproach-free “Parent Trap” days. Now, she said: “There are things that she does just to be on the cover of something. I liked her when she was little.”

Arielle Urvater, 11, also said while once she was a fan of Ms. Lohan and Ms. Spears, she is no longer. “We’re well educated,” she said. “We know that drugs aren’t good and that smoking isn’t good.”

Tweens often think in moralistic terms, especially if they have a solid family support system or role models, Dr. Savin-Williams said.

But around 12 or 13, it is not unusual for a child's individual values to give way to peer pressure, some child experts said, and children may be influenced by what they perceive to be cool, not what they instinctively know to be right.

"The younger kids are a little freaked out by Paris," said Susan Schulz, editor in chief of CosmoGirl. "For the most part they're still very good kids at that age."

But, said Ms. Schulz, when they are teenagers, "every kid is trying to have a Paris Hilton kind of night at their prom."

And that is exactly what some adults fear.

"I don't think there's any question that kids are getting more and more information at a younger and younger age," said Dr. David Walsh, a psychologist and the founder of the National Institute on Media and the Family. "And there are very few filters available." The result, he said, is the "adultification of youth."

"Kids have information but not necessarily the emotional maturity to absorb the information," he said. "We've got kids who are at the simple arithmetic phase in terms of their emotional maturity dealing with quadratic material."

Dr. Gallagher of N.Y.U. suggested parents discuss celebrity misbehavior with their children. "You have to talk about it before someone else does," he said. "That helps the kids digest it more effectively."

Most of those conversations will likely be with and about girls.

"The bad boys have been replaced by the bad girls," said Ted Harbert, the president and chief executive of the Comcast Entertainment Group, which includes E! Entertainment Television, Style Network and G4. "You just don't hear as much of these guys who get in trouble as much as we used to in the 'St. Elmo's Fire' generation."

"The girls don't want to just leave it to the boys to get in trouble," he said. "They want their fair share of time in the principal's office."

But what about all those thoughtful things tweens say about celebrities' bad behavior and their embrace of good clean role models?

Dr. Walsh said: "A kid can write a well-thought-out essay about why a behavior is not good, but that doesn't mean it's going to carry over to their behavior. Thinking ability is right on track but emotionally ability lags."

Yet the girls interviewed cited wholesome-seeming celebrities as their favorites: Miley Cyrus, Ashley Tisdale, Hilary Duff, Dakota Fanning, Anne Hathaway and Ms. Spears's younger, scrubbed sister, Jamie Lynn. Is it possible that today's tweens have seen enough to inoculate them against the pressures of their teenage years?

"As I grow older I see more and more how bad they are," Arielle Urvater said. And yet kids her age cannot help but be interested, she said.

"They're famous, pretty and all the boys like them."