

# “Pretty is as Pretty Does:” Child Beauty Pageants in Deep East Texas

By Taryn Lenert and Dr. Dianne Dentice

## Introduction

Do child beauty pageants affect contestants’ perception of gender norms, gender performance, and confidence? To answer this question, three observations of pageants, three face-to-face interviews, and survey responses from two East Texas pageant Facebook groups will be analyzed through the lens of West and Zimmerman’s theoretical concept of doing gender (1987). Deep East Texas is unique due to the fact that much of its culture originates in old southern views of beauty, the norm of hyper-femininity, and the importance of traditional gender roles in both public and private life.



Retrieved from <https://ukprincessandprincepageant.weebly.com/>



Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2011/09/12/opinion/henson-toddlers-tiaras/index.html>



Retrieved from <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/france-bans-child-beauty-pageants-america-unlikely-to-follow-10155596/>

## Pageant Play and Doing Gender Right

West and Zimmerman (1987, p. 125) describe the process of doing gender as a “routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction.” Goffman (1976, p. 69) defines gender as a “socially scripted dramatization of a culture’s idealization of feminine and masculine natures,” and thus, gender stereotypes play a significant role in how people perform their gender identities. Child beauty pageants provide a literal stage for girls to perform hyper-feminized roles in front of an audience to prove that they are poised, ladylike, and beautiful—all characteristics of what a woman is expected to be in the eyes of the institutionalized image of gender in many societies such as the United States. Doing gender involves relaying the institutional ideals of gender.

## Observations of Pageants

- Photogenic component
- Judge: “Young girls need positive reinforcement.”
- Boys: flexing muscles, “ladies’ men”, audience whistling and laidback. Judging emphasized personality.
- Girls: blowing kisses, cupcake dresses, elegance, poised modeling. Judging focused on beauty, modeling, and personality.
- One pageant had talent and interview portions

## Interviews

- “We just had fun. For us, it was something we did together... [Confidence] wasn’t a goal, it just kind of happened.”
- “[My daughter] is very self-conscious about her figure... she thinks she’s huge. She doesn’t show it on stage, thank goodness.”
- “[Other families] were very competitive, but there was not a lot of passion or just having fun. I think it was just a different mindset. It was more like a job to them.”
- Overall they had positive experiences, but they recall negative experiences that stuck with them for a long time.

## Facebook Survey Results

- Respondents wanted their children to gain confidence, increase self-esteem, develop talent, learn to be a lady, support others, and have fun
- Average spending per year: \$720
- “If you or your child are interested in getting into beauty pageants, the child needs to be prepared or I believe it could damage their self-esteem. It cannot be about winning.”

## The Debate Over Child Beauty Pageants

The debate began in many media outlets after the death of Jon Benet Ramsey—a six year old pageant queen—in late 1996. The media analyzed her participation in pageants and questioned whether they “robbed girls of their girlhood” (Heltsley and Calhoun, 2003). Today’s debate mostly stems from the reality TV show *Toddlers and Tiaras*, which first aired in 2009. The series features the backstage behavior of what happens in glitz pageants. Tamer (2011) considers the show to be borderline child pornography and discusses how the sexualization of children may normalize abusive practices. Most pageant mothers believe that pageants encourage self-esteem, confidence, poise, and femininity (Chapman 2000; Giroux 1998; Heltsley and Calhoun 2003). However, Giroux (1998) believes that “self-esteem becomes a euphemism for self-hatred, rigid gender roles, and powerlessness” in the context of child beauty pageants. In other words, self-esteem is closely linked to gender performance in the pageant world.



Retrieved from <https://www.sophiasstyle.com/blog/winning-pageant-dresses/>



Retrieved from <https://www.thejournal.ie/childrens-rights-groups-concerned-by-child-beauty-pageant-set-for-ireland-99635-Mar2011/>

## Discussion

Child beauty pageants provide a stage for children to perform gender. They use fancy dresses, kitten heels, make-up and hair accessories, specific modeling techniques, and feminized body language to convey their expected gender performance. Pageant requirements are grounded in hyper-femininity, which encourages the contestants to equate success with beauty.