11. The Tampon

Discussion published by Patrick Cox, H-Net Editor and H-Net Staff Editor on Wednesday, October 22, 2014

tampon.jpg

Contributor: Sharra Vostral

Associate Professor of History

Purdue University

The tampon is an unlikely object to associate with American childhood. Yet, it signifies many important developments: (1) a shift away from using strict biological markers to construct “child” and “girl” as categories; (2) the contested space of sex and sex education for children; and (3) corporate marketing toward children. Tampons are one of a variety of technologies used to manage menstruation, which is not just associated with mature women but also girls who have experienced menarche, the onset of menstruation.

Menstruation is no longer a strict marker that signifies womanhood, and this shift has been part of a broader extension of childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood in the United States. There has also been a slow creep toward early onset menstruation in girls as early as age 8 (as well as “precocious puberty” in boys), which some speculate may relate to nutrition, calorie intake, and even environmental pollutants that accelerate human growth.

Worn internally within the vaginal walls, the tampon requires both a bit of practice to use and also knowledge about sexual anatomy. Historically girls have not been encouraged to touch vaginal body parts, with some fearing that girls would learn to masturbate by doing so. The patented telescopic
cardboard applicator of Tampax tampons helped ensure that both women and girls need not even touch themselves in the process. The tampon has also been blamed for breaking the hymen, a physical membrane historically used to determine virginity. Valued by different cultural communities at various moments, the intact hymen was an important requirement of a marriage engagement.

As such, more girls were encouraged to use sanitary napkins. As early as the 1930s, corporations developed menstrual education pamphlets to promote sanitary napkins, and by the 1940s there were entire curriculums including a Disney filmstrip and short film called “The Story of Menstruation” sponsored by the Kimberly-Clark Corporation (maker of Kotex) that grade schools incorporated into health and wellness classes. It was not until the 1970s that tampons were included in menstrual education campaigns directed at girls. Due to strides made in women’s rights and through the women’s health movement, the tampon became a tool of bodily liberation. These classes about puberty and human development were synonymous with sex education well until the late 20th century, and taught girls about menstrual hygiene management.

Ironically, tampons can help girls “pass” as girls. Since their bodies are biologically mature due to menstruation, but this does not equate to cultural maturity, the tampon helps girls to remain active and literally hide their periods. The tampon outperforms the limitations of a sanitary pad, and girls can continue to embody the social construct of a dependent female child by using a tampon to temporarily transform their maturing body. For these reasons, the tampon is an important artifact of childhood in the ways that it embodies cultural assumptions about growth, sexuality, and what it means to be a girl.