

What stunning role models for eight-year-olds

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Five women. Six children. One husband. (Only one. Who has allegedly been known to stray.) Three unmarried mothers. One custody battle. One putative father demanding a paternity test. Another father whose identity is neither confirmed nor denied, but who seems to have little contact with his baby and her mother.

Altogether, this is an emotional fry-up; a hormonal tornado of broken promises, quickie trysts, delusional fantasies and pop-up pregnancies.

Ten years after they launched their sexual empowerment manifesto, this is how the soon-to-be reunited Spice Girls have ended up and, no, it is not pretty. Is this mess of fatherless children, torrid affairs and law suits what they meant by girl power? Surely not.

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The collective fate of Posh, Ginger, Scary, Baby and Sporty certainly reflects the increase of the fragmented family in British society; and some might even hold the Spices partly responsible.

From their first hit in 1996, the group preached a message of feisty liberation, encouraging their pre-teen audience to break free from the shackles of male oppression and enjoy their own sexuality.

"Just because you've got a short skirt on and a pair of tits, you can still say what you want to say," said Baby Spice, alias Emma Bunton.

"Our band is a projection of female power," said Ginger Spice, who went on to pay moving homage to the Suffragettes, with whom the Spice Girls always liked to align themselves. "They died to get a vote," she said. "You remember that and think, ----- hell."

Don't you just. Yet the Spice Girls' most ardent fans were eight-year-old girls, who cannot have fully understood the implications of all this proselytising, but still absorbed the gobby, laughable "emancipation" espoused by the group, and embraced their crop-top legacy with enthusiasm.

The Spice Girls did not burn their push-up bras; they lightly scorched them on the flame of a scented candle. Their thin feminism never did stand up to much scrutiny, but it begat monsters such as Vicky Pollard and a generation of in-your-face sisters doing it for themselves.

Yet no matter how frothy pop culture might be, it still matters, especially if it is being aimed - with laser precision - at malleable pre-pubescents who don't need any encouragement to trust it, use it, prove

it, groove it, show me how good you are, yeah.

This year, the Office for National Statistics revealed that pregnancies in the under-16s rose by four per cent in 2005, the biggest single annual increase for a decade. And yes, there is more than a pinch of Spice in that unholy and unhappy brew.

Meanwhile, nearly one quarter of children born in this country live with only one parent, and nine out of 10 of those are in households headed by lone mothers.

The story is even more disjointed in Spiceworld, where exactly one half of children born to Spices live in one-parent families, with one having a question mark over the identity of her own father.

Scary Spice - Melanie Brown - had to resort to DNA tests to prove to her former lover, the film star Eddie Murphy, that he was the father of their 11-week-old daughter.

"Be responsible," she urged him last week, which is a bit rich coming from someone who got knocked up following a seven-month affair with a man who has six children by two different women.