Call it the high-maintenance generation. How our obsession with beauty is changing our kids.

There's a scene in "Toddlers & Tiaras," the TLC reality series, where 2-year-old Marleigh is perched in front of a mirror, smothering her face with blush and lipstick. She giggles as her mother attempts to hold the squealing toddler still, lathering her legs with self-tanner. "Marleigh loves to get tan," her mom says, as the girl presses her face against the mirror.

Marleigh is one of many pageant girls on the show, egged on by obsessive mothers who train their tots to strut and swagger, flip their hair and pout their lips. I watch, mesmerized, but wonder how different Marleigh is from average girls all across America. On a recent Sunday in Brooklyn, I stumble into a spa that brands itself for the zero-to-12 set, full of tweens getting facialed and glossed, hands and feet outstretched for manis and pedis.

Sounds extreme? Maybe. But this, my friends, is the new normal: a generation that primps and dyes and pulls and shapes, younger and with more vigor. Girls today are salon vets before they enter elementary school. They have spa days and pedicure parties. And instead of shaving their legs the old-fashioned way--with a 99-cent drugstore razor--teens get laser hair removal, the most common cosmetic procedure of that age group. If these trends continue, by the time your tween hits the Botox years, she'll have spent thousands on the beauty treatments once reserved for the "Beverly Hills, 90210" set, not junior highs in Madison, Wis.

Reared on reality TV and celebrity makeovers, girls as young as Marleigh are using beauty products earlier, spending more and still feeling worse about themselves. According to market-research firm Experian, 43 percent of 6- to 9-year-olds are already using lipstick or lip gloss; 38 percent use hairstyling products; and 12 percent use other cosmetics. And the level of interest is making the girls of "Toddlers & Tiaras" look ordinary. "My daughter is 8, and she's, like, so into this stuff, it's unbelievable," says Anna Solomon, a Brooklyn social worker. "From the clothes to the hair to the nails, school is like No. 10 on the list of priorities."

Much has been made of the oversexualization of today's tweens. But what hasn't been discussed is what we might call their "diva-ization"--before they even hit the tween years. Consider this: according to a NEWSWEEK examination of the most common beauty trends, by the time your 10-year-old is 50, she'll have spent nearly $300,000 on just her hair and face. Today's girls are getting caught up in the beauty-maintenance game at ages when they should be learning how to read--and long before their beauty needs enhancing.

Why are this generation's standards different? To start, this is a group that's grown up on pop culture that screams, again and again, that everything, everything, is a candidate for upgrading. Ads for the latest fashions, makeup tips and grooming products are circulated with a speed and fury unique to this millennium--on millions of ads, message boards and Facebook pages. Digital cameras come complete with retouching options, and anyone can learn how to use Photoshop to blend and tighten and thin. It's been estimated that girls 11 to 14 are subjected to some 500
advertisements a day--the majority of them nipped, tucked and airbrushed to perfection. "None of this existed when I was growing up, and now it's just, like, in your face," says Solomon, 30.

What that means for kids in the long term is effort and money washed down the drain each night, along with remnants of a painted face. It's constant, and exhausting. I should know: at 27, my daily maintenance regimen takes at least an hour, and I own enough products to fill a large closet, not to mention a savings account. This is what the 11-year-olds of the world have to look forward to--times 10. Eight- to 12-year-olds in this country already spend more than $40 million a month on beauty products, according to the NPD Group. This trend seems unaffected by the tanking economy: cosmetics sales have increased between 1 and 46 percent in the last year, depending on the product, according to the Nielsen Co.

There's no evidence to prove that women who start primping early will primp more as they get older, but it's a safe assumption that they won't slow down. And what that means, say psychologists, is the evolution of a beauty standard that's becoming harder to achieve. New statistics from the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery show that cosmetic-surgery procedures performed on those 18 and younger have nearly doubled over the last decade. Dr. Alan Gold, the society's president, says that nearly 14 percent of Botox injections are given in the 19-to-34 age group--and while his trade group doesn't break down those ages any more specifically, he's seen a significant increase in the younger end of that group. "I think what we've done is level the playing field, in that someone who may not have had great exposure to these things before--say, on a farm in Iowa--has the same options available to them," says Gold. "Thomas Friedman has written how the world is flat economically. Well, it's getting flatter in terms of aging and appearance, too."

But if the world is flat, and impossible standards have become ubiquitous, can a person ever be satisfied with the way they look? In Susie Orbach's new book, "Bodies," the former therapist to Princess Diana argues that good looks and peak fitness are no longer a biological gift but a ceaseless pursuit. And obsession at an early age, she says, fosters a belief that these are essential components of who we are. "It primes little girls to think they should diet and dream about the cosmetic-surgery options available to them, and it makes the body the primary place for self-identity."

The body, of course, cannot carry the weight of that--and these days, body dissatisfaction begins in grammar school. According to a 2004 study by the Dove Real Beauty campaign, 42 percent of first- to third-grade girls want to be thinner, while 81 percent of 10-year-olds are afraid of getting fat. "When you have tweens putting on firming cream"--as was revealed by 1 percent of girls in one study--"it's clear they're looking for imaginary flaws," says Harvard psychologist Nancy Etcoff. If tweens can be convinced they need to spend to perfect their already youthful skin, it's hard to imagine what they'll believe at 40.

With Aku Ammah-Tagoe

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