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LONDON (April 14) -- A leading British clothing chain has been forced to withdraw a line of padded bikini tops for preteen girls from its 138 U.K. stores after politicians, kids' rights campaigners and the country's biggest newspaper accused it of sexualizing children. Cut-price retailer Primark apologized for any offense caused by its $6 padded tops, which were aimed at girls ages 7 to 8 and came in two colors: candy pink and black with white polka dots. "The company has stopped the sale of this product line with immediate effect," a spokesman for the retailer announced. "Primark will donate all the profits made from this product line to a children's charity." Outrage over this ill-considered attire flared up Tuesday, when child protection consultant Shy Keenan spotted the item for sale in a British store. She immediately rang around the British media, and in an interview with the U.K.'s best-selling tabloid, The Sun, accused Primark of trying "to exploit the disgusting 'pedophile pound' " and steal children's innocence. (She didn't, however, criticize The Sun over its own frequent use of scantily clad models in tight-fitting schoolgirl outfits.)
British politicians, who are fighting a close-run national election campaign, quickly jumped on the scandal and attempted to persuade the British public that they were more disgusted than their rivals. In the London Times, Prime Minister Gordon Brown criticized companies for "pushing our kids into acting like little grown-ups." And during an interview with BBC Radio, David Cameron, the leader of the Conservative Party and the man widely tipped to replace Gordon Brown, said the bikini was "completely disgraceful." He added: "The sort of country I want is one where it is not just government [that] feels outraged about the early commercialization and sexualization of our children. Companies should stop doing it; they should take some responsibility." British retailers do seem to find it difficult deciding which goods are really suitable for kids. In 2006, supermarket giant Tesco (owner of Fresh & Easy in the U.S.) was attacked for selling a pole-dancing kit -- which came complete with a "'sexy dance garter" -- in the toy section of its Web site. The following year Asda, another grocery store, was slammed in the British press for marketing frilly push-up bras to 9-year-olds. And even when there's nothing inherently "sexy" about an item, sometimes a retailer will lumber it with a woefully inappropriate title. In 2008, the now-defunct general-goods store Woolworths found itself at the center of a PR catastrophe after it named a new range of furniture for little girl's bedrooms after Vladimir Nabokov's controversial 1955 novel "Lolita."
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