



commission for  
children and young people  
and child guardian

## Children and young people in advertising

In 2006, awareness of the portrayal of children and young people in advertising was raised by the publication of The Australia Institute's report, *Corporate Paedophilia*<sup>1</sup>. This raised the profile of the sexualisation of children in the world of marketing and advertising and discussed its potential harm to children. Additional research<sup>2</sup> confirms advertising is having an adverse effect upon the health of children: an Australian study found that, by age seven, 71% of girls want to be slimmer!

The Commission is concerned with several issues affecting and involving children and young people in marketing and advertising:

- marketing targeted at children and young people
- the sexualisation of children in advertising
- the promotion of unhealthy body images in advertising
- gender stereotyping
- the promotion of consumerism targeting children, and
- the privacy of children and young people where direct marketing is concerned.

This fact sheet aims to provide some background to these issues and a list of helpful tips for parents to help make some real changes.

### Marketing targeted at children and young people

It is widely known that children are a lucrative market. Social research company Australia Scan says the 'tween' market (which covers seven to 13 year-olds) is worth more than \$10 billion in Australia. Anywhere between \$250 million and \$1 billion of this is spent on clothing (La Nauze and Rush 2006a).

Television is predominantly used by advertisers to market to children (although this may change due to the increasing popularity of the internet) and it is estimated the average child sees more than 40,000 television ads a year. Advertisers spend more than \$12 billion per year targeting the youth market because of its strong contribution to the consumer economy. According to one estimate in the United States, children aged 14 and under make \$24 billion in direct purchases and influence \$190 billion in family purchases<sup>3</sup>.

In December 2004 The Australia Institute commissioned a survey (La Nauze and Rush 2006b) of over 1600 Australians that included a question about advertising to children; 86% of respondents agreed there should be more limits on advertising to children. A telephone survey of a representative sample of 501 Australian parents conducted for the Australian Childhood Foundation in 2005 found that 90% believe that children are targeted too much by companies trying to market their products to them<sup>4</sup>.

1 La Nauze, A and Rush, E (2006a). "Corporate Paedophilia: sexualisation of children in Australia". The Australia Institute. Discussion Paper No.90, October.

2 La Nauze, A and Rush, E (2006b). "Letting Children be Children: Stopping the sexualisation of children in Australia". Discussion Paper Number 93. December. The Australia Institute.

3 McNeal, J (1998) cited in Cantor et al. Cantor, J; Dowrick, P; Kunkel, D; Linn, S; Palmer, E; Wilcox, B. (2004). "Report of the APA Task Force on Advertising and Children: Psychological issues in the increasing commercialisation of childhood". 20 February. [www.apa.org/monitor/juno4/protecting.html](http://www.apa.org/monitor/juno4/protecting.html) [Accessed 130307]

4 Tucci, J, Mitchel, J and Goddard, C (2005), The changing Face of Parenthood: Exploring the Attitudes of parents in Contemporary Australia. <http://www.childhood.org.au/research/reports.asp>

Research<sup>5</sup> shows there is evidence that children are affected by advertisements and that regulation of the nature and timing of advertisements directed at children is warranted.

## Sexualisation of children in advertising

The sexualisation of children and young people – particularly in advertising – is an issue the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian has long spoken out against.

Over the past decade, the fashion industry has started using younger models and now commonly portrays 12 year-old girls as if they were women. Camera angles (where the model is often looking up), averted eyes, wounded facial expressions, and vulnerable poses mimic the visual images common in pornographic media<sup>6</sup>. By sexualising children, advertisers may be suggesting to adults that children are interested in and ready for sex.

It is known that paedophiles use not only child pornography but also more innocent photos of children, such as those in store catalogues, for sexual gratification. Former University of Melbourne psychiatrist, Bill Glaser, says paedophiles see the sexualisation of children as legitimating their desire and notes convicted paedophiles believe that, if children are sexualised in advertising, it must be okay to think sexual thoughts about them (La Nauze and Rush 2006b). One report based on 11 case studies of paedophiles concluded that offenders generate their own erotic materials from relatively innocent sources such as television advertisements, clothing catalogues featuring children modelling underwear, and similar sources (La Nauze and Rush 2006a).

A marketing culture, which displays children in varying degrees of undress with ‘come-hither’ looks and ‘bedroom eyes’ in order to sell products, is irresponsible<sup>7</sup>. If children perceive being sexy as an important part of their lives, they may miss out on activities that better foster physical and cognitive development, such as sports, problem-solving games and imaginative play and, as a result, aspects of their physical and cognitive development are likely to suffer<sup>8</sup>. We should be asking why, as a society, we believe girls should behave or dress in a certain way<sup>9</sup>.

The sexualisation of children is of great concern to some members of society because it reduces the sexual distinction between adults and children and could play a role in ‘grooming’ children for paedophiles – preparing children for sexual interaction (La Nauze and Rush 2006a). The risks this may pose in encouraging children either to initiate sexual experimentation or to agree to an experiment initiated by an older person, before they fully understand the potential consequences, must be taken very seriously.

Images of children and young people in advertising should be respectful, reflect positive, healthy lifestyle choices and show realistic images of what it is like to be young. Adult ideals should not be imposed on children and young people for corporate benefit.

## Promotion of unhealthy body images in advertising

The corporate world subscribes to the theory that if it can imprint its brand on a child, that child will be a customer for life<sup>10</sup>. However, there are consequences of marketing to children.

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5 The Australian Psychological Society Ltd (2000). “Media representations and responsibilities: psychological perspectives”. Position Paper. July.

6 Media Awareness Network (2007). “Media Stereotyping: Media and girls”. [www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/women\\_and\\_girls/women\\_girls.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/women_and_girls/women_girls.cfm) [Accessed 06/08/07]

7 Young Media Australia (2006). “Professionals speak out: marketing harms children”. 8 December. [www.youngmedia.org.au/media\\_ProfessionalsSpeakOut\\_deco6.htm](http://www.youngmedia.org.au/media_ProfessionalsSpeakOut_deco6.htm) [Accessed 26/02/07]

8 Rush, E (2006). “Adult world must let girls be girls”. Sydney Morning Herald Online. 10 October. [www.smh.com.au/articles/2006/10/09/1160246068431.html](http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2006/10/09/1160246068431.html) [Accessed 26/02/07]

9 Overington, C (2007). “Innocent seduction”. The Australian. February 7. <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20876,21183010-28737,00.html> [Accessed 07/02/07]

10 Donahoo, D (2007). “Idolising Children”. University of New South Wales Press Ltd. Sydney. pp164-165, 169, 177.

Tween fashion companies are on the rise, but there seems to be a correlating increase in low self-esteem and poor body image in very young girls (Donahoo 2007). In 2006, 128 girls in their first four years of formal schooling were interviewed<sup>11</sup> to assess their body image awareness. By 6 years of age, a large number of girls said they wished they were thinner. Peer and media influences emerged as significant predictors of body image and dieting awareness. In particular, girls who looked at magazines were even more dissatisfied with their appearance.

Often brands choose very thin models for their advertising campaigns. If companies wish to encourage young people to be happy the way they are, they should choose a cross-section of child models of varying sizes. This would portray a more realistic reflection of children in society rather than attempting to assimilate them to the world of adults, where weight and size are sometimes obsessed over.

Some brands marketed at girls as young as eight years-old are creating lingerie lines, with bra and knicker sets advertised to an age-group that has not yet developed physically. It is inappropriate to have children scrutinising their bodies for traits associated with puberty when they are still very young. They should be allowed to concentrate on play and development of their cognitive and behavioural skills without this pressure.

Companies need to consider the messages they are sending to children and the effect these images have on their health and wellbeing.

## Gender stereotyping

Gender stereotypes are widespread in advertising directed at children, with boys appearing as dominant, active and aggressive and girls as shy, giggly and passive<sup>12</sup>. When the Advertising Standards Bureau made a decision to take a Hyundai campaign off air<sup>13</sup>, it was due to complaints the advertisement was dangerous as it might encourage children to get behind the wheel of a car. Another complaint directed at the ad might have been about its gender stereotyping of the children: while the boy drives and surfs, the girl gets picked up hitchhiking and watches him surf. Even toddlers, it appears, are not exempt from stereotyped gender roles.

The often mixed messages in the mass media make it difficult for girls to negotiate the transition to adulthood: should they be empowered and strong, or servile and vulnerable? A Canadian study found that, while the number of boys who say they “have confidence in themselves” remains relatively stable through adolescence, the number of girls drops steadily (Media Awareness Network 2007).

Although advertising moderation councils might sometimes dismiss gender stereotyping in advertisements under the guise of humour, it is a serious issue which requires attention, particularly with regard to selling these attitudes to such a young audience.

## Direct marketing and related privacy issues

Privacy is also an issue that needs to be addressed. Direct marketing via new technologies presents challenges around maintaining the privacy of children and young people. Websites, for example, market directly to young online members, who may waive their rights to privacy by not reading the fine-print when signing up to receive services. Ads appear on social networking sites, in chat, via spam in email accounts and via mobile messaging. Children enter competitions online and with their mobiles, and often might not think to untick the box that authorises the company to send further advertising material directly to them by all the other companies associated with that product.

While companies may take precautions to safeguard the privacy of children and young people, further

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11 Dohnt, H and Tiggemann, M (2006). “Body Image Concerns in Young Girls: The role of peers and media prior to adolescence”. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, Vol35, No2, April. Springer.

12 Livingstone, S and Milwood Hargrave, A (2006). “Harm and Offence in Media Content: A review of the evidence”. Intellect Ltd, Bristol. p167.

13 Brooks, K (2007). “Trapped by Images”. *The Courier-Mail*. 28 February. p25.

steps should be taken to ensure that the advertising targeted at young people in this manner is age-appropriate, not linked to pornographic sites or those with explicit adult content, and is easy to cancel membership at any time upon request. It should also be ensured that personal details are permanently removed from all marketing databases (and those of subsidiary companies) upon processing the membership cancellation.

## Tips on child-related advertising

- Magazine editors and ad producers should consider what kind of advertising is age-appropriate for young readers. If you see an ad that you believe is inappropriate for the time-slot, website or magazine, make a complaint to the publisher.
- It is important people in key media positions consider the effect that sexualised advertising has on children. If you see a sexualised image of a child or young person in an advertising campaign, make a formal complaint.
- Visual representations of children in advertising campaigns should portray children in realistic situations and poses, such as playing and laughing (not posing seductively). Make a formal complaint if you believe a child model has been posed in a sexual manner.
- If you don't believe a product is appropriate or suitable for your child, don't buy it for them.
- Consider your child's development and wellbeing by focussing more on them having fun, playing and learning than making them self-conscious about their appearance.
- Demand that companies use child models with realistic and varied body shapes to represent the young population. This will help influence children and young people to maintain healthy body images.
- If your child is displaying unhealthy eating behaviour or distorted views of their body shape and size, let them know you are open to listening to them, without being judgmental. This may help them to be more open to discussing their concerns. For further information, check out the "Eating disorders and feeling healthy" link on the Reach Out! website at [www.reachout.com.au](http://www.reachout.com.au).
- If your child is a model, take into consideration what they will be promoting in advertising campaigns, how they are posed, and what they are wearing. Ask a lot of questions before committing to a contract and always register with a reliable agency that has the best interests of your child at heart.
- Offer to help your child cancel membership of a website or to unsubscribe them from marketing lists if they are receiving direct marketing. Get web savvy so you know how!
- Ensure that, when your child has cancelled membership from a website or a marketing database, that the company permanently deletes their information. Get confirmation of this in writing, where possible.
- If your child finds an advertisement directed at them offensive, help them to write a letter of complaint. Criticism is often accepted more readily if coming from the target audience itself.

## How to make a complaint

To make a complaint about advertisements portraying children and young people in a negative or indecent manner, contact the Advertising Standards Bureau.

Complaints about message content and/or advertising should be made to the Telephone Information Services Standards Council.

If a child or young person receives harassing or nuisance emails from an advertiser, try to resolve the problem with the internet service provider in the first instance. If this does not provide results, make a complaint to the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman.

Complaints about internet spam from Australian businesses or individuals should be made to the business responsible in the first instance. If there is no resolution, a complaint can be made to the

Australian Communications and Media Authority. Include the header information in the spam email to help them track down the culprit.

### **For more information**

The Advertising Federation of Australia	<a href="http://www.afa.org.au">www.afa.org.au</a>
Advertising Standards Bureau	<a href="http://www.advertisingstandardsbureau.com.au">www.advertisingstandardsbureau.com.au</a>
Australian Association of National Advertisers	<a href="http://www.aana.com.au">www.aana.com.au</a>
Australian Communications and Media Authority	<a href="http://www.acma.gov.au">www.acma.gov.au</a>
Australian Competition and Consumer Commission	<a href="http://www.scamwatch.gov.au">www.scamwatch.gov.au</a>
Australian Direct Marketing Association	<a href="http://www.adma.com.au">www.adma.com.au</a>
Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman	<a href="http://www.tio.com.au">www.tio.com.au</a>
Telephone Information Services Standards Council	<a href="http://www.tissc.com.au">www.tissc.com.au</a>

### **For more information on the effects of marketing on children and young people**

The Australia Institute	<a href="http://www.tai.org.au">www.tai.org.au</a>
Kids Free 2B Kids	<a href="http://www.kf2bk.com">www.kf2bk.com</a>