

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

Re: Additional information for inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment.

5 May 2008

Dear Sir/Madam,

Thank you very much for the opportunity to present at last week's hearing as part of the Inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the media.

Several questions were posed by members of the Inquiry panel which I undertook to answer more fully. Please find the following additions to our submissions below:

- i) Further information on usefulness of a nationwide public education campaign
- ii) Research priorities
- iii) Elaboration on recommendation 4 that television licensees should be required to submit a plan for the reduction of sexualised content directed at children over a specified time span.

i) Further information on usefulness of a nationwide public education campaign

In our submission to the inquiry, we recommended that a nationwide public education and publicity campaign should be undertaken to encourage parents to:

- (a) monitor their children's viewing of TV, film and video,
- (b) discuss viewed material with their children,
- (c) encourage critical viewing skills, and
- (d) increase their awareness of rating systems.

Whilst we agree with the comments made in the hearing about the limits to the usefulness of public education and publicity campaigns alone to change attitudes and behaviour, we believe that this approach can be useful as a part of a suite of strategies to increase adults' awareness of the risks of cumulative exposure to sexualising messages in our community, the importance of parents' monitoring their children's exposure to media, and, more specifically, as a way of deliberately modelling how to develop skills in critically viewing media.

The premature sexualisation of children can be regarded as a public health issue. In our society, we are seeing increasing numbers of young girls and women developing disturbed eating patterns, distorted

body image, and self-esteem issues. Overseas data links sexualisation with three of the most common mental health problems of girls and women: eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression or depressed mood. A public health approach to dealing with these problems is therefore legitimate. Such approaches typically involve a combination of public education, legislation and targeted interventions to facilitate culture change while limiting the influence of vested interests in the status quo.

Evidence for benefits of public education and publicity campaign

There are many examples of public education campaigns that have been effective in raising people's awareness of an issue (e.g., drink driving, smoking). Even though public education campaigns may not translate into actual behaviour change, they are useful for putting issues on the table, and as a precursor to attitude change. This awareness-raising necessarily precedes behaviour change, and is a valuable part of a campaign to address public health issues. Then, parents, consumers and the general public are more inclined to find ways of challenging the cultural milieu in which women and girls are sexualised (for example by protesting inappropriate sexualised content in varying forms of media, toys; other forms of activism, monitoring media exposure, co-viewing etc).

Examples of public education campaigns

There are numerous ways in which public education campaigns could be effective in raising parents' awareness of the problems of sexualising materials for young people, and for teaching parents how to protect their children from the negative effects. Posters and pamphlets educating parents about what sexualization is, and how it can impact on girls' and young women's sense of self-esteem, can be very useful. When this information is readily available in places that parents visit naturally in the course of their daily life (for example health centres, doctors' clinics, kindergartens and primary schools), then many parents can be exposed to the information and educated about these important issues.

Billboard advertising is another useful way of communicating messages and raising the public's general awareness of a problem. Because billboards are typically a source of sexualising imagery, they would have particular potency in delivering an alternative message.

However, because marketing techniques and media advertising are often highly sophisticated, it can be difficult for 'one-shot' public campaigns to match their potency. For this reason, some degree of industry regulation is also required, for example in raising age limits on young models in sexualised contexts, including the fashion industry.

ii) Research priorities

i) Intervention studies

Currently in Australia we do not have enough information about the most effective strategies for ameliorating the effects of sexualization on children. A particularly valuable piece of research proposed by Dr. Louise Newman (Professor of Perinatal and Infant Psychiatry, University of Newcastle) would be an intervention study exploring the effectiveness of different approaches to teaching media literacy to primary school aged children (5-12 year olds). Media literacy training programs are viewed as one of the key strategies for combating the influence of sexualisation (APA, 2007). Young children are particularly vulnerable to the impact of media and marketing, because they have not yet developed the capacity to differentiate between what is real and what is not, and to critically evaluate what they are seeing.

It is necessary, therefore, that we develop good models for teaching young children how to read media images and how to interpret what they are seeing. Such an intervention study could examine the effectiveness of different approaches to teaching children skills for recognising when they are viewing untrue, exaggerated or unrealistic images. The aim of this intervention strategy would be to develop young children's resilience in 'reading' the media, as a way of inoculating them against the damaging effects on self-esteem and self-image of continual exposure to sexualised material.

ii) Longitudinal research

Another useful research focus would be to conduct some longitudinal research into the differing effects on children's mental health of exposure to sexualising material. The aim of this research would be to determine which age groups are most vulnerable to the negative effects of premature sexualisation. The information gleaned from such a study would enable better targeting of interventions to those groups who are most in need of protection. A cost effective way of conducting a longitudinal study such as this would be to piggyback on longitudinal research projects that are already underway, by posing additional questions to measure the age at which children are being exposed on sexualising material, and the impact of this exposure down the track.

The APA Task Force report contains a number of recommendations for future research, at varying levels of specificity (APA, 2007).

iii) Elaboration on recommendation 4. Television licensees should be required to submit a plan for the reduction of sexualised content directed at children over a specified time span.

Recommendation 4 addresses both the advertising material viewed on television as well as the content of programs targeted at young people.

Whilst it is not the intention to single out the television industry with this recommendation, we do believe that the industry shares the responsibility with the wider community to protect children and young people from the damaging effects on children's development that come from ongoing, cumulative exposure to sexualised material, be that in advertising material or programming. As highlighted in the recent controversy surrounding sexist and sexualised treatment of women in programs such as the AFL Footy Show, such attitudes enjoy widespread, largely unchecked exposure and acceptance in contemporary media. If the next generation is to have access to alternative discourses around gender roles, sexuality and body image, we argue that it is reasonable to take steps now to reduce the amount of sexualised content directed at children – both boys and girls.

Research on how media representations affect individuals' attitudes, values and behaviour is difficult to document because of the complexity of the issues involved, and there are many interacting factors that determine whether and how particular media exposure will affect an individual. Despite the complexities of the relationship, however, we argue that there are consistent trends within a large body of good research, as well as numerous converging psychological theories concerning mechanisms whereby people can be affected by sexualization (See APA 2007 for summary), which more than adequately justify a recommendation for the television industry to develop a plan to reduce sexualised content.

We also note that there is documented public concern about the sexualization of children via television content and programming (Rush & La Nauze, 2006). The industry has a responsibility as a corporate citizen to take account of and respond to the community's concern about the sexualised content in its programming and advertising, and to use its vast resources of skill and intelligence to produce exciting media material that does not rely on perpetuating stereotyped ideals of appearance, and the belief that a person's value comes from sexual appeal and behaviour.

We acknowledge that there is always a tension between freedom of speech and of choice, on the one hand, and regulation in the community's best interests on the other. We recommend that policy makers and regulatory bodies acknowledge that freedom of speech is not an absolute value, but must be balanced against other community values. There is a particular responsibility to protect children, who are still in the process of forming their world-view, from potentially harmful media.

How can the sexualised content be reduced?

There are several ways in which television licencees can be supported to begin reducing the amount of sexualised content on television:

- i) Educating producers about the research findings and theories regarding the impact of media sexualization on young people, especially girls.
- ii) Refining guidelines relevant to the sexualisation of children, in collaboration with experts (e.g., child psychology, paediatrics etc), regarding the potential harms caused by the premature sexualisation of children.
- iii) Becoming more open to consumer input into the content of television widely viewed by children, particularly in terms of the values and attitudes presented to children.

For further information about our submission please feel to contact Amanda Gordon or Dr Susie Burke.

Thank you once again for this opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry.

Yours sincerely,
Amanda Gordon
President
Australian Psychological Society

References

Australian Psychological Society (2000). Media representations and responsibilities. An APS discussion paper.

American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. (2007). Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. Retrieved from www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.html

Rush, E & La Nauze, A., (2006). *Letting children be children. Stopping the sexualisation of children in Australia*. The Australia Institute discussion paper, 93.