

Chapter 3

Effects of premature sexualisation on child development

3.1 Term of reference (b) requires the committee to:

...review the evidence on the short- and long-term effects of viewing or buying sexualising and objectifying images and products and their influence on cognitive functioning, physical and mental health, sexuality, attitudes and beliefs...

3.2 The committee emphasises that its analysis of this issue is based on recognition of the 'important distinction between premature sexualisation and sexual socialisation—that is, the formation of a healthy sexual identity'.¹

Nature of the evidence received

Cumulative versus direct-impact sexualisation

3.3 A number of experts made submissions or appeared at the hearings to give evidence about the effects on children of exposure to sexualising and/or objectifying images or products. Although some types of media were identified as particularly problematic,² the majority of submissions effectively concerned the cumulative impact of all the material and information to which children are exposed. SHine SA, for example, offered a typical observation on the general process or effect of media sexualisation of children:

TV, Internet, radio, music videos, music lyrics, movies, magazines, sports media, video-games and advertising increasingly portray sexualised images which promote narrow and unrealistic 'standards' of physical beauty and sexual interest...Females are more often than males portrayed in a sexual manner and objectified...Males are raised in a society that glorifies sexually aggressive masculinity and considers as the norm the degradation of women.³

3.4 Much of the evidence relevant to term of reference (b) thus did not distinguish between advertising and content produced for/directed at children and that which is produced for/directed at adults. Indeed, the majority was concerned with the latter. Narrow or stereotypical portrayals of body type, beauty and women were commonly identified as the major source of sexualisation of children. The focus of the committee's consideration of the effects of sexualisation was therefore on the cumulative effect of this indirect or 'background noise' of sexualising material, as

1 Dr Katherine Albury, *Committee Hansard*, 30 April 2008, p. 99.

2 These are discussed in detail in chapters 4 and 5.

3 SHine SA, *Submission 39*, pp 1-2.

opposed to children's advertising or content to which they are more directly exposed. Dr Lauren Rosewarne, for example, who appeared in a private capacity,⁴ presented research which concluded that outdoor advertising in Australia tends to present women 'in a very homogenous way as young, thin, white and idle';⁵ and a report by the Women's Forum Australia (WFA) on the female image in women's magazines found that there is a:

...continual depiction of women as hot, thin, sexy and primarily Anglo-Saxon.⁶

3.5 The submissions and evidence from the Australian Psychological Society (APS) explicitly relied on this broader conception or definition of sexualisation. Ms Amanda Gordon, President of the APS, explained:

...sexualisation, to a psychologist, also means that a person's only ascribed value would be their sexuality, their physical sex appeal, to the exclusion of all other characteristics.

When a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness with being sexy or when a person is sexually objectified rather than being seen as a person with a capacity for independent action and decision making and is made into a thing for others' sexual use, it is those aspects of sexualisation that equally concern the Australian Psychological Society...⁷

Specific research, studies and evidence

3.6 The committee encountered a lack of definitive evidence concerning the media and the effect of premature sexualisation. Many submitters relied on a single report of the American Psychological Association (APA), which concerns the sexualisation of girls, on which to base their claims about the media and the harmful effects of sexualisation on child health and development.

3.7 Despite the American focus of the APA report and the studies it surveys and references, the committee found its findings to be generally relevant and useful to the inquiry's terms of reference. Whilst narrow or stereotypical representations of women are not limited to the media, and can be found in many aspects of life, the report's findings may be cautiously applied to at least conclude that some level or preponderance of sexual material in advertising and media content has the potential to contribute to, and perhaps even cause, emotional and physical damage to children. On the other hand, it is recognised that the conclusions and recommendations able to be drawn from the report must be ultimately constrained by its methodological limitations. As Dr Albury noted:

4 The committee notes that Dr Rosewarne is a lecturer in policy studies at the University of Melbourne.

5 *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2008, p. 28.

6 Ms Melinda Tankard Reist, *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2008, p. 32.

7 *Committee Hansard*, 30 April 2008, p. 15.

...the authors acknowledge themselves that most of the research conducted on the question of whether there is a causal link between media representation and changes in behaviour has been conducted on women of university age and older...[The APA itself]...calls for more actual empirical research to be conducted with girls and so on.⁸

Anecdotal claims

3.8 The committee also considered anecdotal claims that were mainly provided in private submissions, but which also arose in evidence concerning professional and expert experiences. These can be characterised as observational, intuitive or perhaps common-sense claims about how certain material may affect children's mental and physical health and sexuality.

3.9 It is difficult for such evidence alone to form the basis of prescriptive or systemic changes to regulation of advertising and media. However, these observations, perspectives and experiences have legitimately informed the committee's deliberations and recommendations in later chapters on improving regulation to afford parents greater control and thus choice over the material to which their children are exposed.

Parent's perspectives

3.10 Over a third of private submitters identified themselves as parents or grandparents concerned that their children and grandchildren are being subject to sexualisation by the media. A frequently expressed sentiment in private submissions received from parents and others was concern over the loss of childhood innocence due to premature sexualisation:

Childhood is a time of joy and innocence, and this should be an absolute right for all our children. They become adults soon enough, and childhood is a time to be cherished.⁹

3.11 Submitters frequently equated 'innocence' with a form of right allowing children to grow up free of adult concerns and to mature at their own pace:

[Young people]...have the right of innocence and should be allowed to mature at their own rate and not forced upon [sic] by media outlets, advertisers or designers.¹⁰

8 *Committee Hansard*, 30 April 2008, p. 104.

9 Jacinta and Nathan Peterson and Fitzpatrick [sic], *Submission 1(a)*. See also Denise den-Bakker, *Submission 24*, p. 1; Mary Carolan, *Submission 52*, p. 1; Jane and Chris Clark, *Submission 70*, p. 1.

10 Narelle Cullen, *Submission 1(a)*. See also Yvonne Dunse, *Submission 1(a)*; Kyla and Dan Miller, *Submission 23*, p. 1; Kym Keady, *Submission 53*, p. 1.

3.12 Private submissions generally assumed that premature sexualisation of children exposes children to the risk of 'psychological damage'¹¹ and emotional, developmental and physical or sexual harm.¹² A typical comment was:

You only need to look at the 13-23yrs age group now to see what a damning effect the last 10 yrs of media's sexual influences have done. They are sexually out of control and seem to have no boundaries...I'm dreading the outcome in another 10 yrs.¹³

3.13 At least one submission pointed to a lack of consensus on the harmful effects of sexualisation of children, but suggested nevertheless that '[the effects] are not likely to be positive'.¹⁴

3.14 Objectification of women and individuals was raised as an issue of great concern to many private submitters, who felt that the abundance of sexual images and messages in the media encourages a view of women as sexual objects to be valued primarily for their appearance and sexual availability or willingness. Many writers, either implicitly or explicitly, drew a comparison with, or connection between, contemporary media standards and pornography.¹⁵

3.15 Low self esteem and problems with self image and emotional development were widely thought to be the result of premature sexualisation.¹⁶ Increasing rates of eating disorders in both girls and boys were regularly cited as being due to the sexualisation of children, which was said to encourage children to consider weight and body image more generally as important.¹⁷

3.16 The decreasing age of children participating in sexual activity, as well as promiscuity more generally, were often raised in private submissions.¹⁸

11 Julie, Gordon, Jordon, Erin and Elyse Macpherson, *Submission 1(a)*. See also Mary Carolan, *Submission 52*, p. 1; Trevor Thomas and Jude Powell Thomas, *Submission 79*, p. 2; Moira Kirkwood, *Submission 135*, p. 1.

12 Cath Nohlmans, *Submission 42*, p. 1.

13 Jeynelle Grimshaw-Hughes, *Submission 1(a)*. See also Peter Dolan, *Submission 71*, p. 1.

14 Graham and Carol Phillips, *Submission 21*, p. 1. See also Ian Bell, *Submission 59*, p. 1.

15 Name withheld, *Submission 40*, p. 1. See also Leanne Nicholson, *Submission 47*, p. 1.

16 Leanne Nicholson, *Submission 47*, p. 1. See also Pamela Andreallo, *Submission 61*, p. 1; Grace Judd, *Submission 64*, p. 1; Jill Ireland, *Submission 74*, p. 1; Matthew Smith, *Submission 81*, p. 1; Dr Philip Freier, *Submission 97*, p. 1; Lisa Gaston, *Submission 99*, pp 1-2.

17 Helen Rubin, *Submission 1(a)*.

18 Nicole T G Bristow, *Submission 32*, p. 1. See also Grace Judd, *Submission 64*, p. 1; Dr Clare Boothroyd, *Submission 122*, p. 1; Gillian Sofatzis, *Submission 125*, p. 1.

Expert perspectives

3.17 In clinical or scientific terms, the committee observes that there is a lack of evidence of the effect of early exposure to sexual themes and images on children's development and that it is, consequently, not well understood. Despite the relatively broad range of research cited or alluded to, there is no definitive understanding of how child development is affected by early exposure to sexual imagery and concepts, and particularly its influence and impact on sexual development. There were no studies that specifically examined the sexualising impact of the media on children put before the committee.

3.18 Professor Catharine Lumby, Director, Journalism and Media Research Centre, University of New South Wales, and Dr Katherine Albury, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Journalism and Media Research Centre, University of New South Wales, submitted that research is needed into the effects of children's undoubtedly higher levels of exposure to media in all its forms:

It is true that children and teenagers are more likely to come into contact with media material designed for adults, via the internet as well as numerous popular media products. It is also true that there is a growing volume of popular media material designed with children as well as teenagers in mind. There is a real need for broad, evidence based research, which examines how children and young people understand this material.¹⁹

3.19 Dr Devora Lieberman, President, Sexual Health and Family Planning Australia (SHFPA), agreed that more Australian research is needed.²⁰ Ms Gordon commented on the type of research needed in order to better inform understanding of children:

In Australia we lack significant longitudinal studies about a whole range of things that would help to inform us what is legitimate in the way we look at children. Starting by understanding how a nine-year-old now is different from a nine-year-old 20 years ago and finding out more about nine-year-olds in 10 years time would be extremely useful in informing us about educational policy et cetera.²¹

3.20 Evidence considered by the committee makes it clear that children begin developing a gender identity very early, that the totality of their social environment has a strong effect in shaping their future attitudes and behaviours, and that they learn social behaviour by observing adults and engaging in extensive mimicry of adults and social situations. However, the extent to which media images and messages influence children's behaviour has not been established. What research has been done tends to indicate that children are not 'empty vessels' who simply accept what they see portrayed in the media, but are active consumers who examine and critique what they

19 *Submission 146*, p. 3.

20 *Committee Hansard*, 30 April 2008, p. 4.

21 *Committee Hansard*, 30 April 2008, p. 17.

see based on what they have learned so far.²² Professor Lumby and Dr Albury pointed to:

...[a] growing body of international research suggesting that young people make sense of the media in very different and diverse ways. Many young people access existing media in ways that may assist the formation of healthy sexual identities, including seeking factual information on sex and relationships from sex advisers and problem pages in magazines...²³

3.21 Parental guidance and attitude appear to be major factors of influence in the framework children use to interpret media. Professor Lumby and Dr Albury observed:

Recent British research indicates that parents can ‘model’ or reinforce particular responses to sexual material, and hence particular sexual identities for their children. The media do not have an autonomous ability to either sexually corrupt children or to sexually ‘liberate’ them.²⁴

3.22 In one UK study of children's attitudes and reactions to contemporary media, the authors found that children were able to identify what was appropriate for them to be viewing and interpreted media images and situations in ways appropriate to their age:

Children are not the naive or incompetent consumers they are frequently assumed to be. They use a range of critical skills and perspectives when interpreting sexual content; and this develops both with age and with their experience with the media...the children's response to sexual imagery in advertising or music videos displayed a well-developed understanding of how such images are constructed and manipulated.²⁵

3.23 The same study found that, beginning at a relatively early age, children learn how to process and interpret media images from their parents; it also found that children do not readily understand sexual connotations and references. It concluded that the ability of the media to instil or create sexual attitudes may be limited by the need for its messages to fit into a framework of existing knowledge that is usually only gained gradually from a variety of sources.²⁶ Some evidence to the inquiry appeared to support this view. For example, Ms Jennifer Walsh, Education Officer, Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS), advised:

...we are...seeing with primary school children in relation to the sexualisation of children...increasing pressure to present themselves in a sexual way without the mature understanding that goes with that...[More]

22 APA, *Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls*, 2007, p. 4.

23 *Committee Hansard*, 30 April 2008, p. 99.

24 *Submission 146*, p. 3.

25 David Buckingham and Sara Bragg, *Young People, sex and the media: the facts of life?*, 2003, p. 238.

26 *Ibid* p.125.

and more girls [are] feeling that they have to present themselves in a sexually attractive way, finding themselves in situations that they are not mature enough to handle and failing to develop those other aspects of themselves that childhood should allow them to develop normally.²⁷

3.24 Ms Gordon also commented on this issue:

Developmental psychologists have done a lot of research in this area and one of the problems is that many children can understand at a cognitive level, but it is very confusing at an emotional level because they are not yet ready to be sexual, to have those sexual messages.²⁸

3.25 The UK study found that morality was also a major factor in the way children interpret the media. When viewing material with sexual themes children often exhibited concern for children younger than themselves; even very young children dismissed such material as 'rude':²⁹

Children made judgements about sex, not in the abstract but in the context of 'love and relationships'. They were very concerned about the decency or propriety of sexual behaviour or sexual images, particularly in public settings...[There] was very little evidence that the children were being morally corrupted, or led towards a kind of amoral cynicism, by the media. Indeed, they often appeared more 'moralistic' (and in some cases, more 'prudish') than many adults.³⁰

3.26 The committee notes that children's emotional and physical development appears both complex and nuanced, based as it is on the totality of their experience, the significant influence of parents and their own interpretation of media and messages to which they are exposed. However, equally, the committee observes that modern media comprises a significant proportion of children's experience. So too, the media shapes and influences adult role models, and broadly expresses and reflects social attitudes and values which are no doubt potentially powerful factors within the totality of a child's experience of the world and society.

3.27 There is, clearly, a need for more research into these complex interactions. However the conduct of research into the attitudes of, and influences on, children, particularly young children does raise serious ethical and practical issues. Any inquiry requiring the study of the influences on children would, of necessity, require a high degree of cooperation from parents and intrude into the details of family life, raising significant privacy questions.

27 *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2008, p. 83.

28 *Committee Hansard*, 30 April 2008, p. 16.

29 Above n 24, p. 111.

30 *Ibid* p. 240.

3.28 Also of concern is the problem, identified in evidence to the committee, that such a study might itself be disturbing and contribute to the process of sexualisation, particularly in younger age groups:

...it is very difficult to ask [children] about aberrant behaviour of any kind because, of course, there are severe levels of anxiety about what children are asked and how destructive to their innocence even that process might be.³¹

3.29 Thus in making this recommendation the committee recognises that it is contingent on it being possible to overcome these problems.

Recommendation 2

3.30 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth through the National Health and Medical Research Council or other appropriate body commission a major longitudinal study into the effects of premature and inappropriate sexualisation of children.

Harms associated with sexualising and objectifying images

Body image and self-esteem

3.31 The committee received a considerable amount of evidence claiming that there is:

...[a] connection between the inappropriate sexualising of children and measurable harm, such as body image dissatisfaction, eating disorders, low self-esteem, poorer academic performance, depression and anxiety.³²

3.32 The WFA, citing the APA report on the sexualisation of girls, submitted:

...exposure to ideals of sexual attractiveness contributes to body image dissatisfaction and eating disorders...[Sexualisation] was linked with three of the most common mental health problems in girls and women: eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression or depressed mood.³³

3.33 Ms Melinda Tankard Reist, Director, WFA, offered the following statistics on rates of eating disorders amongst Australian girls:

...we know that one in 100 adolescent girls in Australia develops anorexia, which is the third most common chronic illness for adolescent girls in Australia and the most fatal of all psychiatric illnesses. We know that one in five are bulimic...A study published late last year found that one in five girls aged 12 and 13 regularly uses fasting and vomiting to lose weight and

31 Professor Anne Mitchell, *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2008, p. 84.

32 Ms Melinda Tankard Reist, *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2008, p. 27.

33 *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2008, p. 39; see also SHIne SA, *Submission 39*, p. 2.

that fasting was the most widely practised diet technique for girls aged 12 to 19.³⁴

3.34 WFA believed that this was connected to the 'overemphasis of hyper-sexualised imagery of girls and women that makes young women feel particularly bad about themselves'.³⁵

3.35 Ms Gordon reported that, in her experience as a practising psychologist, she had observed increasingly younger children presenting with body-image and self-esteem disorders, which she felt was the consequences of their 'overt sexualisation':

I see girls younger and younger becoming depressed. We see girls younger and younger being hospitalised with eating disorders and with concerns about their body and their self-esteem.³⁶

3.36 Professor Elizabeth Handsley, Vice President, Australian Council on Children and the Media (ACCM), explained that, apart from the greater general exposure of children to sexual imagery, ACCM was most concerned about the potential harms arising from 'how children are represented to themselves'. She explained:

We look around and we see images of children that are sexualised, not in the sense that they make children into sexual objects in the normal sense, but more that they associate children with the trappings of adult sexuality. So they do not necessarily make children sexual objects but they engender a self-image within children that is associated with sexual objectification.³⁷

Sexual behaviour

3.37 SHine SA submitted that sexualisation of children also 'works against healthy behaviours, including 'decision making around personal safety in girls and boys'. This is because the media:

...reinforces the concept that "risky people and risky behaviours" are the cause of sexual health issues such as rape, abortion and sexually transmitted infections among teenage girls (and younger) and not lack of appropriate policy.³⁸

3.38 Ms Kaisu Vartto, Chief Executive Officer, SHine SA, indicated that sexualisation of children in the media was a likely factor in the relatively low average age of first sexual intercourse in Australia:

In Australia, the average age of first sexual intercourse is 16, whereas in countries like Scandinavia and in countries in Western Europe it is 18.

34 *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2008, p. 40.

35 *Ibid.*

36 *Committee Hansard*, 30 April 2008, p. 19.

37 *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2008, p. 93.

38 *Submission 39*, p. 2.

Why? What is actually influencing that? One of the factors, according to research, is the sexualisation of children in the media and portraying sex as being able to sell everything.³⁹

3.39 This view was supported by the ARCSHS. The ARCSHS conducts a five-yearly regular survey into the 'sexual health, behaviour, attitudes and knowledge of young people'. Results for the 2003 survey confirmed that young people are becoming sexually active on average at age 16. They are also engaging in a wider range of sexual practices for a longer period until marriage.⁴⁰

3.40 An anecdotal example of changes in the sexual behaviour and attitudes of young people was given by Professor Anne Mitchell, Director, Community Liaison and Education Unit, ARCSHS, who advised that young people were thought to be more often engaging in oral sex as a form of 'casual foreplay'. This view was supported by the 2003 ARCSHS survey, which found that young people were less inclined to view oral sex as sex per se.⁴¹

3.41 In addition, Ms Walsh indicated that a high number of boys and girls are reporting having had sex that they regret:

Another thing that I would describe as aberrant is the number of kids who have had sex that they regret...They are describing it also as 'unwanted sex'. That is a very broad term, but they are generally saying that it is sex they had while they were drunk, which they definitely regretted and which they felt their partner had pressured them into.⁴²

3.42 The committee heard that the sexual behaviour of Australian children was also resulting in increased rates of sexually transmitted infections, STIs. Ms Ann Brassil, Chief Executive Officer, Family Planning NSW (FPNSW) advised:

STI rates, particularly in younger children, have been increasing. We have had a massive increase in cases of chlamydia, which is a sexually transmitted infection.⁴³

Potential benefits of media

3.43 The committee notes that evidence was offered of the potential for media to deliver outcomes, material and/or messages that may offer children positive avenues of personal development or otherwise act to counter negative and/or sexualising content. Dr Sally Cockburn, who appeared before the committee in a private capacity, observed:

39 *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2008, p. 69.

40 Professor Anne Mitchell, *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2008, p. 81.

41 *Ibid* p. 85.

42 *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2008, p. 85.

43 *Committee Hansard*, 30 April 2008, p. 5.

...only a couple of weeks ago...[there was] the 14-year-old girl who was going to be the face of the Sydney fashion show. That is...a very good example of the media, in a positive way. The news came out at nine o'clock in the morning. By three o'clock that afternoon the story was dead because...the Sydney fashion show agreed to drop [her]...[That] is an example of where the media actually did what you and I would probably want to have seen happen.⁴⁴

3.44 Dr Albury observed that media offers the potential for children to both explore and express ideas connected to their sexual development:

Media and popular culture also offer safe avenues for young people to explore fantasies—for example, in the form of crushes on celebrities—and to conceptually practise sexual and romantic behaviour that they may not feel ready for in real life. In addition, many young people are not simply media consumers. Many generate media themselves and are able to create alternative images which reflect their exploration of issues such as sexuality, body image, self-esteem and emotional relationships.⁴⁵

3.45 The actual and potential benefits of television to children's social, emotional and intellectual development were the subject of a number of submissions. Ms Gordon acknowledged that, while there appears to be a correlation between media and sexualisation of children, there is insufficient evidence to say that television is responsible for the sexualisation of children.⁴⁶

3.46 The Australian Children's Television Foundation submitted that:

...because of its ubiquity and influence, television is a powerful agent of socialisation'.⁴⁷

3.47 Based on the preceding analysis and discussion, the committee observes that, although children today are exposed to a multitude of messages and influences via the media, and particularly material that is sexual in theme or nature, the effect of this on their emotional, physical and sexual development is not well understood from a scientific or clinical perspective.

3.48 The committee received no evidence demonstrating direct causal links between exposure to sexual or objectifying images and products, although one study on adult women found a correlation between certain self- and body-image disorders and the prevalence of sexualising and objectifying imagery. There is also clearly a strong correlation between the increase in sexual imagery and the presentation of stereotyped images of young women, both as to their appearance and their social

44 *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2008, p. 58.

45 *Committee Hansard*, 30 April 2008, p. 100.

46 *Committee Hansard*, 30 April 2008, p. 22.

47 *Submission 55*, p. 1.

roles, and the growing incidence of eating and other disorders related to body image and earlier participation in sexual activity.

3.49 The lack of research demonstrating the effects of premature sexualisation on children was contrasted by the anecdotal claims, contained in many private submissions, which suggested that many people believe exposure to sexual imagery in the media is harmful to children's development.

3.50 Professor Handsley acknowledged the uncertain state of knowledge on the effects of the media on children's development, but argued for the committee to adopt a precautionary approach on the basis that any potential for harm to children justifies a prescriptive or interventionist response:

...we might never know for sure exactly what affects children in what way. But, at the very least, we can say there is some evidence that it is likely that these sorts of images and messages are harmful to children in the long term...

If we wait until there is absolute 100 per cent proof and nobody can possibly argue anymore that there is no harm to children, the amount of harm that could possibly be done to children in the meantime is immeasurable. So this is a clear example of a situation where a precautionary principle needs to be applied in favour of protecting children from things that are harmful.⁴⁸

3.51 The committee acknowledges the uncertain state of the evidence but supports the view of Professor Handsley that a precautionary approach is justified. In the following chapters the committee makes a number of recommendations to tighten the regulation of media with regard to advertising and content directed at children.

48 *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2008, p. 97.