

Family First

Additional Comments

Inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment

The Committee found significant community concern about the sexualisation of children. From parents, through to community groups, non-government organisations and expert bodies, there was agreement, backed by thorough research and evidence, that sexualisation of children is excessive, harmful, and must be addressed.

The Committee report acknowledges much of this concern. It states:

Regulation of children's advertising is also undermined by the strongly sexual character of all-pervasive adult advertising and media. Much of the evidence put to the inquiry confirms this analysis. Submitters and witnesses continually expressed concern about children's exposure to sexual and objectifying images in the media and society more broadly.¹

In addition, the Committee acknowledges that commercial interests commonly seek to test the boundaries of regulations and standards in order to seek advantage in the market. For this reason, recommendations made in later chapters seek to improve regulatory complaints systems to ensure that parents and other individuals are able to contribute to the setting and application of the prevailing community standards by which media standards are judged.²

Advertising which targets children and presents inappropriately sexualised images helps contribute, cumulatively, to creating a climate which can lead to the abuse of children. This exploitative behaviour is having a worrying impact on the health and wellbeing of children. The sexualisation of children takes away their childhood and makes them vulnerable to exploitation in various forms.

Family First is concerned that the report has not adequately reflected these concerns and not provided recommendations strong enough to address them. While the Committee says a “precautionary approach” is justified³, it should have taken a tougher stand.

Family First is disappointed the views of Professor Catharine Lumby and Professor Alan McKee were prominent in the report. Professors Lumby and McKee are authors

1 Paragraph 2.10

2 Paragraph 2.17

3 Paragraph 3.48

of *The Porn Report*. They questioned concern about sexualisation and characterised community concern as 'moral panic'.⁴ But the Committee also heard from other experts that the sexualisation of children is a real problem.

Amanda Gordon, President of the Australian Psychological Society stated:

I am concerned because I see in my practice what I believe are the consequences of some of this overt sexualisation of girls. 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. We have heard the evidence about girls younger and younger being engaged in sexual intercourse, before they can possibly have a sensible definition of themselves as whole people, as real human beings, with the ability to make decisions and to understand what it means to say yes or no.⁵

The Australian Childhood Foundation also gave evidence that:

There is ample evidence of sexualised messages being presented to Australian children. Over the past two years, the Foundation has identified and publicly commented on advertising campaigns which have positioned children and young people in a sexualised fashion and promoted products which are associated with sexualised content to children ... it is our view that a contributing factor to the genesis of problem sexual behaviour is the increasing volume of sexualised imagery and themes available in popular culture and accessible to children.⁶

It is clear that a problem exists and should be addressed by the government and by other parts of the community.

Advertising Standards Board

Family First is extremely disappointed - as will be those who have provided evidence of the many failures of the Advertising Standards Board (ASB) - that while recommending a more streamlined complaints system, the Committee designates this task to the ASB, along with Free TV Australia.

Both the ASB and Free TV Australia are industry bodies established by and representing advertisers and commercial broadcasters. Both industries have been reluctant to address the issue of sexualisation.

What is clearly required is an independent complaints handling mechanism, outside the industry body. The Committee report has not kept faith with the public, many of

4 Professor McKee, Committee Hansard, 30 April 2008, page 106; submission 146

5 Ms Amanda Gordon, Committee Hansard, 30 April 2008, page 19

6 Australian Childhood Foundation, submission 109

whom have complained about the ASB, by giving this responsibility to the very body which has come in for so much criticism.

As Dr Lauren Rosewarne, manager of the Centre for Public Policy at the University of Melbourne told the Committee:

My research identifies a series of problems with the operations of the board which contribute to the continual display of sexualised outdoor advertising images, as well as the continual dismissal of complaints about these ads. These problems include the voluntary nature of the participation of advertising agencies, the board's low profile, the lack of pre-vetting of advertisements, the lack of media monitoring, the weak code of ethics, the flawed complaints procedure, the flawed notion of community standards, inappropriate board composition, regulatory capture, flawed funding mechanisms, and the board's inability to punish recalcitrant advertisers.⁷

A clear case has been established for additional regulation. A body such as the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) should be given a more active role in receiving complaints and addressing the failure of industry self regulation.

Penalties and enforcement powers

Family First is disappointed that the Committee report did not see fit to recommend penalties or greater enforcement powers for advertisers who are found to be in breach of advertising codes.

The report states that compliance rates are "excellent".⁸ However this fails to take into account the fact that by the time the complaint has gone through the process, the ad campaign has often finished, as pointed out by Dr Rosewarne, in her evidence to the Committee.⁹

Advertising Code

Family First is disappointed the Committee report has not taken on board numerous recommendations from concerned organisations for amendments to the Australian Association of National Advertisers' (AANA) Code of Ethics. The Code must be amended to incorporate and implement the concept of sexualisation, so that problematic advertising that can harm young people is able to be identified and stopped.

Amendments to the Code are crucial to ensuring industry is able to effectively address the problem and to demonstrate good faith participation in self regulation. Without

7 Dr Rosewarne, Committee Hansard, 29 April 2008, page 29

8 Paragraph 5.52

9 Dr Rosewarne, Committee Hansard, 29 April 2008, page 31

such amendments the industry can continue to duck responsibility by refusing to acknowledge the extent of the problem.

The ASB should be required to focus on taking complaints seriously and apply an improved Code. Regular research such as that completed last year on community attitudes to ASB decisions should continue. However, the ASB must be committed to adjusting its decision making as a result of this research and also as a result of complaints.

Research in 2007 found the community indicated strong levels of dissatisfaction with the ASB's handling of matters of sexual content. Despite this, and despite admitting receipt of a very large number of complaints about the Nandos pole dancing ad, for example, the ASB continues to defend its decision. So far there has been only a minimal change in the ASB's treatment of sexual content or possible sexualising impacts.

Magazines

The Committee recommends that publishers may wish to consider a degree of self-regulation by providing some reader advice on their covers indicating the presence of material that may be inappropriate for children. This is an improvement, but it does not go far enough as it avoids addressing inappropriate content in magazines marketed to children.

The report quotes a response to a question on notice from Pacific Magazines and ACP, publishers of Dolly, who state:

[In general the]...limited number of complaints [received] indicates that the vast majority of consumers have no concerns around their current ability to choose age-appropriate publications.¹⁰

The Committee should have asked how many pre-teen girls would even consider writing to publishers of magazines questioning inappropriate content for their age level. Quoting these comments shows a misunderstanding of the culture of childhood and adolescence.

Music videos

Family First supports recommendation 3 calling for broadcasters to "review" music video classification, but would prefer the recommendation was stronger. Broadcasters have consistently demonstrated a reluctance to take action to protect children from the sexualising impacts and the strong sexual themes and messages in music videos.

Proper classification of music videos requires broadcasters to show some understanding of the likely effects on children and young adolescents.

10 Paragraph 4.98

Critical media literacy skills

A number of submissions called for programs to provide critical media literacy skills to enable students to assess advertising and media. They also wanted to see positive body image programs established in schools. The recommendation for a 'comprehensive sexual health and relationship education program' does not adequately capture this. The case has not been established that sex education is the best way to address the issue of premature sexualisation.

Proposals for greater implementation of comprehensive sex education programs are misplaced in this inquiry.

Conclusion

This Committee report has not put forward the recommendations necessary to address the issue of sexualisation of children, which authorities worldwide have recognised as causing exploitation, harm and violence to children and young people. The better recommendations are not expressed strongly enough to make them effective. The industry has gotten off lightly.

The evidence for harm is now on the public record and Family First will continue to work to bring about the change needed in the long run.

Senator Steve Fielding
Family First Leader

