

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: Inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment.

18 April 2008

Dear Sir/Madam,

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment. Psychologists and other mental health professionals have become increasingly concerned about the prevalence of sexualised material in all forms of media in Australia. This, in conjunction with clinical and anecdotal reports of increasing rates of hospitalisation for eating disorders at younger ages, and increasing rates of disturbed eating behaviour and body image in primary school aged children, means that an inquiry is well due.

This brief submission from the Australian Psychological Society focuses on b) and c) of the terms of references of the inquiry: the short and long term effects of exposure to sexualising images and themes on the emotional, psychological, cognitive and physical wellbeing of children, young people, and adults; and strategies to prevent and/or reduce the sexualisation of children in the media, and the effectiveness of different approaches in ameliorating its effects.

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

Thank you once again for this opportunity

Yours sincerely,
Amanda Gordon
President
Australian Psychological Society

**Submission to the Inquiry into the
sexualisation of children in contemporary
media**

Senate Standing Committee on Environment,
Communication and the Arts

April 2008

**APS contact:
Amanda Gordon, President**

This submission was prepared for the Australian Psychological Society by Susie
Burke, Heather Gridley and Hoa Pham.

Copyright © The Australian Psychological Society Ltd
ABN 23 000 543 788

The Australian Psychological Society Ltd, Level 11, De Bono Centre, 257 Collins Street, Melbourne VIC 3000
Phone +61 3 8662 3300; Fax +66 3 9663 6177; Email contactus@psychology.org.au; Web www.psychology.org.au

About the Australian Psychological Society

The APS is the premier professional association for psychologists in Australia, representing over 16,000 members. Psychology is a discipline that systematically addresses the many facets of human experience and functioning at individual, family and societal levels. Psychology covers many highly specialised areas, but all psychologists share foundational training in human development and the constructs of healthy functioning. Psychologists frequently work in a multidisciplinary context with other health professionals, including GPs, to support wellbeing and to address mental health concerns. Given this context, it is appropriate that the APS should offer a thoughtful contribution to the inquiry into the sexualisation of children.

Effects of sexualising material

There has been a trend over the last decade towards the increased use of sexualised images of children and early adolescents in all forms of media and advertising. There are two main problems: direct and indirect sexualisation of children, particularly girls. Direct sexualisation of children occurs when children are presented in advertising and magazines in ways that are modelled on sexy adults. Children are dressed in clothing and posed in ways designed to draw attention to adult sexual features that the children do not yet possess. Less obvious sexualisation of children occurs through the ubiquitous sexualised advertising and popular culture targeted at adults.

The values implicit in sexualised images are that physical appearance and beauty are intrinsic to self esteem and social worth, and that sexual attractiveness is a part of childhood experience. According to the APA task force on the sexualisation of girls (APA 2007), sexualisation occurs when:

- a person's only ascribed value comes from his or her sexual appeal and behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics;
- a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy;
- a person is sexually objectified, and rather than being seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making, is made into a thing for others' sexual use;
- sexuality is inappropriately and prematurely imposed upon a person such as a child.

All forms of media provide examples of sexualised images, mainly of girls and women. These images are not just restricted to advertising, but include most other forms of media – television, music, music lyrics, movies, sport, video games and the internet.

Although there is little research evidence from Australian samples, the American Psychological Association convened a task force on the sexualization of girls in 2007 that evaluated overseas evidence suggesting that sexualisation has negative consequences for girls and the rest of society. According to the APA report, the cumulative exposure of children and young people to sexualised images and themes has negative effects in many areas. We refer the inquiry to the full report:

www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.html and summarise the main findings below:

Cognitive effects

Exposure to an array of sexualising messages can lead girls to think of themselves in objectified terms ('self-objectification'). This is a process in which girls learn to see and think of their bodies as objects of others' desire, to be looked at and evaluated for its appearance. Self-objectification has been found to reduce young women's ability to concentrate and focus their attention, thus leading to impaired performance on mental activities.

Information processing models predict that not all individuals will be equally affected by what they view, and this has been found to be so. Scripts are more likely to be encoded and enacted when the material viewed is consistent with experiences encountered by individuals in their environment. For example, viewed violence is more likely to influence those who are already vulnerable because they live in environments (homes, schools, neighbourhoods) which are characterised by similar behaviour.

Depression, self-esteem and eating disorders

Research 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.

Vulnerable young people may be influenced by media representation of the narrow thin ideal to develop body image disturbances and eating disorders. Sexualisation and objectification have been found to undermine confidence in and comfort with one's own body, and can lead to a range of negative emotional consequences, like anxiety, shame and inadequacy.

Sexual development

Sexualised images of children are not in keeping with the rights of children to develop as sexual beings within a developmentally appropriate timeframe. Adolescent girls who engage in self-objectification have been found to have diminished sexual health, including reduced sexual assertiveness and a decrease in protective behaviours. Frequent exposure to narrow ideals of attractiveness is associated with unrealistic and/or negative expectations concerning sexuality, and may lead to sexual problems in adulthood.

Identity development: attitudes and beliefs

Sexualised advertising and marketing sends a message that what's important is not what you think or do or care about, but what you look like. These messages impact on how children develop their understanding about their place in the world outside the immediate family. It also affects how girls conceptualise femininity and sexuality, where appearance and physical attractiveness is seen as central to women's value, and can lead to the endorsement of narrow stereotypes of gender roles and of sexual stereotypes that depict women as sexual objects.

Other effects

More general societal effects may include an increase in sexism, fewer girls pursuing careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, the idealisation of youth, increased rates of sexual harassment and sexual violence, and negative impacts on how men regard women, and on their ability to form and maintain intimate relationships with women. A related example is the common co-occurrence of aggression and sex in various media, where aggressive sexuality is presented as a sign of manliness, and women are often treated as property and/or as promiscuous. Research shows effects of viewing sexual aggression on men's attitudes (Linz, Donnerstien & Adams, 1989; Zillman & Weaver, 1989), with increasing moral disengagement, and reduction of self-censure for their own acts of aggressive sexuality. While this research refers to adult images, it is also the case that paedophiles frequently justify their behaviour on the basis of children's 'seductiveness'. As Bandura (1990) noted, these effects are likely to be gradual and insidious, and therefore very difficult to research in an ethical manner. Policy makers cannot hope to base decisions on 'hard' empirical research data in this area, but rather on trends and patterns which are consistent with psychological theory.

Other sexualising contributions additional to media effects.

In addition to the concerns about the impact of media on the sexualisation of children, there are broader socio-cultural influences that also have a sexualising effect. These include products that sexualise girls (products that promote images of sexy, sexualised people to children include clothing, make-up, dolls (e.g., Bratz dolls)), and the influences of girls' interpersonal relationships with parents, teachers and peers, who can also support and promote sexualising messages.

Whilst we recognise that it is beyond the scope of the current inquiry to examine the effects of these other socio-cultural influences, they are important to keep in mind when developing strategies to reduce the harm of sexualization. Successful strategies are those that are able to address the many ways in which culture delivers sexualising and objectifying messages.

Effectiveness of strategies to reduce or prevent the proliferation of sexualised images

A number of strategies are necessary to counteract the influence of sexualised material, ranging from better regulation of all forms of the media (Rush & La Nauze, 2006), to strategies to help girls (and boys) challenge the narrow sexualised views of women that are presented to them.

Media regulation

The media have an important role to play in monitoring the images promoted to young women. Ultimately it is media outlets that gain profits from sexualising images of young girls. The media is able to

influence the attitudes of young people and can play a prosocial role in promoting positive role models for young girls, as shown by 'Faking It', a publication released by Women's Forum Australia.

. While it is undoubtedly advantageous for parents to monitor and control their children's viewing patterns, and we would support vigorous public education campaigns to encourage this, it is highly unlikely that such a campaign will ever overcome the problem of young people's exposure to sexualised images for as long as they remain available. As suggested by The Australia Institute it is not only the responsibility of parents to monitor what their children consume in the media. Billboard advertising and the proliferation of highly sexualised messages in public places means that the media itself needs regulation in order to reduce the exposure of young people to these images. We note that only 46% of parents of teenage boys surveyed in Australian Broadcasting Tribunal inquiry (1990) commented on their children's viewing, and only 33% actually intervened to stop them viewing programs they deemed unsuitable. Even with public education, many children and adolescents can be expected to continue to engage with the media without supervision - which makes regulation of what is on offer even more important.

For a fuller discussion on the effects of the media in general, we refer the Inquiry to an earlier paper published by the Australian Psychological Society (2000), on Media Representations and Responsibilities. This paper reviews psychological research on the social impact of the media, concentrating on television as it is the most studied medium. It focuses on aspects of the media that have raised concern, including:

- violence in children's media
- advertising directed at children
- representations of crime
- the portrayal of ethnic diversity and conflict

Recommendations for responding to these issues aim to minimise the negative effects that have been identified, and maximise the positive potential of the media.

That paper is available at http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/position_paper/media/

Parents

While we acknowledge that it is not solely parents' responsibility to monitor media exposure, there is evidence that the effects on children of what they view are lessened if an adult is present who discusses the program's content with the child (Singer, Singer, Desmond, Hirsch & Nicol, 1988). Such discussion presumably prevents the uncritical adoption of scripts from the viewed material. Parents and other family members can also help make sexualisation visible by discussing other cultural messages with girls.

Parents can also find ways of counteracting sexualising messages with children by teaching girls to value themselves for who they are, rather than how they look. Similarly, boys can be taught to value girls as friends, sisters, and girlfriends, rather than as sexual objects. The Australian Psychological Society recently released a tip sheet for parents (APS, 2008) suggesting ways that parents can help girls question their choices, educate their children, encourage them to participate in activities that emphasise skills and abilities over physical appearance, and help them to find healthy role models. We enclose that tipsheet for your information.

Schools

The APA report on the sexualisation of girls outlines a number of positive alternatives and approaches to counteracting the influence of sexualization, and the relative effectiveness of some of these approaches. Effective strategies include media literacy programs (reported to have a positive effect on body image concerns), promotion of athletics and other extracurricular activities, and comprehensive sex education.

Initiatives by young people

Another approach reviewed by the APA (2007) was that of working directly with girls to become activists who speak out and develop their own alternatives (e.g., through alternative media like 'zines', blogs), through activism, and through girl empowerment groups.

Recommendations

On the basis of the evidence cited above, we make the following recommendations:

1. Existing standards for classification should be tightened so as to reduce admissible levels of sexualised content within existing categories relating to children.
2. More explicit and non-abbreviated statements of the classification of each program or film should be screened before each viewing. TV guides and advertisements should give greater prominence to classifications.
3. A nationwide public education and publicity campaign should be undertaken to encourage parents
 - (a) to monitor their children's viewing of TV, film and video,
 - (b) to discuss viewed material with their children,
 - (c) to encourage critical viewing skills, and
 - (d) to increase their awareness of rating systems.
4. Television licensees should be required to submit a plan for the reduction of sexualised content directed at children over a specified time span.
5. There should be systematic monitoring of sexualised content, with dissemination of results of such monitoring to the public and industry.
6. Media education for all children in schools should be encouraged and supported, so as to establish critical viewing skills and habits, to decrease the likelihood that sexualised scripts will be encoded, and to empower young people to become active rather than passive consumers of media.
7. No government support should be available for the production of films and programs that sexualise children. On the other hand, support should be available for films with prosocial and age-appropriate themes and content.
8. The media industry, especially the TV industry, should demonstrate a stronger commitment to programming that promotes prosocial conduct.
9. The availability and promotion of sexualised toys based upon television programs, movies, advertisements and other media should not be permitted.

If there are any queries relating to this submission, please contact Amanda Gordon, APS President or Dr Susie Burke.

References

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

Australian Psychological Society (2008). Helping girls develop a positive self image. An APS tip sheet.

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

Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (1990). *Report of the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal Inquiry into Violence on Television*.

Bandura, A. (1990). Selective activation and disengagement of moral control. *Journal of Social Issues*, 46, 27-46.

Linz, D., Donnerstien E., & Adams, S.M. (1989). Physiological desensitization and judgements about female victims of violence. *Human Communications Research*, 15, 509-522.

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

Singer, J.L., Singer, D.G., Desmond, B., Hirsch, B., and Nicol, A. (1988). Family mediation and children's cognition, aggression and comprehension of television: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 9, 329-347.

Zillman D., & Weaver, J.B. (1989). Pornography and men's sexual callousness toward women. In Zillman D. & Bryant J. (Eds.), *Pornography: Research advances and policy considerations* (pps.95-125). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Attachments

<http://www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.html>

http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/position_paper/media/

http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/tip_sheets/girls_positive_image/