

## *Inquiry into the Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media Environment*

To the Senate Committee,

I acknowledge that today's children mature faster than in previous generations due to the effects of popular culture, media, consumerism, globalisation and other reasons. My husband and I want our children (and others) to have the option to grow out of childhood more slowly. We try to minimise the impact of the 'rushed childhood' by encouraging balance. Of course we cannot entirely control what our four children view, hear and do. We can sometimes be clever enough or quick enough to help them avoid some of the bombardment of provocative images and messages they face from media, internet or role models. We feel empowered to say no to our children but can also feel overwhelmed at times.

Many parents don't think about the powerful messages (or the effects of an accumulation) that their children, and their children's visitors, are exposed to through media, the internet and role models in their own home and locality. We appear to have accepted sexualised imagery and messages as part of contemporary life even for our children. Many children today are not allowed to walk around the block or to the local shops or park for personal safety reasons. They are depending more on media for entertainment.

Sexualised images, messages and role models were there to a lesser extent in my own upbringing. Perhaps many adults, including those working in media, have been desensitised or have forgotten what it is like to be a child, or what it is like to be the parent of a 7-14 year old. It seems that 'sex sells' even for children (and despite children). The dollar is most powerful.

### **The problem of sexualisation of children in media, advertising and internet includes:**

- Inappropriate advertising at cinemas. For example, when viewing an M-rated movie, such as *Harry Potter 5* or *Pirates of the Caribbean 3*, ads for M-rated movies with sexual references may be shown. As a parent I feel this is quite different to the M-rating given for fantasy-type violence as in *HP5* and *Pirates3*.
- Trailers on cinema websites - where we are encouraged to buy tickets - are not necessarily indicative of a movie's content but some are clearly being pitched to children. For example, the M-rated Australian movie, *Hey, Hey it's Esther Blueburger*, appears in the trailer to be a humorous movie about a 10-12 year old schoolgirl. In the movie the heroine is really a 14 year old who engages in various risky behaviours including drinking alcohol to 'loosen up' and providing oral sex. She and a friend state that they don't want to be 14 year old virgins.
- Children are consumers of internet services, such as search engines (eg. *Google*), social networking services (eg. *Bebo*), and providers of web applications & widgets (eg. *RockYou.com*). Here young people are at risk of being exposed to sexually provocative images and text. Some services (eg. social networking) are being offered to children via email from their friends. It is tempting and easy for children to open accounts with online companies when it is their friends inviting them to click on the links. (Clever marketing). Some internet services are for children over 13 years (and under 18 years with parental permission) but are used by children and young teens without parental knowledge. Children, particularly girls, promote themselves through text and photos and may want to appear older than what they really are. Children can start group pages with friends. My 12 year old daughter was on the "Real-name-of-school School Hotties" page.

- For girls today there is an emphasis on fashion, shopping & looking good. Girls are playing games on the internet (eg. *stardoll.com*) where they shop & dress models, avatars and celebrities. Popular celebrity novel series (eg. *Two of a Kind* titles: *Calling All Boys*, *How to Flunk Your First Date*, *My Sister the Super Model*, *Bye Bye Boyfriend*) feature sporty, successful, sexy, savvy 12 year old girl twins, Mary Kate and Ashley Olsen, or Hilary Duff. Celebrity novel series are widely available in libraries and chain stores.
- Popular radio stations (eg. Nova 96.9FM and 2Day104.1FM) play music enjoyed by youth and families including children as young as 9 -10 years olds. These programmes frequently have direct sexual references in voice overs in the mornings and prior to 8pm.

**Strategies to reduce the sexualisation of children (and to reduce the effects of) in the media:**

- Establish an independent regulatory system to oversee all media exposure and advertising to children and young teens.
- Screening of billboards before they enter the public domain by an independent panel including appropriately qualified childhood experts.
- Sexualised music video clips should only be shown outside children's viewing hours. These should not be shown at childrens discos, tenpin bowling parties or other places devoted to children, such as indoor play centres.
- Pornographic magazines and DVDs to be kept covered or out of the eye level of children and young teens in newsagents, supermarkets, convenience stores and DVD rental shops.
- Stricter control on radio, TV and cinema advertising and programming at times when children and young teens are likely to be viewing/listening. This should include controls on the advertising of TV programmes themselves. It would be helpful if parents received warnings when sexual references inappropriate for the young are to be aired during radio or TV programmes.
- There should be controls on advertising (eg. dating agencies) on TV and some email services used by children and young teens where women can be portrayed narrowly. Many TV ads after 11.30pm for dating/video services are offensive to adults as well as being detrimental for children and teenagers.
- Starting in the middle school years (or earlier) English curriculum should include critical and visual literacy learning around a variety of internet services in addition to general media and advertising. Students should critically consider how they portray themselves and others on web pages. They should learn to discriminate images and messages (including gender and sexual stereotypes) in the media. Parents and other adults should be fully aware of the implications, responsibility and guidance required when they allow children access to email, live messaging, social networking spaces and mobile phone services. Guidance from both responsible adults and older peers will assist children in making sensible choices.

In 2008 I hope that Australian leaders will take responsibility for improving media and advertising regulation in order to reduce the pressure on children (*and* parents) and to enable a broader range of role models for today's image-conscious children, particularly girls.

Lynette Cormack, BAppSc(OT); BTeach (prim)  
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Reference: Kids Free 2B Kids, 2008, in <http://www.kf2bk.com>