

**Submission to  
Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications & The Arts Inquiry  
into  
The Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media Environment**

Thank you for inviting me to make a submission to this very important senate inquiry. I make this submission jointly with my daughter.

I have practiced Medicine for around 25 years and currently work part time as a General Practitioner. I have also worked extensively in commercial radio, television, print and internet media for around 18 years. I have special interests in health communications and sexual health. I have hosted a national talk back relationships program broadcast on Austereo Radio network for 6 years in the 1990s. I currently write the health Q&A column for Girlfriend magazine, part of which is about sex. I am deputy chair of Family Planning Victoria and sit on the board of the Victorian Health Promotion Unit (Vic Health). The opinions expressed in this submission do not reflect the views of any organization I am associated with.

My daughter, Amelia Edwards, is 19 years old and in the second year of her Arts/Law degree focusing on anthropology, history and human rights. She has a particular interest in issues relating to sexuality and identity.

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We believe it is important that in its deliberations, the Committee make a clear distinction between the issues relating to the portrayal of children as sexual objects in the media and those relating to exposure of children to sexually related material.

As always in this type of inquiry, there is a risk that the process might be unduly influenced by well organized minority groups with their own agendas that do not reflect that of the majority. We congratulate the Committee on separating out obvious “form” letters from individual submissions.

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Rather than addressing the individual components of the terms of reference for this inquiry, we have incorporated these into our submission by putting forward four overarching proposals, two prohibitions and two creative initiatives, to reduce the harmful impact of the premature sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment and within the greater Australian social context.

**1. No child under 16 should be portrayed as a object of sexual desire in the media.**

We believe that it is never appropriate for children under 16 years of age to be portrayed as sexually desirable or sexually available to adults in any form of media. We support this being translated into legislation and regulation applicable to all media. Although the definition of what may constitute sexual objectification is subjective, we respectfully suggest that it should be something that Australia’s Office of Film and Literature Classification is well equipped to deal with within this proposed legislative framework

## **2. Children under 16 should not be portrayed as sexually mature adults in the media or live entertainment.**

Pubertal bodies are not fully mature, and if, for example, girls are used as models to represent mature women, observers may form erroneous and damaging ideals of what sexually a mature woman should look like. Similarly, children who see images of their peers dressed and behaving inappropriately as adults, may feel pressure to conform to these constructs, promoting unhealthy body image, and ultimately perhaps robbing them of their childhood. Portraying children under 16 as sexually mature adults sends the wrong message to both children and adults. We believe this principle should be enshrined in law.

Beyond this is the issue of a child who copies the sexual behaviour of adults they have seen in the media and in the community. A child will naturally seek attention and acceptance; if a young girl sees a woman dressed in sexually provocative clothing, receiving positive attention, it is little wonder that she may try to emulate that look. She is, however, unlikely to understand the expectations or consequences attached to such behaviour. Young boys also have their sexual and social behaviours informed by popular culture and advertising materials, and as with young girls can lack an understanding of the implications and objectives of sexualized behaviours like whistling at a passing pretty girl. This is because sexually provocative advertising and programming does not necessarily articulate these consequences, namely that certain behaviours are designed to invite sexual advances, which we as adults are expected to consciously - or sub-consciously - infer. Children do not have the capacity, experience or social programming to make such connections, yet this type of advertising is often on display on billboards and otherwise in public arenas. Ultimately, it is the job of the parent to teach the child the consequences of these images and behaviours.

We draw attention to this point, then, in order to distinguish between the responsibilities of government and those of parents. There must be a line drawn when it comes to censorship, for the government is not the parent, but there to assist the parent. In the battle against the premature sexualisation of our children, what we propose is a creative partnership: parents and government working together to regulate, educate and keep our children safe. Two ways such a partnership might be conceptualized are articulated below.

## **3. A nationally consistent school based curriculum for sexual and relationship health.**

We believe that all children deserve access to age appropriate, reliable, consistent, information about sexual health and relationships. Some parents, however, may not feel equipped or comfortable to teach their children about matters of a sexual nature. Therefore, the most effective delivery method of information for young people is through schools. Nevertheless no nationally consistent curriculum for sexual health education currently exists. This is possibly due to difficulties reaching agreement on what information is age appropriate or necessary within the diverse schools network in Australia.

There are those who believe that sex should remain a taboo subject for children and that it is never appropriate to discuss sex with young people other than in the context of abstinence until

marriage. While parents are free to choose this method, it has been shown that sex education that preaches abstinence only options for young people is not effective in reducing morbidity or sexual activity amongst them.<sup>1,2</sup>

To avoid moral, cultural or religious differences between schools we believe that a program of this nature should be divided into core and optional modules. Core modules would be those where consensus is reached as to appropriate content for all schools and these would be compulsory. Optional modules would those areas considered more controversial but nevertheless have proven health and educational value. Schools may choose which of these optional modules they wish to teach in their institutions. But they would be required to register with the appropriate government body which of these optional modules they had chosen not to teach. This would allow for alternative arrangements to be made for young people to attend the other optional modules outside the school environment, if appropriate.

If we continue to fail to provide our children with consistent, evidence based sexual health information they will continue to seek it from other sources which may be misleading and potentially damaging.

Puberty is a time of great change and learning for young people. But it can also be a time of confusion because as hormones start to make their body mature physically, they also start to create natural feelings and thoughts of a sexual nature. However young people often receive mixed messages about how they should react to these changes. Sadly they also often feel embarrassed to seek guidance from parents or their usual trusted adults.

If children cannot turn to trusted adults or the education system they only have schoolyard whispers, or the electronic and print media. However there is no mandate on the commercial media to provide educational material.

To their credit some media outlets partly take on this role with responsibility. Sally writes a monthly Q&A column for Girlfriend Magazine (published by Pacific Magazines) where young readers write to me with their questions on body and sexual issues. She provides written responses in a *sealed section* each month in the magazine. She takes her role seriously, as do the editors and publishers, but their efforts are no substitute for a nationally consistent sexual and relationship health curriculum in schools and they do not wish their work to be taken as such.

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<sup>1</sup> **The Content Of Federally Funded Abstinence-Only Education Programs** (US) prepared for Henry A Waxman 2004, <http://oversight.house.gov/Documents/20041201102153-50247.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> **Abstinence and abstinence only education**, Curr Opin Obstet Gynecol 2007, Ott MA, Santelli JS Oct;19 (5) ;446-52 [http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17885460?ordinalpos=8&itool=EntrezSystem2.PEntrez.Pubmed.Pubmed\\_ResultsPanel.Pubmed\\_RVDocSum](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17885460?ordinalpos=8&itool=EntrezSystem2.PEntrez.Pubmed.Pubmed_ResultsPanel.Pubmed_RVDocSum)

#### **4. Establish government funded a free to air 24 hour commercial free television, radio station and internet portal that is dedicated to children's (under 16) programming.**

Whilst legislation and regulation can separate adult from children's content, it is only parents who can ensure that children do not access inappropriate material that is freely available in electronic and print media.

Children are inquisitive and often disregard censorship ratings or 'children's' programming time. Children are increasingly technologically savvy and often have unsupervised, independent access to media and the internet. In the face of these developments parents may find increasingly difficult to regulate what their children are exposed to and it is time that we provide them with reliable options they can trust.

Interestingly, Commercial Radio Australia contends, in its submission to this inquiry<sup>3</sup>, that there is no commercial radio programming in Australia directed at children.

Given that commercial media survives on advertising revenue, which is driven by viewer numbers or 'ratings', while parents complain about some radio and TV content they simply have to vote with the remote and switch channels if they object to it. Commercial media will respond quickly to remove programming that isn't rating.

The issue facing parents is, however, to then find an alternative that is safe and palatable to their children.

We propose that to make choices easier for parents the government should add three new arms to the current ABC media outlets

- i) a 24 hour free to air, commercial free, television station with dedicated children's content,
- ii) a 24 hour commercial free FM radio station with dedicated children's content.
- iii) a dedicated children's internet portal .

The content for this children's media network needs to be carefully programmed; it should be both educational and entraining, and also cater to various age groups and interests.

Such a media network would have a fourfold value:

- i) As a means to ensure parents can have confidence that their children will not be exposed to any material beyond a stipulated censorship rating, such as PG.
- ii) As a government funded network not requiring commercial advertising to survive, which would remove the potentially damaging influence such material may have on our children's health and development.
- iii) As a vehicle to reinforce the messages and goals of government education initiatives, this would mean that parents can be present for elements of their children's education in a convenient and comfortable environment.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.aph.gov.au/SENATE/committee/eca\\_ctte/sexualisation\\_of\\_children/submissions/sub25.pdf](http://www.aph.gov.au/SENATE/committee/eca_ctte/sexualisation_of_children/submissions/sub25.pdf)

For example, as a government funded and sanctioned project, the network could act as an adjunct to the proposed nationally consistent school based sexual and relationship health curriculum by broadcasting the actual optional modules as discussed earlier. Furthermore parents would have the opportunity to record and preview this content so as to make informed choices for their children.

- iv) As a media hub, providing integrated and interactive learning experiences for children. The three different media modalities involved in this network, allow a wholistic approach to healthy childhood development, encompassing both entertainment and education.

For example it would even be possible for this network to even be used for integrated campaigns to promote healthy lifestyle and physical activity away from the television computer or radio

.We would be happy to attend a senate hearing to elaborate on any of the points we have made.

Yours sincerely

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Ms Amelia Edwards