

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT,
COMMUNICATIONS, AND THE ARTS:
INQUIRY INTO THE SEXUALISATION OF CHILDREN IN THE MEDIA.

To Whom it May Concern,

I would like to include a personal submission for the inquiry into the sexualization of children in the media.

It is not enough for parents to decide what their children are influenced by. In today's society to do so would be impossible as children are confronted by influences all around us from an early age. Furthermore, when it comes to the influences of the media both overall and that which is directed towards children, and when it comes to products which are marketed directly towards children, many parents are naive of the negative influence their children are faced with from various media and products and many parents are at a loss when it comes to educating their children about media and how not to be responsive to it.

There are many influences out there which vary in the level of impact they have on children and I feel that in searching for a solution on how to manage the problem of sexualization of children in the media we need to look closely at how much influence these sources actually have. It is one thing to look at a billboard advertising lingerie by showing a woman in a bra and panties set for example and say that it is not marketed towards children and it is of little impact when you consider what little clothing people wear at the beach, but if we look specifically at individual cases and judge if they are to be of a significant influence or not we would be ignoring part of the problem. Influences have an accumulative effect, and the influences in the media which affect our children the strongest go on to increase the effect of other forms of media exposure which as an individual influence might otherwise be of little concern (such as the example of lingerie advertising).

Bratz dolls are a problematic influence. Commonly referred to as "prosta-tots" these dolls represent an image that women should deplore. At least Barbie had varying careers and was always out doing something, children can use their imagination with Barbie to reflect a more positive and realistic ideal. Bratz dolls however are nothing more than mall rats with skimpy clothing and mobile phones. An image I want my child reflecting in reality? I don't think so. Of the Bratz dolls I have seen both in the media and on shop shelves, the best way I could describe them is they are dressed to look like comic prostitutes (see below). Is there some reason we feel the need to market sexualised attire to little girls? Is there some reason that normal clothing wouldn't be a more appropriate attire for such a target audience? Sexually dressed dolls have no place in the play of young children. The only other equivalent appearance in the media is in Japanese Anime films with a rating of M or higher and are clearly marketed towards adults, the times which they are aired on TV are usually quite late at night. Furthermore, Bratz dolls do not reinforce positive stereotypes, their title says it all. They perpetuate the falsehood of females being stupid. As an example of one of the first forms of influence that our children are being exposed to that is attractive to them, seeing Bratz dolls as representing a desirable fashion image is conditioning these children to want to dress in such a manner and is one of the first influences in a long line of conditioning.



(one of the baby Bratz range – a toddler complete with bottle of milk wearing a midriff tank top and hot pants)



From the Bratz holiday range. Their clothing looks more akin to clothing you see available in the fancy dress section of lingerie and adult stores for couples who like to get into the Christmas spirit – definitely not suitable attire for a child.

Clothing that is marketed towards children is also of a high concern. Padded bra's (or even bra's in general) and g-strings have no place in the wardrobe of a child, nor does clothing which makes children appear 'tarty'. Children should be dressed age appropriately and to dress them in a manner that conveys a degree of sexual attractiveness is doing nothing more than increasing the risk of being targeted by a child sex offender. Teenagers who dress scantily where at one time referred to as 'jail bait' – what are we to label children as young as 5 who dress in the same way? I strongly feel that some parents are completely naive to this risk, believing that it is cool to dress their daughters as 'girly'. 'Girly' is dressing a child in pink and making them look cute - dressing them up to look cheap and easy is turning them into sexual objects. Forget relying on parent's to be responsible and educated - these product lines should not be available in the first place. They give young children a means to act out what they see and what they desire based on other influences. It isn't ok to dress our children up like Bratz dolls just because children's fashion makes it possible.

The music industry is one of the next influences our children are bombarded with. It seems they go from Hi5 and the Wiggles and are plunged straight into the exotic worlds of seductively dancing, scantily clad, perfectly proportioned musical sex symbols. Only a couple of years ago I was living at a different address. A 9 year old girl came over one day to sell tickets to raise money and she told me how her aunty used to live there - when she discovered I had a baby she wanted to come over to visit, and with her parent's permission came over a couple of times after school. On one of these occasions she was so proud to tell me she had learnt the words to a Black Eyed Peas song and proceeded to sing "My Humps" complete with a dance. I was horrified. This girl was singing a sexually explicit song and dancing in a manner that was definitely not age appropriate - in short she was mimicking what the song projected and for a child it was definitely inappropriate behaviour. I told her that it isn't nice to dance like that, and hopefully as she viewed me as a friend rather than an authoritative adult she took heed. There is no shortage of songs which contain skimpily clad women dancing provocatively to music that contains a seductive beat (or even explicit lyrics), and on a Sunday this is material that is available at a time when there is no other competing children's programming available. It is no secret that children idolise their favourite stars and often try to act like them. What happens when the star a child admires is someone who is marketing themselves as 'one pole short' of being a strip club dancer? It is another notch in the belt called 'conditioning' that guides children along the path of sexuality, and even without the preceding exposure to Bratz dolls or being allowed to wear sexually objective clothing, the images projected by the music industry are strong enough to be a formative influence on the mind of a child. The sexualization in the music industry both in lyrical content and visual content can be best described as a bombardment. No where else in the unregulated, non-age restricted media can we be bombarded with so much sexual content than a short trip down the road of the music industry and the main promoters of this industry which combines the effects of the visual and the lyrical sexual content is in both Video Hits and Rage – both aired at time slots readily available to children, and on a Sunday for Video Hits there is no child-attracting competition on any other station.

One of the biggest media influences in regards to the sexualization of children I feel is magazines. Magazines such as Cleo, Cosmopolitan, Dolly and Girlfriend. The latter two are marketed at a teen audience, the former two are marketed towards a slightly older teen and young adult audience. There is no denying, however, that there is an audience range for these magazines that is much younger than their expressed target audience. I started purchasing Dolly and Girlfriend when I was about 11 years old and I quickly progressed to Cosmopolitan and Cleo prior to reaching the age of 16 years - in fact by the time I was 16 I was tired of them, and from about 18 I can honestly say there was no appeal at all. They are alluring to young teens, with plenty of information regarding employment, fashion, makeup, healthy lifestyle, and the latest stars. Cosmopolitan in particular is not shy about it's sexual content, and this is the danger area for any of their audience which is under 18 years of age. In genre, there is no doubting that Cosmopolitan and Cleo are preceded by Dolly and Girlfriend - for Dolly and Girlfriend readers, Cosmo and Cleo are a logical next step. Marie Clair is too 'grown up' for a mid-teen to older teen audience and outside of that the options are Woman's Day and New Idea types of titles which bare no resemblance in the content

they contain, the way their content is presented, or the manner in which they are advertised.

Two episodes I purchased of Cosmopolitan (while under 16 years of age) contained a bonus little book of "Cosmo Sex Confessions", part 1 and 2 respectively. These books detailed stories supposedly submitted by readers detailing various sexual experiences such as lesbian flings, threesomes, sex on holidays and so on. They were quite detailed - slightly more explicit in language and you would have expected the stories to appear in magazines such as Picture, Hustler or Penthouse along side visual pornographic images. Without recalling which information was contained in any of the four mentioned titles specifically, there was no shortage of 'how to' information about sex. "Sealed Sections" readily contained details and even instructions on sex, detailing where the pleasure centres are, how to masturbate (yourself or someone else), different sexual positions, tips for putting that kinky zing into your sex life (such as feathers, body paint, etc), flirting techniques, and some containing submissions from guys detailing what they like their girlfriend to do - one of them I recall specifically, detailed how when he is on the brink of orgasm he states he likes his girlfriend to "take the initiative to stick her finger up my bum". This sort of content has absolutely no place in magazines that are not age restricted. Such content is not informing readers of medical issues, std's, breast cancer, pap smears, or any other form of information that would be relevant and educational - the concept of 'sex sells' for these magazines is taken to the literal extreme. If the content of such magazines is outside of the content we would be prepared to accept in school run sex education classes then it has no place whatsoever in non-age restricted magazines that are marketed in part towards teens.



Taken off the Cosmopolitan site, this is the 'Sex Position of the Week'.

According to "The Virgin Diaries" on the Girlfriend website:

"I've recently had sex for the first time and parts of the whole experience was weird and emotional, but it was partly exciting too. The act itself was how I expected it to be, but the physical feeling wasn't. I thought it would hurt, or I wouldn't like it, but I actually quite enjoyed sex." (Apparently posted by a 15 year old girl)

According to "10 Steps to Getting a Boyfriend" on the Dolly website:

"Well, if you've been dying to speak to that cute guy from PE or pining away for that hunky friend-of-a-friend you've seen so many times at parties, here's your chance to find out the top ten tips to getting your dream guy"

According to “Sex Q&A – The Big O” on the Cleo website:

“Try fantasy: It's a great way to spice up your relationship. You can get dressed up and meet at a bar or cafe and pretend you don't know one another. Chat each other up taking on different roles and personalities to expand the playful side.”

According to “3 Kinds of Sex All Men Crave” on the Cosmopolitan website:

“When he's flushed after a win or starts gloating about a mini success, bait him by slowly stripping off your clothes across the room — in his eye line but out of his reach. "Just looking at your naked body can further raise a man's testosterone, feeding his desire," says Fisher. Let him watch you touch your own erogenous zones, which will make him hot and give you satisfaction too.”

So what are the effects of such exposure? Well, I am not trained in psychology however I have the unique perspective of being able to offer an opinion based on having read these magazines when I was a child. There is no denying that when adults read sexually explicit material there is at least some element of titillation or arousal - if this wasn't the case then erotic literature would not be successful and top selling pornographic magazines would not contain such stories. But the people who read age-restricted material are adults; children don't experience that effect right? WRONG. When a young teen (or even pre-teen) reads sexually explicit material there is definitely some degree of arousal even if it is immature. Children get all giggly when they see someone kissing on TV – imagine the reaction when they are confronted with sexually explicit material detailing sex acts. And when the material is not just a story, but detailed instructions on 'how to', the possibilities are just plain scary to fathom because the result is not just a child who is being encouraged by the literature to feel a degree of sexual arousal, it is a child who now also has quite broad understanding of what to do and how. A child or very young teen reading this sort of material is then armed with the ability to flirt, or to even act in a seductive manner, and at an age when we are more receptive to the attention of adults and at times seek it out this is a dangerous game to play. The possibility for children to be targeted by a sex offender is increased because these magazines offer children and young teens a means to act in a way that is well beyond their ability to understand, and there is no doubt that they directly encourage their readers to be sexually explorative (with no differentiation between an age appropriate target audience and one that is not, and with no prevention of such material being available to children).

Between magazines offering the 'how to' guide and explicit material that should be age restricted, and music and music videos that contain a strong element of sexuality, what has resulted is the sexual conditioning of a child. Previous conditioning from toys such as Bratz dolls and the availability of explicit clothing for children would only serve to pre-condition them to be more accepting of sexualised content in the media industries as they grow older. And parents are incredibly limited, if not powerless, to stop it. If we don't buy the magazines our children want then they will go out and buy them or read a friends copy. If we don't let them watch Video Hits or Rage then they can download what songs they want, watch them at a friends place, or even purchase the dvd's and cd's themselves. Parents are left helpless when such influences surround our children, and the best we are left with is to try our best to educate them so they are not so receptive to the media. But how do we do that? Is there some instruction manual for how to teach our children to be anti-media influenced? No there isn't. We are relying as a society on parents knowing what to do, and even relying on them to be aware of the problems and various negative influences in the first place. Mass educating parents on the finer points of child psychology and

how to prevent your child from being conditioned by sexualised media is something that is not only impossible on a mass scale, but also something that may very well be out of the grasp of understanding of some parents. The initiative should not be on each and every parent to become educated child psychologists in order to prevent such conditioning, the onus should be on the government to regulate businesses to ensure they are not producing material that is going to sexually condition children, especially when such material is marketed towards children or directly available to children, since clearly businesses are incapable of regulating themselves.

So what of other forms of media that are clearly geared towards and adult target audience such as billboard advertising that is selling alcohol, lingerie or cars? What effect do they have? Not much if you look at them individually. A child passenger in a vehicle passing a billboard of a bikini clad model perfect woman is unlikely to be affected strong enough for it to be of concern. However, when a child has been pre-conditioned sexually through other forms of media, the effects of this form of advertising are increased. If you have a child that already desires to dress sexily, is learning ways of how to act and perform sexual acts via magazines, and idolises music containing sexual lyrics and the music videos that go along with them, seeing a sexualised image in advertising is going to be of stronger effect. Whilst they may not be solely responsible for influencing children, advertisers that use sexual imagery need to be aware that they are not a singular unit – they form part of the entire culture that has become sexualization in the media and as a whole it is affecting our children.

And what of young boys? Most of the points raised would clearly be directed at concern regarding young girls, have boys been left out of the conditioning loop? No, they haven't. So what effects does the sexualization in media have on them? They aren't going to be reading Cosmo or Girlfriend, and they aren't going to play with Bratz dolls, and there is no range of clothing or products for boys that could be described as 'sexual'. But they are affected. They are affected by what is projected to them, and if the images they are seeing and the behaviours that are reflected even in their female child counterparts are of a sexually objective nature then boys will learn to objectify women into being sex objects. The image of both women and girls that is projected onto both boys and men is a conditioning in itself. If the image of women and girls continues to be of a sexualised nature, and boys are conditioned by this, then we are conditioning our future men to see women in an unideal way. This in turn has it's own danger as such desensitisation and conditioning at a young age for boys could see and increase in sexual and physical attacks against women when these boys turn into men. This isn't going to be the case for every male child of course and there are other psychological factors at play that cause a person to be aggressive – however there is no denying that environmental factors are a strong influence on future behaviour. Male children who are sexually abused are of a higher chance of becoming abusers as adults than their non-abused peers. Logic would have it that a male child who is conditioned to see women (and even girls) as nothing more than sexual objects as a child will have a higher chance at treating women (or even girls) as nothing more than sexual objects as an adult than his non-conditioned peers.

The fact is, we cannot measure the effects that sexualization in the media on a child on a single media level. Conditioning is something that is accumulative – the effect of sexual content in advertising is going to be a hell of alot stronger in children who have grown up playing with Bratz dolls and reading Cosmo than it is in a child that

has not had such previous exposure. When you are conditioned by a particular medium, further conditioning adds to that. And of course there are children who will be much more receptive to conditioning than others. We can't look at sexual advertising that is geared towards adults and say that it has no effect on children, because we haven't taken into account the level of sexual conditioning a child has previously been exposed to.

The following changes need to be addressed:

1. Toys marketed towards children need to be produced to an acceptable standard to ensure that they are an ideal medium for children. Dressing up a doll to look like a prostitute is not acceptable practice.
2. Children's clothing should be just that – children's. Dressing a child to look like an adult going out on the town will draw unwanted sexual attention to that child and put them at increased risk of sexual abuse. In particular, bra's and g-strings should not be produced for a child market. The children's clothing industry should be regulated to produce clothing that is age appropriate. Making children appear to look much older than what they are and to dress in a sexually provocative manner is grossly inappropriate.
3. Music that is available during child-viewing hours should not contain sexually explicit lyrics or film. If film or lyrics are of a sexual nature then they should be reserved for late night music shows where the target audience is adults. There are plenty of decent songs and video clips on the market that have been shown during child-viewing hours that are not of a sexual nature, this increasing trend towards sexually explicit music and film clips to be aired during child-viewing hours is not acceptable. If music artists desire their music and film clips to reach a wider target audience then the onus is on them to produce the material according to such specifications.
4. Magazines that contain sexually explicit material should be age restricted. The details I have personally been privy to (especially in Cosmopolitan) are nothing short of pornographic and as such it should be (and I believe already is) illegal to sell such material to children. This is one of the most concerning forms of media exposure our children have to sexual content and it is not just concerning – it is blatantly explicit material that should already be regulated according to regulations on pornographic material.
5. The position of sexualised advertising that is geared towards adults (eg car and alcohol advertising etc, and including the placement of pornographic magazines in shops etc) should be regulated to ensure that through positioning and size it has minimal exposure for children. Whilst small amounts of exposure may have limited effect on a child, or even go unnoticed, bombardment of 'in-your-face' sexualised advertising or such advertising that is designed to be viewable for lengthy period of time (eg sidewalk poster advertising, buss stop advertising, etc) does affect children and needs to be stopped.

I truly hope that these points are investigated as well as the many other points that have been raised, and the points that have already been made by qualified professionals heeded. Businesses often do not have their consumer's best interests at heart – their primary interest is to make money. If a particular product sells well then

they will do little to remove it or restrict it unless forced. The perfect example of this is tobacco – it sells and it sells very well, so despite knowing their product causes the deaths of so many people annually they have opted to continue selling their product at the detriment of their consumers. The sexualised content in media is similar in that they know it sells and despite suitably qualified professionals (such as psychologists) explaining the risks of exposing our children to sexual material, these companies continue to do what they do best – sell.

There needs to be an independent regulatory system to oversee all media exposure and advertising to children and young teens. At present we are selling the image of sexuality to children under the age of 16. Not only is it grossly immoral of any government to allow this, it should be made outright illegal. It is a child sex offence to show a child pornographic material, but for a magazine company all they have to do is label it as ‘education’ and their sexually explicit content goes unnoticed. It is a child sex offence to sexually abuse a child in any way, but for clothing companies to sell clothing that makes children appear sexualised and increase the potential for being a target of abuse, they are doing nothing more than offering a bigger range of clothing choice. We need to see that the sexualization of children is criminal. It grooms children into accepting sex, portraying the image of sex, and even wanting sex, way too young. The process of grooming children is something that we are well aware of – only we normally think of it something paedophiles do. Corporations do it too, every time they encourage children to engage in an activity, dress in a particular manner, or behave in a certain way that is overtly sexual it is the sexualization of children and it grooms them through conditioning. It makes children much easier targets for paedophiles because some of the grooming process has already taken place and the child is more receptive to the concept of sexualization due to previous exposure in the media. It is time for businesses to act in a manner that shows a degree of responsibility when it comes to marketing towards our children, producing products and material that are accessible to children, and using advertising that is viewable by children. We as parents can try as hard as possible to prevent our children from being conditioned by sexualization in the media, but it is impossible when everywhere we turn there is sexualised imagery and content. We should not be forced to live as communal hippies in the middle of nowhere just to escape the bombardment of sexualization in the media – our children have a right to be protected. It is time the government stepped up to the mark and ensured that businesses act in a manner towards our children that is responsible, moral and ethical when it comes to the concept of sexualization.

Grooming our children through sexualization in the media is psychological abuse and it needs to be stopped immediately!

Yours truly
Tara DeVries
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