



**Submission to the
Senate Standing Committee on Environment,
Communications and the Arts**

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

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Executive Summary

The Australian Christian Lobby welcomes the Senate's decision to examine the important issue of the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment and commends Senator Allison for raising this important issue.

There is widespread community concern about the highly sexualised environment in which children are now raised, the messages this sends to children about how to be successful and popular, and the impact this has on their development. This concern is shared by a broad range of groups including faith groups, family groups, women's groups, think tanks such as the Australia Institute, professional bodies such as the American Psychological Association, and many mums and dads in the community who are trying to raise well adjusted children in an increasingly toxic environment. The Australian Medical Association has also expressed concerns about the hazards of idealised media images of the perfect body and the impact this has on self-esteem and dangerous eating patterns¹.

Sexually charged advertising routinely appears on billboards that families pass on the way to school. Added to these sexualising messages are pole-dancing kits for children, lingerie for pre-pubescent girls, bimbo games, suggestive styles and slogans on kids' clothing, Bratz dolls, make-up for young girls, tween magazines, and graphic sexual music videos on Saturday mornings.

The American Psychological Association, the largest body of psychologists in the world, reviewed the evidence on the sexualisation of girls and found that there was ample evidence to show that sexualisation has negative effects in a variety of domains, including cognitive functioning, physical and mental health, sexuality and beliefs, including attitudes to sexual harassment and sexual violence. Even on an intuitive level, it is obvious that it robs children of the full term of their childhood.

There are many actions that could be taken to improve this situation if only legislators can develop the political will to address this toxic culture. This submission makes several positive recommendations for change and no doubt many other groups concerned for children's welfare will raise similar ideas.

It is imperative that the Senate is not simply content to hold an inquiry. The urgency of the issue demands that legislation be introduced which will raise children's interests above those of the

¹ *Position Statement on Body Image and Health*, Australian Medical Association, 2002

corporate and adult world which is driving the pornification of culture, ensuring that the interests of children are paramount. The appointment of a Federal Children's Commissioner the power to veto marketing practices and products that sexualise children would be one useful step forward.

What is 'sexualisation'?

The American Psychological Association identifies several aspects of sexualisation, which contradict the development of a healthy sexuality. They argue that sexualisation occurs when any of the following conditions are met:

- A person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behaviour 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 – that is made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision-making;
- Sexuality is inappropriately imposed on a person².

When these pressures are applied to children, we can expect a range of negative outcomes, due to the fact that children have been forced to deal with sex and sexuality before they are developmentally ready to do so.

The Australia Institute states that, 'broadly defined, sexualisation is the act of giving someone or something a sexual character'³. Sexualisation 'captures the slowly developing sexuality of children and moulds it into stereotypical forms of adult sexuality.'⁴ In a detailed report on the sexualisation of children in Australia, the Australia Institute notes that:

In the past, the sexualisation of children occurred indirectly, primarily through exposure of children to representations of teen and adult sexuality in advertising and popular culture. The very direct sexualisation of children, where children themselves are modelled on sexy adults, is a new development. The pressure on children to adopt sexualised appearance and behaviour at an early age is greatly increased by the combination of the direct sexualisation of children with the

² *Report of the APA Taskforce on the Sexualisation of Girls*, American Psychological Association, 2007

³ Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze, *Corporate Paedophilia: Sexualisation of Children in Australia*, The Australia Institute 2006, page 1

⁴ *ibid*

increasingly sexualised representations of teenagers and adults in advertising and popular culture⁵.

This link between the direct and indirect sexualisation of children is important to remember. It means that any comprehensive approach to tackling this problem must address not only media directed primarily at children, but also the messages that children imbibe from the wider teen and adult culture which is sadly saturated with sex as an advertising tool, or as a cheap way to boost ratings for TV programs.

The Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts has asked for public comment on:

1. The sources and beneficiaries of the premature sexualisation of children in the media;
2. The evidence on the short- and long-term effects of viewing or buying sexualising and objectifying images and products and their influence on cognitive functioning, physical and mental health, sexuality, attitudes and beliefs; and
3. Strategies to prevent and/or reduce the sexualisation of children in the media and the effectiveness of different approaches in ameliorating its effects, including the role of school-based sexuality and reproductive health education and change in media and advertising regulation such as the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice and the Commercial Radio Codes of Practice.

This submission will examine each of these topics in turn.

The sources and beneficiaries of the premature sexualisation of children in the media

The American Psychological Association believes that there is 'no question that girls (and boys) grow up in a cultural milieu saturated with sexualising images⁶.'

Advertising

Advertising acts as a 'distorted mirror' in that it only reflects a selected and highly manipulated set of cultural values and symbols⁷. Examples of this are the common media messages about

⁵ *ibid*, p vii

⁶ APA, *op cit*, p3

⁷ Pollay RW, 'The distorted mirror: reflections on the unintended consequences of advertising,' *Journal of Marketing*, 1986, vol 50, p2

sexual behaviour which objectify women, show sex as a tradable commodity, and give a clear but narrow picture of what a 'sexy' woman looks like⁸.

The failure of advertising standards is greatly implicated in the sexualisation of children. This is demonstrated both in products marketed to children, the portrayal of children in advertising, and the blatantly sexual images and messages used to sell products to adults.

Rush and La Nauze express concern about the sexualised clothing and poses of child models in catalogues for children's clothing, commenting that:

...factors that contribute to sexualisation include clothing and poses that in adults draw attention to sexual differences such as the broad shoulders of the adult male, and the defined hips, waist and breasts of the adult female. Children do not possess these physical attributes yet they are dressed and posed as if they do, often with the aid of cosmetics which mimic the secondary effects of sexual arousal and sometimes in a setting that is normally used by adults rather than children. Typically, children appear more heavily sexualised when more of these factors – clothing, pose, cosmetics and setting – apply⁹.

The above discussion has focused on the direct sexualisation of children through advertising. The indirect sexualisation of children through advertising directed to adults is perhaps on an even larger scale.

ACL is particularly keen to see the standard of outdoor advertising dramatically improved as the highly sexualised images and messages on billboards are causing tremendous difficulties for parents, who lose the opportunity to determine the timing and focus for messages about healthy sexuality because so many examples of unhealthy sexuality abound.

Consider this selection of comments prompted by a recent article¹⁰ on the appalling state of advertising standards:

- "My five year old son loudly asked, 'Mum, what's hot sex?' after seeing a billboard near a Parramatta service station."

⁸ Linn S, *Consuming Kids: Protecting our children from the onslaught of marketing and advertising*, Anchor Books (Random House), New York, 2005.

⁹ *ibid*, p7

¹⁰ Stephen Downes, *So who gives a FCUK about advertising standards?* Available at <http://www.crikey.com.au/Media-Arts-and-Sports/20080214-So-who-gives-a-FCUK-about-advertising-standards.html>

- "From the junior school to home we pass a billboard for a whorehouse. What am I supposed to say to my kids? Are they recruiting dads or daughters?"
- "I have a six year old daughter who is avidly learning to read at the moment and loves to try to read signs, billboards, number plates and so on as we drive. I did not appreciate having to try to explain to her what that ad said and what it meant." (The ad in question was a billboard by the Advanced Medical Institute featuring the slogan 'Stronga, Longa, Donga!' and a call to improve your sex life).
- "Why should I have to explain to my eight year old daughter what male sexual dysfunction is when I'm just trying to drive her to her dance class?"
- "On our ten minute drive to school through Melbourne's leafy eastern suburbs, my daughter and I saw billboards advertising "the world's thinnest condom" and "Melbourne's best brothel". It made us both feel uncomfortable."
- "Billboards are visual pollution and they are everywhere."



AMI billboard on the Princes Highway Dandenong, one of the busiest roads in Melbourne



A Durex advert in Melbourne



A Sexpo billboard along the Ipswich rail line at Goodna, Qld, promising "more live porn stars than ever seen in Australia" just 600 metres away from Goodna Primary School



A lingerie billboard



A billboard for a Melbourne brothel, which children pass on the way to school



Advert for a strip club displayed on the Princes Highway, Dandenong



Advert for a brothel along Cheltenham Road, Dandenong

The Advertising Standards Board received complaints about several of these advertisements but tends to rule that such ads would not offend a reasonable person. However, it seems the Advertising Standards Board may be out of touch with the 'reasonable' Australian community. Late in 2007, its own research showed that 'when compared to the Board, the community is more conservative in their attitudes towards sex, sexuality and nudity.'¹¹

Music videos

Programs showing music videos are often shown in prime children's viewing time on weekend mornings and are usually rated as G or, less often, PG, meaning they are largely deemed suitable for a child audience.

Whilst musical genres vary, the material children see when watching music videos often contains a high degree of sexual content. As Arnett notes¹²:

Although music videos are fairly diverse in themes and scenes, if there is such a thing as a typical music video, it features one or more men performing while beautiful, scantily clad young women dance and writhe lasciviously. Often the men dance too but the women always have fewer clothes on. The women are mostly just props; not characters, not even people, really, they appear

¹¹ 'Advertising Standards Bureau releases world first research,' Advertising Standards Bureau media release, 4th December 2007

¹² Arnett JJ, 'The sounds of sex: sex in teens' music and music videos' in JD Browne, JR Steele, and K Walsh Childers (eds), *Sexual Teens, Sexual Media: Investigating the media's influence on adolescent sexuality*, 2002, pp253-264

for a fraction of a second, long enough to shake their butts a couple of times then the camera moves on.

Children love music and love dancing and copying what they see others doing. They certainly do absorb the messages given in music videos and song lyrics, sometimes with disturbing results as this story told to childhood expert Diane Levin¹³ shows:

Jenna, my four year old granddaughter and I were in a store buying shoes for the new school year. The radio was playing and she said to the sales clerk, 'Is that the Spice Girls singing?' He shook his head, 'No,' and asked if she liked the Spice Girls. She nodded her head. He asked, 'What's your favourite song?' Jenna looked at him coyly and said, '*Let me be your lover!*' When he asked if she knew the words to the song, she began to sing the song – including all the gyrations of her little body. I wanted to sink into a hole and cry.

Magazines

The advent of the 'tween' magazine, targeting readers aged 5 -12, is a relatively recent phenomenon in Australia, dating back only to 1996 when *Barbie Magazine* magazine first appeared, to be followed by *Total Girl* in 2002 and *Disney Girl* in 2004. Whilst magazines for teenagers have been sold in Australia since the 1970s (*Dolly*), the advent of Barbie magazine was the first publication to appear in Australia that could be argued to be a children's version of adult women's magazines.

These magazines are widely read by children and 'tweens' and contain a very significant amount of sexualising content such as beauty, fashion, celebrities (usually those famous primarily for their looks and often those who star in TV shows rated unsuitable for children such as *The OC*), gossip, romances and crushes, particularly of very young girls (the target audience) on much older men (celebrities). In a content analysis carried out in early 2006, the Australia Institute found that, 'Over half the content of *Barbie Magazine* and *Total Girl* and close to half of *Disney Girl* was sexualising material.'¹⁴

As previously stated, it is not only the direct sexualising of children in tween magazines that should be of concern, but also the indirect sexualisation of children through exposure to

¹³ Levin D, 'So sexy, so soon: the sexualisation of childhood' in Olfman S (ed), *Childhood Lost: How American culture is failing our kids*, 2005, p142.

¹⁴ Rush and La Nauze, Op cit, p16

magazines directed at adults. Many magazines for adult women, such as *Cosmopolitan* or *Marie Claire*, contain a heavy emphasis on beauty, celebrity, graphic sexual accounts, dating advice, and the promotion of a vast array of products designed to boost sex appeal.

Even more unashamedly sexual are the pornographic men's magazines that are sold uncovered on low shelves at children's eye level in petrol stations, supermarkets, convenience stores and other locations where shoppers, let alone children, should not have to confront pornography.

The objectification of women in these magazines is self-evident and does impact relationships between men and the real women in their lives. In 2007, the men's magazine, *Zoo*, launched a competition inviting readers to win a boob job for their girlfriend by sending in pictures of her cleavage, with readers to vote for the woman most deserving of breast enhancement. At the close of the competition, *Zoo's* website boasted that, "We've had over eleven hundred women enter which equates to over twenty two hundred individual boobs."

"One lucky *Zoo* reader will be able to give his girlfriend the ultimate present," magazine editor Paul Merrill said in a statement. "It's impossible to think of a more romantic gift than new breasts. It's the gift that keeps on giving." Of course, this 'gift' keeps on giving to the man who wants a girlfriend with bigger breasts, not to the woman who has been told her body is unacceptable in its current form and is being pressured to undergo major surgery to satisfy her boyfriend's porn-inspired fantasies.

Clothing

Girls' clothing now includes cross-over tops to highlight as yet undeveloped cleavages, thin straps to show off shoulders and necklines, crop tops showing off the navel area, short skirts and sexualised underwear. Boys' outfits may include jackets designed to emphasise the shoulders of grown men.

Crude slogans are becoming commonplace, with young teenagers sporting Jay Jays 'Little Loser' t-shirts with slogans such as 'Ms Floozy,' 'Mr Pimp,' and 'Little Miss Bitch'. Children's underwear is no longer designed for practical purposes only, with Bratz launching a range of padded bras for 6-8 year olds and a major department store allegedly selling a range of underwear, in sizes aimed at young teenagers, which include slogans such as 'Love sucks,' 'naughty butt nice' and '\$\$\$ worth it.'

Perhaps the most disturbing development of recent times is the extension of this marketing trend to babies' clothing with t-shirts in size 0 now carrying slogans such as 'all Daddy wanted was a blowjob' and, possibly sadder still, 'are you my Daddy?'

Sexualised slogans on babies' t-shirts



It is overly simple to say that parents who object to such clothing should simply not buy it for their children. Of course parents should exercise sound judgement when shopping for their children's clothing. But the pressures on parents and children should not be underestimated. As sexualised clothing becomes more prevalent, there may be less availability of non-sexualised children's clothing, and certainly it is less likely to be worn by fashion-conscious tweens who know that their place in the school popularity stakes is increasingly dependent upon presenting the right images: the one sold to them in tween magazines, no doubt!

Beneficiaries

The main beneficiaries of the sexualisation of children are the corporations who sell to them. Children are a lucrative market. In the USA, it is estimated that children under 12 directly influenced the spending of up to US\$300 billion in 2000¹⁵. One estimate put the value of the tween market in Australia, which covers 7-13 year olds, as worth more than \$10 billion, of which between \$250 million and \$1 billion is spent on clothing¹⁶. The dominant drive in the corporate world is to maximise profits by opening new markets, not the welfare of children – that protection is, at least partly, the role of government.

¹⁵ Preston E, White CL, 'Commodifying kids: branded identities and the selling of adspace on kids' networks,' *Communications Quarterly*, 2004, Vol 52, no 2, pp115-128

¹⁶ Wells R, 'Very women little,' *The Sunday Age*, 7 May 2006.

There is perhaps also a disturbing second group beneficiary of the sexualisation of children: those adults who have sexual desires for children, namely paedophiles.

One report based on eleven case studies of paedophiles concluded that offenders generated their own erotic material from seemingly benign sources such as advertisements, catalogues showing child underwear models, and similar other sources¹⁷. Anecdotal evidence seems to support this, with the Sydney Morning Herald reporting in 2006 that a man on trial for paedophilia was found to have on his computer not only child pornography, but also links to child modelling sites¹⁸.

Commenting on child advertising, one psychologist writes:

It would not be difficult to make a case that such images are the soft porn of child pornography and that they exploit childhood by introducing adult sexuality into childhood innocence¹⁹.

The American Psychological Association cautions that, 'Images of precocious sexuality in girls may serve to normalise abusive practices such as child abuse, child prostitution, and the sexual trafficking of children²⁰.'

It is important not to make too strong a case for a causal link between the sexualisation of children and paedophilia, as far more research is needed. However, given the vulnerability of children and the devastating impact of child sexual abuse, governments would be well advised to err on the side of caution and take steps to end the premature sexualisation of children in the media.

The impact of premature sexualisation

It can be seen from the litany of examples provided in this submission so far, that there is widespread evidence of the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment. Children sadly grow up in a sex-saturated culture that gives the repeated message that people's value mainly lies in their sexual attractiveness. This message is fed to them very early in their games, magazines and TV programs and is reinforced by similar and perhaps stronger

¹⁷ Howitt, D, 'Pornography and the paedophile: is it criminogenic?' *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 1995, Vol 68, pp15-27

¹⁸ Kennedy L, 'Policeman a pedophile, court told,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19th September 2006

¹⁹ V Walkerdine, 'Violent boys and precocious girls: regulating childhood at the end of the millennium,' *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 1999, Vol 1, no 1, pp3-23

²⁰ APA, op cit, p34

messages in the mainstream culture, particularly regarding the persistent depiction of women as sexual objects for men's pleasure. The result is that children are forced to deal with sex and sexuality before they are developmentally ready, and, adding insult to injury, they imbibe a very distorted view of these issues from the surrounding culture.

There is strong evidence that this sex-saturated culture is causing a variety of harms.

Summarising the consequences of the sexualisation of girls, the American Psychological Association, a scientific and professional organisation that represents the largest association of psychologists worldwide, stated:

...there is evidence that girls exposed to sexualising and objectifying media are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction, depression and lower self-esteem...Self-objectification has been shown to diminish cognitive ability and to cause shame. This cognitive diminishment, as well as the belief that physical appearance rather than academic or extra-curricular achievement is the best path to power and acceptance may influence girls' achievement levels and opportunities later in life²¹.

In a culture that has fought hard for the equality of women, it is extremely distressing to reach the point where girls are taught to dream such small dreams: the dominant message is not that they have an innate value, or can achieve ambitious career goals, or deserve lasting love in enduring relationships, but simply that their worth lies in their sexual appeal, which diminishes as they age.

Opportunity cost of sexualisation

Sexualisation carries an opportunity cost. There are only 24 hours available in each day, so children and adolescents who focus on developing their sex appeal with extensive concerns for their clothing, make-up, hairstyles and accessories, have less time to spend developing their abilities in sports, music or academic study. As the American Psychological Association puts it, 'chronic attention to physical appearance leaves fewer resources available for other mental and physical activities²².'

²¹ APA, op cit, p34

²² APA, op cit, p21

A fascinating 1998 study proved this point²³. College students, alone in a dressing room, were asked to try on either a swimsuit or a sweater. During the ten minutes that they waited in either garment, they were asked to perform a maths test. The women in swimsuits performed significantly worse in this maths test than the women wearing sweaters. No differences were found for men. It would seem that wearing the swimsuit made women more likely to focus on their appearance and compare their body to sexualised ideals, with the result that their capacity to apply themselves mentally was diminished.

Sexual development & initiation

The American Psychological Association (APA) notes that sexualisation also impacts negatively on girls' sexual development as they are exposed to models of passivity, and also impacts on their relationships with other girls as female friendships become policing grounds for conformity to a narrow sexual ideal, or competition arenas for boys' attention. The APA concludes:

Girls' relationships with boys and men are affected in that exposure to sexualising and objectifying media has been shown to relate to girls' and boys' views on dating, boys' sexual harassment of girls, and attitudes towards sexual violence²⁴.

The age of first sexual intercourse is steadily falling and it is possible that one reason for this is the elevated importance of sexual attractiveness and experience as a sign of one's value. Sexualised images present a distorted view of sex and sexuality, which does not prepare children and adolescents for the realities of sexual relationships.

Though there are very few studies on the effects of sexual content in the media, those which do exist indicate significant correlations between the viewing of sexual media content and sexual activity, including testing positive for sexually transmitted diseases. A longitudinal study demonstrated a causal link, finding that among 1,800 American teens aged 12-17, increased exposure to sexual media doubled the chance of their having initiated sexual intercourse or increased non-penetrative sexual activity in the following year²⁵. This is quite a significant finding.

²³ Frederickson BL, Roberts T, Noll SM, Quinn DM, & Twenge JM, 'That swimsuit becomes you: sex differences in self-objectification, restrained eating, and math performance,' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1998, vol 75, pp269-284

²⁴ *ibid*

²⁵ Strasburger, VC, 'Adolescents, sex and the media: Oooo, baby, baby-a, Q&A,' *Adolescent Medicine Clinics*, 2005, Vol 16, no 2, pp269-288

Early sexual activity carries the risk of unwanted sex and of contracting sexually transmitted diseases. Some studies suggest that the younger a girl is at first sexual intercourse the more likely it is that she has had involuntary or forced sex²⁶. Given the APA's findings (quoted above) that sexualisation influences attitudes regarding sexual harassment and sexual violence, this is very concerning.

Noting the alarming rise in sexually transmitted infections such as *Chlamydia* and the decline in young people's knowledge of HIV transmission, the Australia Institute laments that the 'fantasy of sex as it appears in popular culture is not balanced by widespread understanding of the physical risks of real sex.'²⁷ Certainly it does not assist young people to understand the place of sex within a loving and committed relationship.

Eating disorders

Children in developed nations are now reaching puberty much earlier than they did in previous generations. One sixth of eight-year-old girls show some signs of puberty, compared to one in 100 a generation ago. One in 14 eight year old boys have pubic hair, compared to one in 250 a generation ago²⁸.

However, this earlier onset of puberty does not mean that children are maturing equally fast in other areas:

...experts in childhood development often note that children's emotional and cognitive development has not advanced at the same pace [as their physical development]. As a result, children's bodies are maturing before they are psychologically mature. Children are thus ill-equipped to deal with sexualising pressure, which implies that only a limited range of mature body types are attractive and desirable²⁹.

Of course, few people match this ideal body type, which is largely a fiction created by magazine editors making creative use of image manipulation software. However, the constant promotion of the ideal shape in television, advertising and magazines has detrimental effects, particularly on the development of young girls.

²⁶ Bar-on M, Broughton D, Buttrose S and Corrigan S, 'Sexuality, contraception and the media,' *Pediatrics*, 2001, Vol 107, No 1, pp191-194

²⁷ Rush and La Nauze, op cit, p43

²⁸ Odone C, 'Sexy kids,' *New Statesman*, July 15, 2002

²⁹ Rush and La Nauze, op cit, p35

Strasburger³⁰ reports a study of nearly 3,000 Spanish 12 to 21 year olds, which found that those who read girls magazines doubled their risk of developing an eating disorder. Field³¹ reports a US study of approximately 7,000 girls aged 9 to 14 which showed that purging behaviour such as vomiting or using laxatives was more likely in those girls who placed a higher importance on looking like females on TV, in movies or in magazines.

Net-savvy youngsters are now using online methods to assist one another in the potentially fatal pursuit of the ideal body. In April 2008, France announced new measures to stamp out pro-anorexia blogs and websites where anorexics share experiences and tips on subjects like appetite suppressants, giving one another advice about how to lie to their doctors, what kinds of food are easiest to vomit, and how to 'purge' whenever they take any kind of food³².

Medical professionals have noted the dangers of eating disorders and linked the rising pressure to achieve an impossible ideal body type with irresponsible media portrayals. In 2002, the Australian Medical Association issued a position statement on body image and health.

Body image attitudes develop during childhood and dissatisfaction tends to increase during adolescence and young adulthood especially in females. Young people are dieting and expressing dissatisfaction with their body shapes at an increasingly young age. This is of great concern, as dieting is a known precipitant factor in the development of eating disorders. Eating disorders are serious psychiatric illnesses associated with a high level of suicide. Research indicates that even if young people recover from an eating disorder, they may suffer long-term health problems as a result of their illness...

While on average people weigh more than they did 20 years ago; the perceived 'ideal' body type is getting thinner. This dissonance has been found to contribute to body dissatisfaction in both men and women. Extreme dieting restrictions and vigorous exercise regimes would be needed to obtain this 'ideal' body type for most people...

While some can be commended for their healthy portrayal of body image in the media, marketing and advertising portrayals of physical perfection create particular social pressures that impact on a person's body image. There is a growing body of research evidence suggesting that the impact of idealised images in the media can be hazardous especially for individuals who have certain

³⁰ Strasburger, 2005, op cit

³¹ Field AE, Camargo CAJ, Taylor CB, Berkley CS, and Colditz GA, 'Relation of peer and media influences on the development of purging behaviours among pre-adolescent and adolescent girls,' *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, 1999, Vol 153, No 11, pp1184-1189

³² 'Jail terms for pro-anorexia websites,' www.news.com.au, 16th April 2008

vulnerability's such as low self-esteem. Young people are especially susceptible to social pressures to conform to ideal stereotypes³³.

To sum up, there is evidence from reputable studies, including public statements from highly credible professional bodies such as the American Psychological Association, that the premature sexualisation of children has a range of negative impacts on their sexual development, relationships, achievements in other fields, and on their physical health. The Australian Medical Association has also expressed serious concerns about the impact of idealised media images of physical perfection may have on individuals who are vulnerable to developing serious conditions such as eating disorders.

Strategies to address premature sexualisation

ACL argues that the recommendations below need to be implemented as a matter of urgency.

Priority to be given to children's interests

Children's interests need to be given priority in a reformed media system. This could be achieved by:

- Establishing an independent regulatory system to oversee all media exposure and advertising that impacts on children and teenagers.
- Appointing a Federal Children's Commissioner with the power to:
 - Veto marketing practices and products that sexualise children;
 - Educate advertising and marketing professionals and the general public about the prevalence and dangers of sexualising marketing practices for children and adolescents.

Advertising

Australia's advertising system needs a complete overhaul, both in its code of ethics and its regulatory structures. Many individuals and organisations who care about children share a common frustration about the current system of advertising industry self-regulation, which almost always supports industry concerns above public interest concerns. Self-regulatory structures and responses have failed to respect the concerns of parents by making it extremely difficult for them to limit children's exposure to harmful advertising messages and images.

³³ *Position Statement on Body Image and Health*, Australian Medical Association, 2002

Failure of the Advertising Standards Board

The Advertising Standards Board (ASB) is an industry-established body, which handles complaints about advertisements. While it supposedly represents community standards, it fails to consult child development experts about the potential impact of advertisements on children. The ASB does not have any role in authorising advertisements before they are released but simply adjudicates on complaints, which it usually summarily dismisses based on flimsy defences from the advertising industry, without reference to objective opinion from health development experts. On those comparatively rare occasions when the ASB finds that an advertisement does breach the advertising code, it has no power to impose fines, meaning that advertisers can defy the rules in short advertising campaigns, stop them if ASB finds against them, and face no penalty, either financial or commercial.

Failure of the Advertisers' Code of Ethics

The Advertisers Code of Ethics and its accompanying Advertising to Children Code are industry-developed codes which should govern the content of advertising. As noted above, however, advertisers can breach these codes with relative impunity.

Even within this very lax system, the codes themselves do not currently prohibit unhealthy sexualising content. The Code of Advertising to Children does not deal with the sexualisation of children. The more general code dealing with advertising gives no recognition to the fact that children and adolescents may be adversely affected by highly sexualised outdoor advertising such as that appearing on billboards.

Contrast this with the very serious provisions made to address the marketing of junk food to children, which has arisen from political, medical and community concern about rising levels of childhood obesity. Surely the rising levels of eating disorders, sexualised behaviour and value systems, and sexually transmitted diseases amongst young people, all call for a similarly tough stance to be taken against sexualising content in advertisements.

Recommendations to improve advertising standards

Self-regulation of advertising by the advertising industry is a manifest failure. As a result, ACL recommends that:

- The self-regulatory advertising system be abolished;
- Government intervention be initiated to ensure that advertising practices which are harmful to children and adolescents be stamped out;
- Priority to be given to fulfilling social responsibilities to children and the community in a new model of advertising, media and marketing regulation managed by the government;

- A new or amended ethics code be established for advertising which forbids sexualised images of adults, adolescents or children in any context where this may harm the psychological development of children and adolescents. This new code needs to be accompanied by appropriate penalties for advertisers that are significant enough to promote compliance. Consideration should be given to a statutory code;
- Participation of relevant industry groups in the new body is to be encouraged but it must be balanced (or even outweighed) by the participation of parents, community groups, and child and adolescent development experts;
- Whilst sexualising content is to be firmly discouraged in all media, it should be treated particularly seriously in outdoor advertising, as this is unavoidable viewing for many parents and children. All billboards and other outdoor advertisements should be screened before entering the public domain by an independent panel which includes qualified childhood experts;

Complaints system

At present, the complex and unresponsive complaints system deters people from expressing their concerns about advertisements, television and radio programs. Members of the public often find the different systems confusing, frustrating and difficult to access. There are several different complaints bodies, depending on the issue, and each has different processes, timescales and approaches to handling complaints. In most cases, however, it takes much too long to get a decision on a complaint, with the result that many television programs have screened their entire season of episodes with impunity, even if they later receive a gentle rap over the knuckles for breaking the rules.

ACL recommends the establishment of a single complaints system covering all media. This would simplify the complaints process. This independent body should be staffed by complaints process experts who can channel the complaints received, provide timely responses and ensure appropriate penalties are swiftly imposed on media outlets that have forsaken their social responsibilities.

Robust codes of conduct for broadcasting and other media

This complaints system would need to be supported by agreed and enforced codes of content for all areas of media (not only advertising as described above, but also television and radio broadcasting) to require responsible commercial behaviour. This would cover the marketing of products and services, entertainment broadcasting, music, and any other areas that need to respect the developmental needs of children and youth.

In particular, this system should ensure that:

- Sexualised music video clips can only be shown outside children's viewing hours and that stricter controls are placed on radio and television advertising before the watershed;
- Strict limitations are imposed on sexualised content and imagery in magazines marketed to children and teens;
- Pornographic magazines must be covered by opaque wraps and kept on high shelves beyond children's eye level, rather than on obvious display in supermarkets, petrol stations, newsagents and convenience stores;
- Restrictions are imposed on what can be sold to children and teens to prevent the sale of sexualised merchandise including inappropriate clothing and toys;

A robust and protective system such as this would better provide parents with the opportunity to limit their child's exposure to media messages and images that they judged inappropriate or harmful.

Conclusion

Legislators can no longer ignore the devastating impact that the sexualisation of children is having on vulnerable young people. Urgent, serious and sustained action is needed to change this environment.

ACL firmly hopes that this initial Senate Inquiry will be followed by the introduction of legislation to put an end to industry self-regulation and to give prominence to the evident need to protect children from the unhealthy sexualised environment, which now sadly exists in Australia.

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