

**SUBMISSION TO THE  
SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO THE  
SEXUALISATION OF CHILDREN IN THE CONTEMPORARY  
MEDIA ENVIRONMENT  
APRIL 2008**

**NSW Commission for Children and Young People  
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## **THE NSW COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

The NSW Commission for Children and Young People ('the Commission') promotes the safety, welfare and well-being of children and young people in NSW.

The Commission was established by the *Commission for Children and Young People Act 1998* (NSW) ('the Act'). Section 10 of the Commission's Act lays down three statutory principles which govern the work of the Commission:

- a) the safety, welfare and well-being of children are the paramount considerations;
- b) the views of children are to be given serious consideration and taken into account; and
- c) a co-operative relationship between children and their families and community is important to the safety, welfare and well-being of children.

Section 12 of the Commission's Act requires the Commission to give priority to the interests and needs of vulnerable children. Children are defined in the Act as all people under the age of 18 years.

Section 11(d) of the Act provides that one of the principal functions of the Commission is to make recommendations to government and non-government agencies on legislation, policies, practices and services affecting children.

## **GENERAL COMMENTS**

The Commission is pleased to make a submission to the Standing Committee's inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment.

The Commission advocates for the wellbeing of children and young people including their participation in the communities and societies in which they live. We recognise that children and young people are active consumers and producers of a wide range of media.

The Commission's submission is structured in the following sections and provides discussion on:

- Children, young people and the media
- The debate on the sexualisation of children in the media

- The evidence on the effects of the sexualisation of children on children and young people
- Recommendations

## CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE MEDIA

Media are sources of entertainment, communication, education and information. They are part of everyday life for almost all Australian children and young people. The Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2006 found that 97% of Australian children aged 5 to 14 years watched television, videos or DVDs, 92% used a computer during or outside school hours with 65% having accessed the internet and 64% played electronic or computer games<sup>1</sup> (over a two week period).

Media, particularly emerging media, potentially offer children and young people great opportunities to communicate with each other, to access learning and educational opportunities, to play and to participate in society.

Children's exposure to media occurs in a variety of settings. Children and young people are engaging with and using a variety of media at home, at school, on public transport and in public spaces. Most homes have more than one type of electronic media and children and young people are now more media savvy than previous generations. Writing about new media and young people, Sonia Livingston argues that the 21st century home is being transformed into a site of a multimedia culture<sup>2</sup>.

The emergence of new technologies and new media has historically been accompanied by community concern and debate about the mode, messages, and images that are being communicated. The introduction and popularisation of cinema, radio and television during the 20th century was accompanied by public debate about the potential negative social impacts of these new technologies on society, particularly on children and young people.

Livingston notes that the questions now being asked about children's relationship with media have been asked before, and argues the advent of new media generates community discussion and sometimes creates "moral panics"<sup>3</sup>. These discussions are usually adult-centred: they reflect the concerns of adults rather than the views of children and young people.

Adults have a responsibility to care for and protect children. Parents and families are gatekeepers of children's access to much media. The proliferation of mass media makes this task more challenging. Parents are, rightly, concerned about the images that children and young people are increasingly exposed to and the potential impact that the media has on their children's safety and well-being.

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<sup>1</sup> ABS (April 2006) *Children's participation in cultural and leisure activities*, 4901.0, Australia

<sup>2</sup> Sonia Livingston (2002) *Young people and New Media*, Sage Publications, London

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p.5

## THE DEBATE ON THE SEXUALISATION OF CHILDREN IN THE MEDIA

The recent Australian debate on the sexualisation of children in the media has focused on inappropriate images of children and the promotion of products that encourage the commodification of childhood and the sexualisation of children and young people<sup>4</sup>.

In preparing this submission, very little research could be identified which sought children and young people's views on their sexualisation in the media. The absence of children and young people's voices in the current public discussion is concerning. It may reinforce a notion of kids as passive consumers of media and products.

The Australian debate on this issue is dominated by the voices and opinions of adults. It has focused on adult concerns about media images of children and young people, particularly females, and marketing products using these images to children. Issues that concern children may not be those that concern adults.

Research undertaken by the University of Western Sydney and the Australian Broadcasting Authority in 1999 sought the views of children on media harm. They found that while some children found adult concerns about the potential harm of media to children justified, many thought their concerns were unconvincing or exaggerated. Young people also spoke of double standards of parents and teachers in regards to television viewing<sup>5</sup>.

The Commission has discussed the issue with some children and young people. While they have not identified actual harm to themselves or other children and young people they know, they have expressed disquiet about being exposed to sexualised material. It often makes them uncomfortable. They recognise that some material is for adults, and many of them would prefer not to have to see age-inappropriate material.

There remains a need to seek out the views of children and young people on how they are depicted in the media, particularly discovering how media influences their beliefs, behaviours and attitudes. It is recommended that the current inquiry seek the views of children and young people, give them serious consideration and reflect them in the final inquiry report.

The debate is not limited to Australia. A 2007 American Psychological Association Task Force defined sexualisation as occurring when:

- *A person's value comes only from his or her sexual appearance or behaviour to the exclusion of other characteristics*

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<sup>4</sup> The media debate is documented in Rush, E & La Nauze (2006) Letting Children be Children : stopping the sexualisation of children in Australia, The Australia Institute, Discussion paper 93

<sup>5</sup> Children's views about media harm A collaborative project between the University of Western Sydney and the Australian Broadcasting Authority (2000), Monograph 10, Australian Broadcasting Authority, Sydney. P. 29

- A person is held to a standard that equates sexual 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/or decision making; and/or
- Sexuality is inappropriately imposed on a person<sup>6</sup>.

## THE EVIDENCE ON THE EFFECTS OF THE SEXUALISATION OF CHILDREN

It is important to note that there is limited empirical research about the effects of sexualisation on children. The American Psychological Association report quoted above states that there is a "paucity of research specifically on the sexualisation of girls" and that the available research concerns the sexualisation of women<sup>7</sup>.

Potential sources of material sexualising children in the media are many, and likely to increase as new technologies and media emerge. Sources identified in the American Psychological Association report include prime time television programs, television and radio commercials, music videos, song lyrics, magazines, movies, newspaper and billboard advertisements, cartoons and animation, sports coverage, video and computer games, and the internet.

There are, potentially at least, many direct beneficiaries of the sexualisation of children and young people. The beneficiaries may include designers, celebrities, advertisers, producers, retailers, shareholders and those who directly profit from advertisements, television and radio stations, newspapers, magazines, eBusinesses and internet service providers. The scope of potential beneficiaries is enormous<sup>8</sup>. They are almost all adults.

Children and young people themselves very rarely derive any benefit from being sexualised, though some young entertainers and models may receive benefits in terms of income and career advancement. There is little evidence about whether they also suffer harm.

There has been concern expressed about the impact of sexualised images on potential abusive behaviour. Writing about child pornography possession and abuse, Carr argues

*The increase in looking, collecting and possessing child abuse images is leading to more children being abused than otherwise would have been the case because:*

<sup>6</sup> American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2007). Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2007).  
<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p.4  
<sup>8</sup> Rush, E & La Nauze A (2006) Corporate Paedophilia: Sexualisation of children in Australia, the Australia Institute, Discussion paper 90.

- (1) *It is likely to cause a proportion of this enlarged population of 'lookers, collectors and possessors' to go on to abuse children; and*
- (2) *it also creates a demand for new child abuse images to be produced, and in order to produce these new images new children will be recruited to be abused*<sup>9</sup>

While the link between child pornography possession and abuse is contentious, consumption of pornography has been identified as a risk factor for boys' and young men's perpetration of sexual assault<sup>10</sup>. However, no research has been identified to link possession of non-pornographic sexualised images of children with abusive behaviour.

While evidence on the impacts of sexualised images on children and young people is scarce, there is emerging evidence that children are influenced by media. This does raise the need for community reflection on the messages being transmitted to children, particularly around appearance and sexuality.

For example, there has been some research on body image. Media, along with parental and peer influence, appear to influence body image development in children<sup>11</sup>. Research has also identified that children are vulnerable to messages the media portray about body image and that during adolescence they become accustomed to the images conveyed<sup>12</sup>.

An Australian study into the influence of media and peers on body image in girls 5-8 years found that young girls are living in an "appearance culture". Girls who had greater exposure to women's magazines, perhaps belonging to their mothers or sisters, were found to be less satisfied with their appearance. Girls who viewed more music videos showed greater dieting awareness. The study found exposure to age-appropriate media, for example, children's television, was completely benign with respect to body image<sup>13</sup>.

The absence of empirical evidence does not mean that there is no cause for concern nor that no harm is done to children or young people by exposure to sexualised material in the media.

Given the absence of evidence, we should be cautious.

<sup>9</sup> Carr, J (2003) *Child abuse, child pornography and the internet*. London: NCH

<sup>10</sup> Flood, M & Hamilton, C, *Youth and Pornography in Australia, Evidence on the extent of exposure and likely effects*, The Australia Institute, Discussion Paper Number 52, Feb 2003

<sup>11</sup> Clark, L & Tiggemann, M (2007) *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, vol.36, no.1 pp. 76-86

<sup>12</sup> Lawrie, Z, Sullivan, E, Davies, P and Hill R. (2006) *Media influence on the body image of children and Adolescents, eating disorders*, 14:355-364

<sup>13</sup> Dohnt, H. and Tiggemann, M. (2007) "Body image concerns in young girls: the role of peers and media prior to adolescence" in *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, vol.35, no. 2, April 2006, pp.141-151, p.149

We should respect the expressed wishes of many children and young people that they are not comfortable with sexual material and they would prefer not to be exposed to it.

A group of primary school children from the Blue Mountains for example, recently travelled along a major highway to visit the Commission. During the meeting two boys on behalf of the group, asked the Commissioner if she could get rid of the rude billboards they had passed on their journey to the meeting. They said they'd seen rude billboards about three times and that they'd found them offensive and distressing. The billboards advertised 'sex enhancing nasal spray for longer lasting erections' and 'longer lasting sex'. Although the billboard image did not feature children and the product was not targeted to children, the billboard was designed to be seen by all travellers on a major highway. It clearly had a negative impact on this group of children.

Other children have mentioned being upset by pornographic magazines being displayed at children's eye-level, especially in convenience stores and service stations.

Children should not be subjected to this sort of adult material that distresses them nor can parents protect them from it, as they can't hide billboards or display racks in the same way they can turn off a TV.

The current Advertising Standards Bureau (ASB) guidelines do not contain specific regulations for billboard advertisements. Billboard advertisements are viewable 24 hours a day. Not all are suitable for, and some are offensive to, children. Local government has the power to regulate billboards. Councils could be required to consider the impact on children of sexual material when approving billboard applications.

The proliferation of sex and sexy images in the mainstream media exposes children to complex messages about sex, bodies, values and attitudes across a wide range of media.

The effects of this exposure on children require further investigation. Until more is known about the effects, it would be appropriate to respect children's wishes and reduce the possibility that they will unwittingly be exposed to sexualised material, whether it features adults, young people or children.

Children and young people develop over time in many ways, including emotionally and sexually. Material with some sexual content may be appropriate and acceptable to most 16 year olds, but offensive to most 8 year olds. Developmental, age and cultural appropriateness are perhaps more crucial than the simple presence or absence of sexual material.

The responsibility for monitoring and shaping the content of the media is shared by communities, industry, regulators, government and media. They should share in responding to concerns about the effects on children and young people, and to the wishes of children and young people.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1. Governments and industry should expand and promote opportunities for children and young people to contribute to developing and producing material across a range of media.
2. The Australian Government should expand age-appropriate entertainment and educational media for children, by funding ABC 3 as a children's free to air television station.
3. Education departments should encourage and assist schools to implement curriculum that explores and critically analyses media content.
4. Industry, governments and child, family and youth services should encourage families to be active in monitoring their children's use of and exposure to the range of media available within their homes.
5. Governments and industry should support and encourage parents to spend time with their children through: family friendly work practices and policies; easy access to simple information about making secure their home media devices; and opportunities to raise, and have addressed, their concerns about inappropriate media.
6. Funders of research should prioritise the development of a solid evidence base about:
  - a. the impact on children and young people' well-being of sexualisation of children in the media and children's exposure to adult sexual material
  - b. the experiences and concerns of children and young people about their representation in the media
  - c. factors influencing the development of body image disorders in children and young people.
7. Media regulators should enforce existing standards and regularly review them, in consultation with children and young people among others, to address concerns about the impact of sexualisation on children.
8. Regulatory guidelines for approval of Billboard advertisements by local councils should be strengthened to reduce the exposure of children and young people to sexually explicit or suggestive material.
9. The retail industry should adopt a code of practice that avoids pornographic or other sexualised material being displayed where children may easily see it.