

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

11 April 2008

Dear Sir,

**Submission from the Life, Marriage and Family Centre,
Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney to the Inquiry into the
Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media
Environment**

In my position as Director of the Life, Marriage and Family Centre, and drawing on my experience as a family and parent advocate, I wish to forward this submission on behalf of the Life, Marriage and Family Centre, Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney.

The Life, Marriage and Family Centre is an agency of the Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney and has been established to extend the research, policy, educational and pastoral activities the Church undertakes with respect to life, marriage and family issues. Currently there are some 589, 000 Catholics in the Archdiocese of Sydney, constituting 32.3% of the general population living within the geographical boundaries of the diocese. Over one million Catholics live in the greater Sydney area and there are approximately 5.1 million Catholics nationally.

The Catholic Church has a great and ongoing tradition of caring for families and children. Catholic agencies have long dedicated significant resources to provide family support services and we continue to be involved as a significant non-government provider of these services for the wider community.

Catholics hold strong beliefs about the dignity of the human person, especially those persons in vulnerable circumstances. In particular, we maintain that in the case of children there is an important duty of care. As such, to permit the projection of media influences which fail to respect that latency period which is vital to each child's healthy psychosexual development is to allow a form of abuse.

Provisions of the Bill

The inquiry seeks to examine the sources of the premature sexualisation of children in the media, review the evidence for its effects on children and to examine strategies to prevent or reduce the sexualisation of children in the media.

Comments

The place of the media. The Catholic community has always regarded the various means of communication as an opportunity for humanity. However, the contemporary media environment also poses great risks for children and families. Pope Benedict XVI has spoken of the need to safeguard children and families from dangerous influences: “On the one hand, undoubtedly, much of great benefit to civilization is contributed by the various components of the mass media...On the other hand, it is also readily apparent that much of what is transmitted in various forms to the homes of millions of families around the world is destructive.¹” No media platform should be permitted to project those images and portrayals that are damaging to the developing young person and to family life. An all too common effect of such damaging portrayals is the premature sexualisation of vulnerable young persons.

The preciousness of human sexuality. Human sexuality is linked to the identity of every man or woman and has physical, moral and spiritual dimensions. Sexuality ‘especially concerns affectivity, the capacity to love and to procreate, and, in a more general way the aptitude for forming bonds of communion with others’². Sexualisation occurs when the worth of a person “is judged on the basis of sexual appeal and behaviour” and ‘when a person is seen as a sexual object rather than a person with their own independent thoughts and behaviour’³. When vulnerable young people are induced to accept such a damaging portrayal of the human person it causes manifest damage to their own proper development as persons and impairs their understanding of the nature of healthy relationships. In particular, when children are portrayed in a sexualised manner the damage is even more profound.

The need to support parents. The role of parents in educating their children in a proper understanding of the nature of human sexuality and of how to form appropriate bonds of communion with others should never be undermined. Governments need to be at the service of parents in this regard since ‘children are only likely to be able to develop freely if government assists parents by limiting sexualizing pressure at its source – advertisers and marketers. Current regulations are failing in this task’⁴. Previously, premature sexualisation in children occurred through their exposure to advertising and popular culture. A more recent phenomenon which has heightened the potential for harm to

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, “Address to Plenary Council of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications”, March 9, 2007, accessed at <http://www.zenit.org/article-19115?l=english> on February 20, 2008.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, para 2332

³ Australian Psychological Society, *Helping Girls Develop a Positive Self-image*, APS website 2008

⁴ Rush, E and La Nauze A., *Letting Children Be Children*, Discussion Paper 93, The Australia Institute, December 2006

children is the portrayal of children in images, entertainment media or advertisements in ways that mimic adult sexual behaviour. Subtle and not so subtle influences which contribute to the sexualisation of children 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 yet possess these physical attributes, yet they are dressed and posed as if they do, often with the aid of cosmetics that 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 – apply’⁵. The impetus behind such images and portrayals is almost exclusively commercial opportunity and the desire for adults to obtain monetary gain.

The harm to children. There are a number of specific types of harms which are linked with premature sexualisation. The portrayal of an ‘ideal’ body type via various media is associated with an increased incidence of eating disorders among older children and teenagers. One Spanish study of 3000 girls found a two-fold increase in the risk of developing an eating disorder in those who read girls magazines while a US study of several thousand young teenage girls found that the risk of vomiting or laxative use increased in line with how strongly a girl wanted to look like women portrayed in movies and the media⁶. The risk of psychological harm to children is a particular concern. A recent Australian study of young girls found that half of those surveyed wanted to be thinner although only 15% were overweight⁷. An extensive 2007 review by the American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls found clear evidence ‘that girls exposed to sexualising and objectifying media are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction, depression, and lower self-esteem’. In addition, the APA review found that objectifying and sexualizing media was shown to be associated with ‘boys’ sexual harassment of girls and attitudes towards sexual violence’⁸.

A further and particularly worrying possibility is that as sexual images and portrayals of young children become more explicit ‘it is possible that younger children will also develop more attention seeking sexual behaviours’⁹. Whilst the extent to which such sexualized images of children may promote paedophilia may not yet be clear, society has an obligation to protect vulnerable children and to adopt a precautionary approach with respect to their portrayal in the media. Some studies already indicate ‘significant correlations between viewing of sexual content in the media and sexual activity, including testing positive for sexually transmitted diseases’¹⁰. There is a further risk of profound harm to young people from common media portrayals that ‘normalise the treatment of women as objects, present sex and violence as linked, and show sex as a commodity’¹¹. Where such values and behaviours are promoted there is significant

⁵ Rush, E and La Nauze A., *Corporate Paedophilia*, Discussion Paper 90, The Australia Institute, October 2006, p 7

⁶ Detailed in Rush, E and La Nauze A., *Corporate Paedophilia*, Discussion Paper 90, The Australia Institute, October 2006, p 35

⁷ Detailed in Rush, E and La Nauze A., *Corporate Paedophilia*, Discussion Paper 90, The Australia Institute, October 2006, p 37

⁸ APA Task force Report of the Sexualisation of Girls, Washington, 2007, p 35.

⁹ Lamb, S. and Brown, L. 2006. *Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing our daughters from marketers’ schemes*. St Martin’s Press, NY, p 48

¹⁰ Strasburger cited in Rush, E and La Nauze A., *Corporate Paedophilia*, Discussion Paper 90, The Australia Institute, October 2006,

¹¹ Linn, 2005 cited in Rush, E and La Nauze A., *Corporate Paedophilia*, Discussion Paper 90, The Australia Institute, October 2006,

potential for ongoing and destructive effects on the social relationships and self-images of persons across their lifetimes.

Summary

In conclusion, children face a range of risks as a consequence of their sexualisation through the media. These risks are associated with eating disorders, psychological harm, increased attention seeking behaviours, paedophilia, premature sexual intercourse, and the impairment of their proper social development and of their ability to contract healthy relationships. Whatever media standards are being applied, through self-regulation or otherwise, are clearly and woefully inadequate to ensure the proper protection of children from sexualisation. As a society we have a duty of care to change this situation quickly - even if it requires imposing some limitations on adult choices and experiences.

Recommendations. A new legislative and regulatory framework which adopts a highly precautionary approach where the interests of children are concerned would do much to improve the current situation. When laws change, social perceptions and norms change with them and the resultant effects are felt by everybody.

1. There is a real opportunity to nudge society along a healthier community path through the introduction of regulations which place the 'onus of proof' on the various media producers and outlets to clearly demonstrate that their images and portrayals do no harm.
2. In addition, since it is children that are most at risk there would appear to be sound reasons for including parents, each of whom has a number of children of different ages, within any body which has a formal monitoring role of standards in advertising and the broader media.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Secretariat undertaking this review. I would be happy to meet with any relevant persons to discuss the issue outlined above should that be useful.

Yours sincerely,
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