

Inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment

With sexualised imagery on the increase, self regulation is failing our children, and the regulatory system and bodies need serious review.

As a concerned citizen, I am extremely unhappy with the appallingly low standards of advertising and marketing and their impacts on young and not so young children. I am highly angered at the way exceptionally sexualised images and messages that are being used in public spaces especially on television and radio, are being met with almost complete apathy towards their impact, especially on young people. In a recent attempt to alert the Advertising Standards Board of my concern about a large billboard advertising 'longer lasting sex', they completely dismissed my complaint with regards to hyper-sexualised imagery. Numerous friends complained to the board and they were met with similar dismissals. This experience made me realize how difficult it is to make a complaint - so many of us as average everyday citizens just give up because the process is too complicated and time consuming. Thus the Women's Forum Australia provides me with organizational representation and a voice to more adequately and efficiently ensure that my voice may be heard.

Therefore as a member of the Women's Forum Australia, I wholeheartedly agree with the proposal they have submitted and strongly endorse all of the suggestions they have made.

You will have received their document no doubt. I have included it again as it completely reflects my sentiments.

Debra Black

From the Women's Forum Australia.

1. Amendments to the Code:

We call for amendments to the AANA Advertiser Code of Ethics (the code dealing with advertising generally) and the Advertising to Children Code to prohibit unhealthy sexualising content. The AANA Code of advertising to children has no section which deals with the sexualisation of children. The code dealing with general advertising has no acknowledgment that children and adolescents may be adversely affected by highly sexualised public advertising such as that appearing on billboards. (In contrast, the AANA takes the advertising of food and beverages to children very seriously).

The AANA needs to address:

- *Sexually provocative or highly sexualised images of adults or adolescents in any context where such depictions may impact adversely on the psychological development of children and adolescents.*
- *Depictions that sexually objectify men or women, in locations or in ways that could adversely impact the healthy development of children and adolescents.*
- *Depictions of children as focused on bodily appearance or dress, or as sexually aware or engaging in sexual behaviours.*

2. More Government involvement in regulation:

The current self regulatory scheme has failed to maintain adequate advertising standards. It has also failed to acknowledge or respond adequately to the developmental needs of young people. Self regulatory structures and responses have not properly acknowledged the rights of parents and guardians to manage or limit children's exposure to harmful media and advertising messages and images.

The Advertising Standards Board was set up by industry to police itself. It purports to reflect community standards. Yet it does not consult child development experts about the potential impact of advertisements on children before they are released for public viewing. The ASB

does not vet advertisements before they are released publicly - it only gets involved when there is a complaint. Even when complaints are made they are often dismissed, without a response based on objective opinion from health professionals in the field of child development. The ASB cannot impose fines, so advertisers can breach the rules with short advertising campaigns, stop them if ASB finds against them, and face no penalty.

- Government intervention is needed to ensure that industry practices that are harmful to child and adolescent development are prohibited. A new model is needed which upholds social responsibility to children and the community as being the central consideration in the use of public space and airwaves. Input and participation of relevant industry groups must be balanced by input and participation by the public, especially parents and guardians and child and adolescent development experts as well as government. Public accountability and social responsibility need to be guiding principals in advertising, media and marketing standards and regulation.
- Child and adolescent development experts should be represented on the Advertising Standards Board.

3. Oversight of children's interests in marketing, media and advertising:

WFA supports the establishment of a Federal Children's Commissioner with the power to

- ban sexualised marketing practices and products that do not respect children's developmental needs.
- educate industry and the public about the dangers of sexualising marketing practices on children and adolescents.

4. Reform of complaints processes to achieve more accessibility and accountability:

Complaints mechanisms are unwieldy and difficult to understand and access by ordinary members of the public. A range of bodies are responsible for handling complaints about advertising, media and marketing. Each body is currently accessed through different complaints making and complaints hearing processes and accountability mechanisms are inconsistent. It takes much too long to get a determination.

WFA calls for implementation of a centralised administration to administer and channel complaints, creating a one-stop complaints point for the general public. Complaints would be received by complaints process experts who would direct the various complaints to the relevant responsible bodies. Principles of an effective, accountable and accessible complaints process would include:

- monthly turnaround times with requirements that responsible bodies respond within this monthly time frame with meaningful and accountable response processes.
- requirements for wider industry codes of conduct that would prohibit marketing practices that can harm children and adolescents through premature sexualisation, with requirements as above. Such codes should require responsible commercial behaviour, including in products and services marketing, music, entertainment marketing and broadcasting, that respects the developmental needs of children and youth and that also allows parents and guardians the reasonable capacity to limit or avoid exposure to products, messages or images judged developmentally inappropriate or harmful.