

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

My family and I are unhappy with the low standards of advertising and marketing and their impacts on our children. We are angry at the way highly sexualised images and messages are being used in public spaces and on television and radio with almost complete indifference to their impact, especially on young people. The Advertising Standards Board appears to dismiss almost all complaints relating to sexualised imagery. The obstacles of a cumbersome complaints process serves to discourage any efforts to voice complaints, many just give up because the process is too complicated and time consuming.

We are calling for:

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:

We support 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.

We call 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.

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