

Submission

on the

Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media Environment

to the

Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts

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1. Introduction

The Senate has referred the following matter to the Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts for inquiry and report by the 23 June 2008:

The sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment, including radio and television, children's magazines, other print and advertising material and the Internet.

In undertaking the inquiry, the committee, in particular:

- a. examine the sources and beneficiaries of premature sexualisation of children in the media;
- b. review 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
- c. examine 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.

The Committee has called for public submissions which are due by 18 April 2008.

2. Sexualisation of children in advertising

Children have a right to enjoy their childhood without any pressure to prematurely develop an interest in, or give expression, to adult concerns and experiences, including an active sexual awareness.

The well-known cliché that “sex sells” should have no place in advertisements directed at children.

2.1 Taskforce on the Sexualization of Girls

The Report of the American Psychological Association (APA)'s Taskforce on the Sexualization of Girls¹ found evidence that “although advertisers are typically careful not to sexualise young girls directly, several advertising techniques do so indirectly.” The report cited studies illustrating three techniques:

- (1) Children, and girls especially, depicted as sexual objects or as counterparts to adult versions for example, advertisements in which girls appear with sexualised adult women and are posed in matching clothing or seductive poses.
- (2) Advertising imagery with both a “trickle up” and a “trickle down” framework on girls and women so that the distinction between women and girls may become blurred. In this framework, young girls are “adultified” and adult women are “youthified.”
- (3) Advertising which employs youthful or “barely legal” celebrity adolescents, particularly those popular with children, in highly sexual ways. The message from advertisers and the mass media to girls (as eventual women) is they should always be sexually available, always have sex on their minds, be willing to be dominated and even sexually aggressed against, and they will be gazed on as sexual objects.

The report also discusses “the impact of products that sexualise girls or women” including “dolls, clothing, and cosmetics” which “present examples of products marketed to girls that present images of sexy, sexualised persons.”²

According to the report “sexualisation occurs when 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; and/or sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person.”³

Sexualisation of girls is problematic because it may be linked to “a variety of harmful consequences. These consequences include harm to the sexualised individuals themselves, to their interpersonal relationships, and to society. For example, there is evidence that sexualisation contributes to impaired cognitive performance in college-aged women, and related research suggests that viewing material that is sexually objectifying can contribute to body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, low self-esteem, depressive affect, and even physical health problems in high-school-aged girls and in young women.

“The sexualisation of girls may not only reflect sexist attitudes, a societal tolerance of sexual violence, and the exploitation of girls and women but may also contribute to these phenomena.”⁴

2.2 Regulation of advertising to children

At present advertising on commercial free to air TV to children during C and P programming is governed by the Children’s Television Standard (CTS)⁵ while advertising to children during all other programming is governed by the Commercial Television Code of Practice and by AANA (Australian Association of National Advertisers) standards.

There would be merit in incorporating all the provisions dealing with advertising to children, into the CTS and applying CTS advertising provisions (excluding the restrictions on amount of advertising allowed during C programs) to all advertising directed to children. This would consolidate responsibility for all television advertising to children under the direct responsibility of the Australian Communications and Media Authority.

Importantly, it would mean that all complaints regarding advertising to children on television at any time, rather than only during P and C periods, could be made directly to ACMA rather than under the current system, which requires complaints about television advertising outside of CTS time to be made to the relevant licensee in the first instance. This single system would be much simpler for parents to follow. This proposal has been made to the Australian Communications and Media Authority’s Review of the Children’s Television Standard.⁶

The AANA Code for Advertising to Children would still be necessary to cover advertising to children in other broadcast contexts (including radio) and in print and other media.

Recommendation 1:

The Australian Association of National Advertisers should amend its Code for Advertising to Children by adding to the section on Social Values:

- ***as section 2.3.1 (c) a provision that “Advertisements to Children must not include images or language that directly or indirectly conveys or implies the sexualisation of children”;***
and
- ***as section 2.3.1 (d) a provision that “Advertisements to Children must not advertise products that sexualise children.”***

Recommendation 2:

These provisions should also be incorporated into both the Children’s Television Standard either by incorporating all relevant provisions of the AANA Code for Advertising to Children into the Standard or as separate provisions.

Recommendation 3:

The provisions dealing with advertising in the Children’s Television Standard should be applied to all television advertising to children not just to advertising during programming classified C and P. The complaints mechanism in the Children’s Television Standard should apply for all such advertising.

2.3 Definition of children

Section 1(d) of the current AANA Code for Advertising to Children defines children to mean “children 14 years old or younger”.⁷

The Consolidated ICC Code of Advertising and Marketing Communication Practice, issued by the International Chamber of Commerce, refers in Article 18 to “children and young people”. The provisions of Article 18 are said “to apply to marketing communication addressed to children and young people, as defined in national laws and regulations relevant to such communications.”⁸

The US⁹ and Canadian¹⁰ codes each define children as 12 years old or under. This seems unnecessarily restrictive.

The law of the European Union regarding television provides in Article 16¹¹ for the protection of “minors” from inappropriate broadcast advertising. The definition of minor is a matter for national law but most member states have an age of majority of 18.

The Convention on the Rights of a Child¹², which has been ratified by Australia, states in Article 1 to be a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier. The age of majority in all Australian jurisdictions is 18.

Recommendation 4:

The definition of children in all codes dealing with advertising should be amended to reflect the provision of Article 18 of the Consolidated ICC Code of Advertising and Marketing Communication Practice and the definition of children or minors under international and Australian law as all persons under 18 years of age.

3. Television

The Report of the APA Taskforce on the Sexualization of Girls provides a summary of research evidence¹³ indicating that:

- sexual comments and remarks are pervasive on television, and they disproportionately sexually objectify women;
- in prime-time comedies, sexual behaviours by men included were leering, ogling, staring, and catcalling at female characters and sexual remarks by men were about female body parts or nudity;

- one study of 81 episodes of prime-time programming found that 84% contained at least one incident of sexual harassment, with an average of 3.4 incidents per program;
- another study of 56 episodes of prime-time programming found that 74% contained at least one incident of gender harassment in the form of jokes, most of which were accompanied by laugh tracks, with the majority of jokes referring to women's sexuality or women's bodies and comments that characterized women as sexual objects.
- in music videos sexually objectifying images of women constitute a large portion of the content, with women more frequently than men presented in provocative and revealing clothing, objectified and typically serving as decorative objects that dance and pose and do not play any instruments, often displayed in ways that emphasize their bodies, body parts, facial features, and sexual readiness.

Noting research that the average child or teen watches 3 hours of television per day, the report comments that "massive exposure to media among youth creates the potential for massive exposure to portrayals that sexualize women and girls and teach girls that women are sexual objects."¹⁴

3.1 Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice

The Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice¹⁵ has no provisions which directly address the problem of sexualisation of women and girls in television programming.

Section 1.8.6 of the Code prohibits material which is likely to "provoke or perpetuate intense dislike, serious contempt or severe ridicule against a person or group of persons on the grounds of age, colour, gender, national or ethnic origin, disability, race, religion or sexual preference." This provision has not been interpreted to exclude the kind of material which presents women as sexual objects as outlined in the research summarised in the Report of the APA Taskforce on the Sexualization of Girls.

Provisions in the Code dealing with the depiction of sexual behaviour are linked to partial exceptions based on "justification by the story line". For example the Code provides in relation to "sex and nudity" in the MA Classification that¹⁶:

"Visual depiction of intimate sexual behaviour (which may only be discreetly implied or discreetly simulated) or of nudity only where relevant to the story line or program context. However, a program or program segment will not be acceptable where the subject matter serves largely or wholly as a vehicle for gratuitous, exploitative or demeaning portrayal of sexual behaviour or nudity. Exploitative or non-consenting sexual relations must not be depicted as desirable."

The Australian Communications and Media Authority has interpreted this provision as allowing the following depictions of sex and nudity in the series *Californication* largely on the grounds that this is a "a narrative set in contemporary Californian society"¹⁷:

- oral sex between a Catholic nun in her habit and the main male character;
- the main male character's 12 year old daughter alerting him to the presence of a naked woman in his bedroom;
- the main male character having sex with a 16 year old girl;
- a scene in which a woman asks the main male character whether she should have cosmetic surgery on her breasts and her vagina, he answers that she shouldn't while pushing her back through a doorway he is leaving by;
- a woman strips naked in front of the main male character asking him what he thinks of her body, her pubic area is obscured in the camera shot just by the man's arm; the couple then

have sexual intercourse after which they both vomit as a result to imbibing alcohol and smoking cannabis;

- while having sex with another woman the main male character fantasises about having sex with a 16 year old girl;
- a man masturbates while looking at photographs on a website of his female employee in sexualised poses dressed in her underwear with one nipple exposed;
- a couple have rear-entry intercourse;
- a man smacks the bare bottom and thighs of his young female employee.

This list of incidents of depictions of sexual behaviour is from just three one hour episodes of this series. If this series can pass muster by ACMA as suitable for free to air television then it is clear that either the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice is defective or its interpretation by ACMA is unacceptable. It does seem that ACMA gave too much weight to the question of relevance to the story line. The notion that because the story is *about* decadent and meaningless sex in California it is justifiable to serve up endless depictions of such sex is wrongheaded. ACMA also seemed to rely on a distorted notion of the word *discreetly*, arguing that various camera angles, shadows, and so forth made *discreet* the scenes in which it was quite clear that the sexual activity detailed above was taking place.

Recommendation 5:

The Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice should be revised to more clearly exclude programs that portray women as sexual objects. It should be made clearer that contextual factors such as story line do not permit the inclusion of material which otherwise exceeds a program's classification.

Recommendation 6:

Officers of the Australian Communications and Media Authority should be given appropriate training on the issue of sexualisation of women and girls so that they are less likely to treat as trivial the kinds of depictions of sexual behaviour prevalent in programs like Californication.

4. Music

The Report of the APA Taskforce on the Sexualization of Girls provides a summary¹⁸ of research evidence on the sexual content of popular music.

“It is evident that the lyrics of some recent popular songs sexualize women or refer to them in highly degrading ways, or both.

“Some examples include the following:

- “*So blow me bitch I don't rock for cancer / I rock for the cash and the topless dancers*” (Kid Rock, “f*ck off”, 1998);
- “*Don'tcha wish your girlfriend was hot like me?*” (Pussycat Dolls, 2005);
- “*That's the way you like to f*** ... rough sex make it hurt, in the garden all in the dirt*” (Ludacris, 2000);
- “*I tell the hos all the time, Bitch get in my car*” (50 Cent, 2005);

- “*Ho shake your ass*” (Ying Yang Twins, 2003);

“As part of a recent study of the effects of listening to popular music on sexual behavior (Martino *et al.*, 2006), researchers coded the content of 164 songs from 16 artists popular with teens. Overall, 15% of songs contained sexually degrading lyrics. Most of these lyrics were concentrated within the work of rap and R&B artists; as many as 70% of individual artists’ songs included degrading sexual content.”

Recent research has found that “Listening to music with degrading sexual lyrics is related to advances in a range of sexual activities among adolescents, whereas this does not seem to be true of other sexual lyrics. This result is consistent with sexual-script theory and suggests that cultural messages about expected sexual behavior among males and females may underlie the effect. Reducing the amount of degrading sexual content in popular music or reducing young people’s exposure to music with this type of content could help delay the onset of sexual behaviour.”¹⁹

4.1 Commercial Radio Codes of Practice & Guidelines

Commercial radio is governed by Commercial Radio Australia’s Codes of Practice & Guidelines.²⁰

Section 1.3 (e) of Code prohibits the broadcast of a program which is “likely to incite or perpetuate hatred against or vilify any person or group on the basis of age, ethnicity, nationality, race, gender, sexual preference, religion or physical or mental disability.”²¹

Section 1.5 (a) provides that “All program content must meet contemporary standards of decency, having regard to the likely characteristics of the audience of the licensee’s service.”²²

The Codes of Practice & Guidelines include “Guidelines and Explanatory Notes on the Portrayal of Women on Commercial Radio”²³. These provide that “In the portrayal of women on commercial radio, broadcasters should avoid promoting or endorsing inaccurate, demeaning or discriminatory descriptions of women by ... 5. not broadcasting material which condones or incites violence against women.”

Anecdotal evidence²⁴ suggests that music with demeaning song lyrics is nonetheless pervasive on commercial radio.

In May 2007 ACMA dismissed a complaint about offensive song lyrics broadcast in Tasmania on 7JJJ.²⁵ This complaint was made under the ABC Code of Practice which provides (at 2.3) that “Provided it is handled with integrity, any of the following treatments of sex and sexuality may be appropriate and necessary to a program: it can be discussed and reported in the context of news, current affairs, information or documentary programs; it can be referred to in drama, comedy, lyrics or fictional programs; and it can be depicted, implicitly or explicitly.”²⁶

“Handled with integrity” seems an insufficiently objective or specific criterion for assessing the acceptable boundaries of treatments of sex in song lyrics. It is hardly surprising that complaints are dismissed.

4.2 ARIA/AMRA Code of Practice

The Australian Recording Industry Association and the Australia Music Retailers Association have a Code of Practice²⁷ which provides for three levels of warning labels, as well as a provision dealing with product exceeding level 3 which is not to be sold.

This provides that “Product containing lyrics which promote, incite, instruct or exploitatively (“exploitative” means appearing to purposefully debase or abuse for the enjoyment of listeners, and

lacking moral, artistic or other values) or gratuitously (“gratuitous” means material which is unwarranted or uncalled for, and included without the justification of artistic merit) depict drug abuse; cruelty; suicide; criminal or sexual violence; child abuse; incest; bestiality; or any other revolting or abhorrent activity in a way that causes outrage or extreme disgust to most adult” is not to be sold.

The three warning levels are: *Moderate Impact* coarse language and/or themes; *Strong Impact* coarse language and/or themes; and, *High Impact Themes*, not to be sold to persons under 18.

Two examples of lyrics from albums recently approved for sale²⁸ by ARIA/AMRA with Level 3 Warnings suffice to illustrate the inadequacy of this scheme:

Stripped, raped and strangled²⁹

(from 15 Year Killing Spree [Album] by Cannibal Corpse

They think they know who I am
All they know is I love to kill
Face down, dead on the ground
Find me before another is found

I come alive in the darkness
Left murdered and nameless
Dead unburied and rotten
Half eaten by insects

She was so beautiful
I had to kill her

Tied her up
And taped her mouth shut
Couldn't scream
Raped violently
Rope tight, around her throat
Her body twitches
As she chokes

Strangulation caused her death
Just like all the others
Raped before and after death
Stripped, naked, tortured

They're all dead, they're all dead
They're all dead by strangulation

I come alive in the darkness
Left murdered and nameless
Dead unburied and rotten
Half eaten by insects

It felt so good to kill

I took their lives away
Seven dead, lying rotten
Unburied victims
Their naked bodies putrefy

Strangulation caused her death
Just like all the others
Raped before and after death
Stripped, naked, tortured

They're all dead, they're all dead
They're all dead by strangulation

I come alive in the darkness
Left murdered and nameless
Dead unburied and rotten
Half eaten by insects

They think they know who I am
All they know is I love to kill
Face down, dead on the ground
Find me before another is found

The Corpse Garden³⁰

(from Left in Grisly Fashion [Album] by Prostitute Disfigurement)

Cruising the streets for young women
Luring them into my van
Gagged, her eyes begged for mercy
Never to be seen again

Blindfolded, gagged with masks of tape
Stripped naked, shackled to the bed
Female body infested, bruised and lacerated
There's no escape from your fate

Enter the house of horror
No turning back from your fate

Slowly slicing her body
Using my tools of the trade
With a depraved relish
The horror is now uncaged

Young women were stripped
Bound with tape
Raped, tortured then killed [2x]
Dismembered and buried
In the corpse garden

Deceased through mutilation
Bones are turned to mush
Sliced female flesh leaves me
In a rudimentary rush

Slashing young women and children
Left mummified in my masonry
Stuffed and buried in my backyard

To hide my killing spree

The corpse garden [2x]

It is hard to see what might qualify as sufficiently exploitative and gratuitous to be actually classified as “not to be sold” under a system that finds these lyrics acceptable.

Recommendation 7:

The various codes of practice for radio, television and music recordings need to be revised and strengthened to more effectively limit the broadcast and distribution of material which demeans women by treating them as sexual objects, including as objects for sexual violence.

5. Internet

Pornographic websites - of which there are over 4 million of which at least 100,000 contain child pornography³¹ - are a growing problem, with especially serious risks for children. Cassandra Tinning, a social worker at the Child At Risk Assessment Unit based at the Canberra Hospital, has³² reported an alarming increase in sexually abusive behaviour by children against others - including “oral sex and forced intercourse with other children or forced intercourse with animals.”³³

She said her unit worked with children under 10 and had seen a dramatic increase in the numbers of children sexually harming other children - from three per year in the 1990s, to about 70 in the first half of 2003. Some were as young as six, seven or eight. Almost all of them went online to access pornography.

Many of these children thought that pornography was the internet’s sole purpose. A quarter of them had been shown by someone else how to find pornography on the internet. Most of the young abusers came from dysfunctional homes - but it was their internet exposure which led them to sexually abuse their peers.

The Government’s policy of implementing a national mandatory filtering scheme which will require all ISPs to provide a pornography-free feed to all home, schools and other places where children have access to the Internet is a vital measure to limit this harm.

In implementing this filtering scheme it should be possible to ensure that Internet content that would be classified as X18+ or RC (Refused Classification) is completely excluded by ISPs. RC material includes child pornography, incest fantasies and depictions of sexual violence. There is no reason for anyone in Australia to have access to this material.

The publication and sale of X18+ films has been banned by all States. The possession of X18+ films is prohibited in a significant part of the Northern Territory by the Commonwealth as part of the national emergency response to the sexual abuse of Aboriginal children. This leaves only the Australian Capital Territory and a portion of the Northern Territory where the sale of X18+ films is legal. It would be inappropriate for the Commonwealth to effectively undermine the State bans on the sale and publication of X18+ films by actively facilitating access to X18+ content on the Internet when this content has been identified and access blocked by the mandatory filtering scheme.

This would leave open the possibility of the provision by ISPs, on request with age verification in accordance with a reliable protocol, of access to MA 15+ and R18+ content.

Recommendation 8:

In implementing a national mandatory filtering scheme at ISP level:

- ***the feed for children should, as far as possible, exclude all content that would be classified as MA15+, R18+, X18+ or RC; and***
- ***the feed for adults available on request with reliable age verification should also exclude, as far as possible, all content that would be classified as X18+ or RC.***

6. X18+ films

All decent Australians have been deeply disturbed by the accounts of child sexual abuse, including the sexualisation of young children through exposure to X-rated pornography, recounted in *Little Children are Sacred*.³⁴

One example will suffice to illustrate the nature of the problem: “The Inquiry was also told a story of a 17-year-old boy who would regularly show pornographic DVDs at a certain house then get young children to act out the scenes from the films.”³⁵

This echoes the findings of the 1999 Report of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Task Force on Violence (Queensland)³⁶ which also pointed to the link between X-rated films and sexual violence against women and children: “The incidence of sexual violence is rising and is [in] a direct relationship to negative and deformed male socialisation associated with alcohol and other drug misuse, and the prevalence of pornographic videos in some Communities.” The Aboriginal Coordinating Council referred to \$4,000 to \$5,000 of orders of pornographic videos sent every week from Canberra to the Cape Communities.

At the Joint Press Conference announcing the Northern Territory emergency response legislative package on 22 June 2007 the Prime Minister, the Hon John Howard, stated: “that if this set of circumstances had been disclosed as taking place in the suburb of Dickson, can you imagine what the local response from police, from medical authorities and from the state government would have been? It would have been horror and immediate action and a demand by the community that something be done.”

Sadly, there is evidence that similar events involving the sexualisation of young children through exposure to X-rated pornography are taking place in the suburbs of Canberra. The problem may be less widespread than in indigenous communities but it is nonetheless alarming.

A paper³⁷ presented at the Ninth Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect in November 2003 by staff from the Child at Risk Assessment Unit, Canberra Hospital has reported that exposure to X-rated pornography is one significant factor in children younger than 10 years old sexually abusing other children.

In the first six months of 2003 the Unit had identified as many as 48 children under 10 years of age who had engaged in sexualised, sexually abusive behaviour. The paper does not claim that pornography is the only factor in children becoming sexually abusive. Other factors include substances abuse, mental health and domestic violence issues in the family. Nonetheless the authors make a strong case for access to pornography as decisively shaping this disturbing trend in the incidence of sexually abusive children. The authors present a case study of a nine year old boy, Steven, who sees his mother’s current de facto (her fourth since Steven was born) watching pornography and concludes that this is an acceptable activity. He then gets involved in viewing pornography regularly. Soon he is making his four year old half-brother Deacon act out homosexual acts with him. He also makes younger girls at school participate in sexual acts with him and threatens to hurt them if they tell anybody. While Steven certainly had significant social and developmental

problems the specific expression of these problems in sexually aggressive behaviour with younger children was shaped by his exposure to graphic sexual images.

In 2003 the Australia Institute³⁸ found that, of boys aged 16 or 17, one in twenty watch X-rated videos on a weekly basis while more than a fifth watch an X-rated video at least once a month.

In the light of this evidence of the damaging effect of X-rated videos on non-indigenous children and young people, in places other than the Northern Territory, as well as the evidence cited above on the impact of X18+ films on indigenous communities in Queensland, there is a strong case for complementing the specific provisions proposed in this bill by additional measures that would reduce the exposure of children everywhere to X18+ films.

The Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs in its *Report on the Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Welfare Payment Reform) Bill 2007 and four related bills concerning the Northern Territory National Emergency Response*³⁹ observed that:

The committee believes that it will be important to carefully monitor the measures in the National Emergency Response and Other Measures Bill dealing with the possession and supply of X18+ films to assess their effectiveness in preventing the use of these films in the sexual abuse or sexualisation of children and young people in the prescribed areas. Given the ready access to X18+ films under the Northern Territory's *Classification of Publications, Films and Computer Games Act*, which will continue to apply outside the prescribed areas, these measures may not be sufficient to achieve the objective.

Consideration may need to be given to extending the prohibition on the possession and sale of X18+ films throughout the Northern Territory, or to cutting off the supply of such films at their source through an amendment to the Customs (Prohibited Imports) Regulations 1956, a prohibition on the carriage of X18+ films by a carrier service or even a prohibition on the production and sale of X18+ films in the Australian Capital Territory.

In the light of this observation the Government's proposal⁴⁰ to significantly loosen the prohibition on X18+ films by allowing them to be taken into the prescribed areas in the Northern Territory for the alleged purpose of transporting them to a place outside the prescribed areas is regrettable.

Recommendation 9:

The Commonwealth should use all its available powers to suppress the X18+ film industry throughout Australia by:

- ***amending the Customs (Prohibited Imports) Regulations 1956, Regulation 4A, Importation of Objectionable Goods so that films that would be classified X18+ are included in the definition of objectionable goods and therefore unable to be legally imported into Australia;***
- ***making it an offence under Commonwealth law to carry or cause to be carried or to receive from a carrier service a film classified X18+.***
- ***use the territories power (Section 122 of the Constitution) to directly prohibit the production, sale and possession of X18+ films in all territories, including the Australian Capital Territory as well as the Northern Territory.***

7. Sex education

The terms of reference call for a consideration of the effectiveness of school-based sexuality and reproductive health education which make a contribution to ameliorating the effects of premature sexualisation of children.

There are two competing approaches to sex education in contemporary societies:

“‘Comprehensive’ interventions place primary emphasis on teaching prevention methods for sexually active teens, centered on the use of condoms, although some also present abstinence as the preferred option.

“‘Abstinence’ interventions place primary emphasis on teaching the postponement of sexual initiation or the discontinuation of sexual activity, and often include information about the limits of condoms in preventing STDs.”⁴¹

The debate about the relative effectiveness of these two approaches in preventing teen sexual risk behaviour has been going for some decades. A recent study⁴² examining the effectiveness of abstinence programs found that: “youth in the program group were no more likely than control group youth to have abstained from sex and, among those who reported having had sex; they had similar numbers of sexual partners and had initiated sex at the same mean age. Contrary to concerns raised by some critics of ... abstinence funding, however, program group youth were no more likely to have engaged in unprotected sex than control group youth.”⁴³

Several flaws in the design of this study have been identified by the Institute for Research and Evaluation.⁴⁴

Other well-designed evaluations of abstinence programs have found significant, long-term reductions in adolescent sexual activity, with both moderate and high-risk populations.⁴⁵

Theory-based abstinence-only interventions have the potential to reduce sexual activity or delay sexual debut among young adolescents, without having adverse effects on condom use when adolescents initiate sexual activity.⁴⁶

Virgin students who underwent an abstinence program were about 46% as likely to initiate sexual intercourse as the virgins in the comparison group after one year.⁴⁷

A study of the Heritage Keepers abstinence program found that one year after program participation virgin middle school students were about one half as likely to initiate sexual activity as the comparison group. Roughly one half of the sample was African American, for whom the program effect was equally strong.⁴⁸

The Institute for Research and evaluation concludes⁴⁹ that “research shows, not surprisingly, that some programs work and some don’t. The important questions are ‘which ones do, and why?’ Abstinence interventions are most effective if they incorporate what has been learned about how to reduce adolescent sexual risk behaviour:

- Well-designed programs target teen attitudes, values, efficacy, and goals regarding abstinence, sexuality, and relationships, as key mediators of sexual behavior.
- The classroom teacher plays a crucial role in the process of changing teen attitudes and behaviors about sexuality through his/her personal example, mentoring, and teaching skills.
- Successful programs utilize a variety of instructional methods that include interactive participatory activities, role playing, skill-building, personal application, and commitment.

- An initial program installment of 20 hours of instruction, repeated annually, and followed by regular reinforcement of the abstinence message is the minimum dose recommended to facilitate an increase in teen sexual abstinence.
- Well-designed abstinence interventions will contain a strong parent component that includes direct parent instruction and “homework” assignments to facilitate parent–teen interaction about abstinence.

Comprehensive sex education programs typically contain significant amounts of sexually explicit information, such as “discussions of anal sexual intercourse, graphic sexual descriptions, homosexual role playing, discussion of dental dams, encouraging mutual masturbation, encouraging teens to watch erotic movies, demonstrations of condom use, having teens practice using condoms, and instructing teens on how to obtain birth control without parental knowledge or permission.”⁵⁰

Comprehensive sex education programs do not actively deter teens from engaging in sexual activity. “For the most part, teens are not urged to avoid sex per se, but to avoid sex without contraception. As long as the teen feels ‘comfortable’ with the activity, protected teen sex is not criticized, but is presented as commonplace, healthy, and largely unproblematic... The underlying message that pervades comprehensive sex-ed curricula is that it is okay for teens to engage in sex as long as ‘protection’ is used.”⁵¹

Australian programs such as Talking Sexual Health⁵² and SHARE (Sexual Health and Relationships Education)⁵³ have similar content and messages as the American comprehensive sex education programs analysed by Martin *et al.*

Such content seems to be more part of the problem of sexualisation of children than part of the solution.

Recommendation 10:

Abstinence based sex education programs, when well-designed, produce measurable declines in teenage sexual activity. Such programs should be trialled and funded in Australian high schools.

8. Endnotes

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1. American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007, *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls*. (Washington, DC), p 13, www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.html.
 2. *Ibid*, p 13-15.
 3. *Ibid*, p 2.
 4. *Ibid*, p 3.
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