

**Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment**

*from Alison Campbell Rate*

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To the Committee Members

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry.

The starting point for this inquiry should not be ‘what sexual diet do adults want access to?’ or ‘what money can be made by advertisers and businesses?’, but **what is in the best interests of children and young adolescents?**

The developmental needs of children and young adolescents are currently not being considered by the media when it comes to the purveying of overt sexual imagery and the communication of sexual messages via some elements of

- internet
- television
- song lyrics
- magazines
- billboards
- games

In my work as an educator for Open Doors Educational Services over the last 20 years I have spoken to many parent groups about sexuality education and how to communicate with their children about body changes, growing up, how a baby begins etc. Sensitive, age appropriate education given by the parent in response to a child’s natural questions and curiosity is the ideal because it respects the child’s level of development and the parent/child relationship. Unfortunately the media is daily usurping this parental privilege.

I am constantly being approached by parents who feel thoroughly intimidated by the culture we live in which they feel is saturated by sexual images that force their child into an awareness of adult concepts well before they are ready to understand them and deal with them. Parents are very concerned about the effect such messages will have on the way their children think about themselves and others, the way they value their bodies, and how their ability to act safely in relationships may be affected.

Billboards about erection problems, young teen magazines that show pre-pubescent girls in sexualised poses, the marketing of lingerie to 6 year old girls, newsagent displays of pornographic magazines at child’s head height, sexual innuendo on television ads for cars, shoes, jeans, take away food, etc, etc – all these and many more COMMON features of our culture have forced their way into childhood. And why? Because of the power of the advertising dollar and the slack laws that guard what children and families are exposed to.

There is no possibility of choice when it comes to enormous highway billboards. There is no possibility of choice when it comes to newsagent displays. There is little choice when so called children's television viewing time is peppered with ads and promos containing inappropriate content. Internet filtering from home is hit and miss at the best without something being done at the server level.

As a parent of 3 children aged between 10 and 16 I am angry and frustrated at how such advertising intrudes into our family life. Every attempt I have made to complain about an ad to the Advertising Standards Board has been rejected. The process is time consuming and from my experience useless. It would be interesting to know the percentage of complaints about sexual imagery in advertising which actually result in an ad being pulled.

**The set up and powers of the ASB need to be reviewed.** As a starting point the ASB should include members who are experts in child and adolescent development who go in with the task of placing the protection of children and adolescents from inappropriate sexual messages as their first priority. Erring on the side of caution should be welcomed. Advertising content should be scrutinised by the ASB before it goes to air, not simply after complaints are received as by that time the damage is done. Currently, by the time a complaint is processed and a judgement given the ad has already come to the end of its run. This makes a mockery of the complaints process and contributes to parents' sense of powerlessness in the face of a dollar-driven media.

It is clear that self regulation within the industry is not working. The code needs to reflect the needs of children first when it comes to sexualised images, not the needs of advertisers. Standards now being applied to food and drink advertising towards children show that change can happen when we put their interests first. **Children's interests need representation at federal government level** to ensure this happens: to move against advertisers and programmers who assault children with hyper sexualised images and messages, and to work to educate the community about this aspect of the care and protection of the most vulnerable members of our society.

Mature adults have a better chance to identify media messages and reject them if they wish. Children and young teens do not have the psychological, emotional or intellectual capabilities to discern the messages that are being thrust at them daily from all directions. They absorb these images and messages about sex and body image and judge themselves accordingly – *too fat, not sexy enough, no boyfriend/girlfriend therefore a loser, wearing the wrong stuff, got to be sexually savvy, must show off my body*, and so on.

This external pressure plays right into the state of mind of adolescence where to be normal is everything and is more likely to push adolescents into early sexual behaviour. The problems of teen pregnancy, teen abortion and sky rocketing STI rates are well known. As a well established counselling centre for crisis pregnancy, Open Doors counsellors are aware that a range of elements contribute to these problems, however **a media driven culture which pushes hyper sexual awareness and sexual expectations onto the young is not helping vulnerable adolescents manage their lives more safely.**

The **acceptance** that sexual imagery should be the normal way to sell, promote and glamourise to even the very young must be challenged by a civilised society. Parents and other concerned individuals must not be dismissed as ‘wowers’ or ‘religious fundamentalists’ by those who prefer to place a higher priority on the satisfaction of their own desires than they do on the welfare of children.