

## **Submission to Inquiry into the Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media Environment**

Dear Sir/Madam

As a mother and youth worker, this is an issue that has concerned me deeply for some time. Sexualised images abound in every form of media, from music videos to billboards to magazines and even toys and it is becoming increasingly obvious that children are affected by them. In my work with teenagers, the youth themselves will readily affirm that the media has a large influence on their behaviour. At its worst, this kind of advertising can contribute to paedophilia, by presenting children as desirable sexual objects – this is exemplified by a certain waxing studio openly advertising that their Brazilian waxes offer a “childlike appeal”.

I have also found the complaints process to be unwieldy and convoluted, and the rulings by the Advertising Standards Board to show no concern for the effect that sexualised advertising has on the developing minds of children and teenagers. It is worrying that the board does not contain any members that have a child development background and does not vet advertisements, only getting involved after the damage has been done. This self-regulatory approach does not seem to be working and needs to be overhauled. It is also appalling that the Code of Conduct for advertising to children does not contain any clauses on the sexualisation of children. In addition, the Code does not respect the rights of parents to limit the exposure of their children to sexualised material.

### **Evidence of Short and Long Term Effects of Sexualising and Objectifying Images**

In my work with teenagers, with the program *Choices, Decisions, Outcomes...* I give teens information on the risks associated with early involvement in sexual activity. In my experience, teens know very little about the prevalence and seriousness of STIs and the long term emotional consequences of sexual involvement. All they see in the media is that to be ‘normal’, one must be sexually appealing and available all the time, and that sex is all about the pleasure one can derive from using another person. Many discover too late that there are consequences associated with sexual activity and how damaging those emotional consequences can be both to themselves and future relationships.

This culture of ‘sex with no consequences’ and using each other for pleasure encourages early promiscuity. There is a large body of research indicating that this is leading to escalating STI and pregnancy rates. But perhaps even more importantly, our teens are acquiring emotional scarring that diminishes their concept of self worth, makes it more difficult to commit in relationships and is finally manifested in high divorce and marital dissatisfaction rates.

### **Strategies to Prevent or Reduce Sexualisation of Children**

Sex might indeed sell, but that doesn’t mean as a society we should accept its unbridled use as a tool for profit. Sexual images ‘burn’ onto the brain and have a great effect on how we see ourselves and others. We should promote imagery that encourages us to see each other as persons of worth and dignity, not objects to be used for pleasure.

To that end, I will reiterate that the Advertising Standards Boards needs to be overhauled, to have child development experts as part of the panel and to be proactive in filtering out advertising that could be harmful to children and adolescents. There should also be a central complaints handling department that can direct a complaint to the appropriate body.

The Code of Ethics should be amended to include restrictions on the use of sexualised material in advertising to children and respect the right of parents to limit the exposure of their children to inappropriate sexualised images.

Finally, programs such as *Choices, Decisions, Outcomes...* should be encouraged in all schools. Programs like these do not only give information about STIs and pregnancy, a key aspect is that we encourage the concept of self worth and respect for others. It is of limited, perhaps even counter-productive, value to simply promote condoms, as no condom will ever be strong enough to protect their vulnerable heart. School based sexuality education that encourages delay of commencement of sexual activity, preferably until marriage is vital to counter-balance the pervasive influence of media images of sex. This kind of education gives teen information they need to make their own healthy decisions, giving them back control over their lives and ultimately the freedom they seek.

Thankyou for taking the time to read my submission

Mrs Cath Nohlmans