

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

Dear Sir,

Re: Inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment

I am the mother two children. My six year old son is starting to read all signs, headlines and magazines covers. My four year old daughter is becoming interested in clothes and dolls, but also has an amazing ability to repeat whatever she hears on the radio – including lyrics and ads. I have been concerned for some time about the increasing premature sexualisation of children in Australian society through the media and commercial outlets. Sexual content, whether overt or implied, is increasingly not only accessible to children, but is also being aimed at them. As a parent who is trying to give my children a solid moral foundation and a respect for themselves and their bodies, I am already finding myself surrounded by messages that are absolutely contrary to those I know to be moral and healthy. I intend to give my children the facts of life and the right information presented at the right time in a healthy way. I don't expect to have to explain sexual facts or terms while waiting by the magazines in the checkout, or while driving my children to school.

There is much concern at the present time about obesity in children, and the effect of junk food advertising on children is now not disputed. In my own experience, resisting the effect of junk food advertising on my children by simple discussions on healthy and “bad” foods has been a relatively simple battle (thus far). The influence of sexual messages, which are all pervasive in television, radio, magazines and clothing stores are far harder to define to children and to combat as a parent. What are my children absorbing? What will the long term effect be on them and their peers, on body image, precocious sexual activity and the long term effects on their expectations of healthy relationships?

Whilst I am concerned about billboards, magazines and certain sexualised dolls and clothing ranges aimed at children, in this submission I would like to focus on commercial TV and radio.

Television

There is a strong blurring of definition between the timeslots for childrens' and adults' programming. Whereas children's TV was clearly between 3 and 5pm on weekdays (when I was growing up anyway), now this timeslot contains many programmes with a high degree of adult content. I think we can expect many children will watch TV from the time that they arrive home from school until dinner, and that the standards of television need to be appropriate for this timeslot.

An example of inappropriate programming for this timeslot would be “The Bold and the Beautiful” which airs at 4.30pm on weekdays, with storylines based around a highly sexualised, dysfunctional family. Themes include happiness is all about sex; love is all about sex; being sexy gains love and infidelity is OK as long as you’re in love. I was appalled at recent episodes which clearly portrayed the rape of a leading character, the discussion of the morning after pill and termination of a possible pregnancy. This programme immediately follows programming aimed at children and I wonder how many parents busy with after work and after school duties are present to discuss these themes with their children, or to insist children switch off after childrens’ programming ends.

There is little suitable early evening television for children. Advertisements for later (adult) television programmes that air in the period are often titillating and highly sexual to entice the viewer.

Saturday morning television, another prime timeslot for children viewing is shocking in its music video show content - highly sexualised, and in a particularly unhealthy way. The objectification of women, mild bondage scenes, and gangster approaches to sexuality are common.

Commercial Radio

Like many families, we do not watch television in the mornings, but do instead listen to morning radio for news, weather and traffic updates. Whilst commercial radio does not (obviously) portray visual images, I have found that the sexualised and smutty content of the various morning “crews” humour, as well as the explicit lyrics to many songs aired during this timeslot, to be inappropriate for children. Far from being background noise, children listen intently to radio, and many are exposed to this content in the home and in the family car on the way to school. Two recent discussions heard by my husband at 8.30am on a weekday morning on commercial radio (while the children were in the car on the way to school) were (1) the merits of vibrators and (2) selling one’s virginity to win a competition, - hardly appropriate morning radio content.

Whilst there are no radio programmes that I know of that are aimed specifically at children, it is naïve to think that children are not exposed to this sexualised content. In my own family situation, I now avoid commercial radio when children are present and have found local community radio and the ABC to be suitable replacements.

The terms of reference of the inquiry refer to strategies to prevent and/or reduce the sexualisation of children in the media. I ask that the inquiry considers that whilst various media are aimed at a specific demographic, the standards of decency must be considered for any media that children are likely to be exposed to – not just the target demographic. Thus, if it can reasonably be expected that children will be exposed to morning radio, or to billboards in public spaces, or to television in the 3 – 6pm time slot or even later, then the effects on children must be regarded. These standards of decency must be enshrined in the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice and the Commercial Radio Codes of Practice, and must be enforced, preferably by an external body.

This is an area of strong concern for me, and I expect that my concerns will grow as my children grow older. As yet I have not made formal complaints to media organisations. With voluntary codes of practise and the lure of large advertising dollars I do not expect that the issues of a concerned parent will hold much weight with TV executives. To whom shall I go? Ideally, I would like to see an independent body set up to protect the rights of the child in the media, advertising and the commercial sectors. This body must consult with parents and child development experts and must have the power to pre-approve programmes and advertising, and to enforce the withdrawal of undesirable content and advertising and inappropriate media content.

Children cannot protect themselves. The terms of the inquiry include the examination of strategies to prevent and/or reduce the sexualisation of children in the media and the effectiveness of different approaches in ameliorating its effects. Sexuality aimed at children is presented to them as making them happy, popular and cool. Children are sexual beings. Once exposed to sexual images can innocence be regained? I think not. Once they are exposed to sexualised content it can't be undone.

I am asking the Senate in its inquiry to protect children and to protect and uphold healthy parenting and family values.

Sincerely,

Dr Nicole Myers (BSc, PhD)