

To the Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts,

I am the parent of two young children. I am also a trained primary school teacher and an active participant in my community. I am writing to you because I am extremely concerned about the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment.

Over the past five to ten years I have noted the way the media increasingly portray younger and younger children (particularly girls) in a sexual manner. From runway models who begin careers at 13 years of age to companies who market 'sexual' attire to increasingly younger clientele. Our society seems to be letting down its defenses when it comes to this issue. Perhaps it's because it is such a difficult area to monitor or perhaps it is because it has been happening so gradually that we haven't stopped to think where this will all end up.

Would it be okay to see a six year old in a 'bra' and underpants combo plastered across a billboard on a main street? If not, then why is it okay to sell this kind of stuff to that age group? The 'Mary Kate and Ashley Olsen' range is just one example of a clothing line which has mini skirts and mid drift tops marketed to girls as young as five and six years of age. Now I am the first to admit that little children will always want to dress up and play make believe. The difference is what is on offer? Is it a small child choosing from a parent's oversized wardrobe or a marketing company deciding which item will 'grab' a child's attention by making them feel more grown up. Of course parents can limit a child's access to either but the question is "Is it appropriate to make this kind of attire available to this age group in the first place?"

The creation of the 'Bratz' doll is another example. Large breasted, heavily made up dolls with tiny, skin tight clothing which come with an array of extra's such as body jewels, tattoos and hair streaks. All this marketed to girls as young as five years of age! You only have to watch cartoons on a Saturday morning to see the media bombardment. Get the latest Bratz doll with makeup for her and you, create an online persona and play games with your friends, curl and twirl your hair just like Barbie. It just goes on and on.

I think part of the problem is also the lack of media education. I know that teachers struggle with an already packed curriculum but I truly believe that media education should commence from a child's first year at school. Lessons could be as simple as showing a group of children an advertisement and then comparing it to the 'actual' product and getting them to note the similarities and differences. They could then be encouraged to question why a company would portray a product differently to the actual item. For children to be able to make informed choices and decisions regarding the media they need to understand that they are being targeted and why. Only then will they be able to see, think, analyze and make informed decisions.

The other issue which frightens me is just how insidious the media actually is. What we wouldn't accept five to ten years ago is now common place. On a television show which is aired at 7pm it is apparently quite appropriate to use the word 'shit'. When did this become okay? When people stopped saying it wasn't.

Every human is created with his or her own sexuality. It is a complicated area and one which each person must discover for themselves. Do we want the media guiding our children through this process? Do we want expectations of how adults look, dress and interact being formed by marketing companies when our children are still in primary school? I don't. Either we find a way to 'arm' our children by educating them in the media's tactics or we find a way of protecting them from companies which see them as just another 'niche' market.

I hope that this inquiry will come up with some logical findings and some creative solutions. Whatever the outcome, I would urge the inquiry to consider how important the role of education is in this area. I would argue that being able to evaluate the media is as necessary a skill today as the ability to read and write. Unless children begin to understand the gimmicks, the bias; the marketing process, they will never fully be able to understand their part in it and so sense and protect themselves from possible dangers.

Yours Sincerely
Justine Edward