

18 April 2008

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

Dear Members of the Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts,

As parents, we are very concerned about the level and prevalence of the sexualisation of children in the mediums referred to in the Terms of Reference: “the contemporary media environment, including radio and television, children's magazines, other print and advertising material and the Internet.” We have two daughters and are concerned about raising them in this environment. We are also pleased that the Senate is taking an interest in this matter. We understand the sexualisation of children to refer to both exposure of children to inappropriate images and other content across the media, and the sexualized way in which different media depict children. Our responses below will reflect this.

*In undertaking the inquiry, the committee, in particular:*

*a) examine the sources and beneficiaries of premature sexualisation of children in the media*

With the Internet commonplace and expanding in scope and importance by the moment, it's inevitable that children will come across some sexually related material, explicit or implied. We do not just refer to pornographic websites but to pop up advertisements, emails with attachments containing nudity or sexual content, newspaper or magazine websites that do not intend to promote such images or text, but include occasional risqué material.

Other sources of concern are newsagents that stock ‘soft’ pornographic material, often at a height viewable by children. Also, our local newsagent has pornographic magazines situated next to the children's magazines, which is unacceptable. Perhaps most striking of all are the large, unavoidable billboards along freeways, bridges and other motorways that advertise sexually related products. One screams “WANT LONGER LASTING SEX!” as you can see driving towards Broadway on Parramatta Road in Sydney at present, or the worst we saw appeared above a rail underpass around eighteen months ago near Strathfield Station, in Sydney's Inner West. The product was “Horny Goat Weed” and showed a couple in an erotic embrace, and though no sexual act was occurring, you

could somehow tell it wasn't far away. The proximity to the station compounded the offensive nature of this image and text, as Strathfield is an area with many schools and the station is a crucial focal point for students to commute to and from these. For its time there, it was awful. Thankfully, our children are still too young to have to explain something like this, but we will not be immune from doing so in the future. Advertisers should not subject our children to this, exposing them to images and concepts that scandalise. Television advertisements during family hours sometimes feature content inappropriate for children. Standards need stronger enforcement.

The sexualised portrayal of children in the media is increasingly a cause for concern. The prevalence of the Bratz range of dolls, television programs and merchandise is a role model for our daughters that we strongly object to. Any kind of children's wear that tries to promote a sexually suggestive image is also inappropriate. This especially includes children's clothing that emphasises the breast area when this is unnecessary. In an article in *The Australian*, "Sexualisation of children in ads a 'non-issue'" by Caroline Overington, 12 October 2006, Duncan Fine, "a writer for the kids show, Hi-5 and co-author of *Why TV is Good for Kids*" is quoted as saying

If kids want to get dressed up as Kylie - or Paris Hilton for that matter - then let them, because if you find an eight-year-old girl in a bikini a sex object then it's you who has the problem - not her, not her parents and not the store that sold it to them.

Source: <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20867,20569290-2702,00.html> (accessed 17 April 2008)

A writer for children's programs making such comments is alarming, as this attitude informs their contribution to their work. It represents the kind of problem that needs addressing, as the idea of responsibility for the presentation of a child is removed from the key people in this case, namely her, her parents and the store that sold it to them and placed on the person who fits the description of a pedophile. This view is dangerous because it sidelines the very people who have the responsibility to protect the child, and of not promoting her as sex object. Also, parents need to be more responsible about the kinds of clothes, toys and media they purchase their children. They can be part of the problem.

Last, the "Gaycare" controversy that Sue Dunlevy of *The Daily Telegraph*, broke on 29 May 2006 is a key example of imposing an inappropriate sexual agenda upon children. Childcare centres owned and administered by Marrickville Council used "gay-friendly story books" to inculcate the "children aged from six weeks to six years about gay, lesbian and 'transgender' parenting" (page 7). These years are too young even to instruct children in the sexual nature of natural parenting, let alone in concepts other than this.

*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 recent banning of 14 year old Monika Jagaciak from Australian Fashion Week demonstrates decisive and principled action. The media coverage in Australia was extensive. Originating in The Daily Telegraph, other newspapers printed the story; one example being Brisbane's Courier Mail, titled *Models under 16 banned from Australian Fashion Week*, 11 April 2008, <http://www.news.com.au/couriermail/story/0,23739,23521742-952,00.html> (accessed 17 April 2008). Decisive action, like this, is necessary to make clear what boundaries exist. The recent changes of the Advertising to Children Code by the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) is also a further step forward, see *Sexualisation of children banned in ads*, 16 April 2008, <http://www.news.com.au/story/0,23599,23548953-2,00.html> (accessed 17 April 2008).

Changing media and advertising regulations is a positive step to curb and restrict the sexualised portrayal of children and the public depiction in advertising of sexual material. Also, incentives to fashion designers and elements of the entertainment industry not to sexualise the portrayal of children may help, though how this might work is unclear. The removal of sexual materials, as promoted in Marrickville Council's childcare centres, is justifiable if only for the reason that the subject material is inappropriate for the very young. The prohibition of this needs to be national. If our daughters were anywhere where this was occurring we would remove them, without question. Last, changes and improvements require accompanying severe, enforceable penalties, with swift action if there are any infringements. Without this, all good efforts to act in this area will go to waste.

On the subject of "school-based sexuality and reproductive health education" parents, being the prime educators of their children, are responsible for this, not schools, or Local Councils. The terms are also vague and can usually encompass a morality that we do not want our children to have. "Reproductive health" is usually code for things like contraception and abortion, which we fiercely oppose and fear that informed by secular ideals, this school-based teaching will pay no attention to fixed moral principles, namely, the Natural Law, instead, only a shifting and driven popular consensus.

Thank you,  
Gerard and Andrea Calilhanna