

Commissioner for Children and Young People

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts
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Dear Secretary

Inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry. I am pleased to provide comments in relation to my role as Western Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People.

I was appointed as the State's inaugural Commissioner for Children and Young People in December 2007 pursuant to the *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006* (the Act). Under this Act, I have responsibility for advocating for the half a million Western Australian citizens under the age of 18 and to promote and monitor their wellbeing. I am also required to monitor and review policies, practices and services affecting the wellbeing of children and young people.

The increasing prevalence of sexualised images of, and to, children is of concern—to me, to parents and to many other members of the community. I thank the Committee for opening this issue to public debate; it is encouraging that it is being examined.

The premature sexualisation of children is slowly becoming normalised in our media and marketing culture; images of young girls looking 'sexy' and dressed up as smaller versions of attractive women are common in most mass media (including magazines directly targeted at young girls). Children are now targeted as consumers in their own right, with marketers capitalising on their desire to be adult and 'grown-up' with little regard for the consequences on the children themselves. Each new campaign nudges out the boundaries of what is accepted and this unchecked evolution of sexualisation in the media is both insidious and potentially dangerous, not least because once these images are out they cannot be reined back in. It is therefore prudent to take stock at particular moments in time, to assess whether our society is doing all it can to promote the health and wellbeing of our future generations. This Inquiry gives us that opportunity.

The American Psychological Association distills the problems caused by the increasing sexualisation of children into three main risk areas:

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1) Cognitive and Emotional Consequences: *Sexualisation and objectification undermine a person's confidence in and comfort with her own body, leading to emotional and self-image problems, such as shame and anxiety*

2) Mental and Physical Health: *Research links sexualisation with three of the most common mental health problems diagnosed in girls and women—eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression or depressed mood*

3) Sexual Development: *Research suggests that the sexualisation of girls has negative consequences on girls' ability to develop a healthy sexual self-image.¹*

Each of these areas has potentially irreparable effects on the natural and healthy developmental processes of children. According to Dr Emma Rush, a fourth and particularly concerning effect of the proliferation of sexualised images of children is that it encourages sexual predation on children. In an article for *Online Opinion*², Dr Rush states that "publicly displaying sexualised images of children undermines the existing social prohibition against seeing children as sexually interesting."

In pursuing a course of action, I urge the Committee to have regard for Australia's international responsibilities under the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (the Convention). Having ratified this Convention, Australia has committed to ensuring that "in all actions concerning children...the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration."³ This is not simply a moral debate; Australia has a legal obligation to the global community to assess continually the suitability of its care and protection structures, to take stock of its cultural industries, and to examine whether the "best interests of the child" are at their heart.

It is unarguable that the promotion of healthy, safe and strong development is in the best interests of the child. Every child should have opportunities that encourage them to reach their full potential, and their diversity should be embraced. The sexualisation of children in the Australian community is not, by any definition, in the best interests of the child.

When Australia ratified the Convention it formally recognised the "important function performed by the mass media" and committed to ensuring:

...that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health.⁴

Further, and more specifically, Articles 17 (a) and (c) of the Convention confer on Australia a responsibility to:

...encourage the mass media to disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child .. [and to] .encourage the development of appropriate guidelines for the protection of the child from information and material injurious to his or her well-being...

Given that evidence exists that the sexualisation of children has negative effects across a variety of health domains, including cognitive functioning, physical and mental health, and

¹ American Psychological Association, Media Release *Sexualization of girls is linked to common mental health problems in girls and women – eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression, an APA task force reports*, February 19 2007, <http://www.apa.org/releases/sexualization.html>

² Rush, E., *Child Sexualisation is No Game*, www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=6422&page=0, 26 September 2007

³ United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Article 3

⁴ *Ibid*, Article 17

sexual development, the task now is to do as the UN requires and develop appropriate guidelines to halt these deleterious effects on Australia's children and promote more positive development.

The existing codes and guidelines on sexualised images are loose, at best, and do not provide a comprehensive guide to advertisers, marketers or the media about what is and is not acceptable in this area. The Children's Television Standards (CTS) include several restrictions to:

...ensure that children are protected from material which may be harmful to them and that non-program material directed to children is presented clearly and in a way that children understand. These restrictions acknowledge that children are a distinct group of media consumers whose cognitive abilities require special consideration .⁵

However, no section of the CTS deals with the sexualisation of children. The CTS is currently under review but the sexualisation of children is not within the scope of the review. The Australian Association of National Advertisers' (AANA) Code of Ethics states that:

Advertisements shall treat sex, sexuality and nudity with sensitivity to the relevant audience and, where appropriate, the relevant programme time zone.⁶

Like the CTS, it also makes no particular reference to the sexualisation of children. The AANA has adopted a Code for Advertising to Children, to "ensure that advertisers develop and maintain a high sense of social responsibility in advertising to children in Australia"⁷ Although the AANA is to be commended on developing a separate Code for children, it also omits any reference to the matters of sex or sexuality, and it does not go far enough in ensuring that the wellbeing of the child is protected and promoted. I understand that this Code is also currently under review.

These existing regulatory instruments are interesting to examine as they reflect a common agreement that children are a vulnerable and impressionable group of citizens whose protection requires special consideration. Yet, too often the concerns that are raised about the need to protect children from premature sexualisation are dismissed as 'censorship' or as thinly veiled attempts to abolish our democratic right to freedom of speech. Not so. It is a mark of a civilised society that those who need protection are protected. Any marketing of this nature to other vulnerable groups would be seen as abhorrent and there is no reason why material for children should not be subject to critical, research-based assessment.

The community relies on regulatory bodies for that protection and expects them to keep pace with social and cultural developments, but the sexualisation of children is a phenomenon that has emerged relatively quickly, and the regulation is not keeping up. Indeed, self-regulation may not be an appropriate way to handle this sensitive issue at all, particularly as marketing to children in this way has been exposed as an economically lucrative exercise.

I strongly advocate, therefore, for a collaborative approach between parents, legislators, marketers, advertisers, the media, and children and young people to develop a set of standards that will ensure that the healthy and positive development of our children is promoted in Australia's contemporary media environment.

⁵ Australian Communications and Media Authority, *Children's Television Standards Review: Issues Paper*, 2007, p24

⁶ <http://www.aana.com.au/pdfs/AANACodeEthics.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.aana.com.au/pdfs/A2CCCode.pdf> (2/3)

Professor Fiona Stanley AC has argued that Australia must adopt a "very serious and intensive commitment to the Convention on the Rights of the Child" if we are to value our children and put their wellbeing at the forefront of our activities.⁸ To promote this approach, the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) has prepared a *Commitment to Young Australians* (the Commitment) which was launched in May 2007 and is based on the Convention. The Commitment has been written as a unifying statement by ARACY members as a document to which organisations can commit to improve the lives of children and young people. This Commitment could provide a central guiding document, or at least a good starting point, around which a new set of standards could be based. A copy is attached for the Committee's reference.

Currently, the Advertising Standards Bureau (ASB) administers a national system of advertising self-regulation. This system is largely complaints-based, with the ASB making its determinations against the AANA Code of Ethics. It is perhaps time to reassess the adequacy of the existing complaints-based self-regulation process. Kids Free 2B Kids has called for the examination of complaints to include objective advice from child development experts.⁹ I agree with this suggestion and ask the Committee to consider it in their deliberations. Again, this is not to encourage censorship, nor to limit innovation or creativity in advertising, but to ensure that children and their development are given special consideration and protection.

The Convention's preamble states that.

...the family, as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community .

The Government and Parliament have a responsibility to support parents and families as they guide their child through a healthy and safe childhood, encouraging a broad range of activities, learning opportunities and experiences. Parents will, understandably, feel undermined and overwhelmed if they have to single-handedly counteract an influx of messages that narrow the child's scope, telling them that their value comes only from their sexual appeal or sexual behaviour. We can, and must, provide better assistance to parents, and work with them and the industry to cherish childhood and its natural stages of development.

In conclusion, I recommend that the Committee consider the following proposals when examining ways forward.

- That the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the "best interests of the child" principle, be central to any future deliberations or policies on this issue.
- That, through a collaboration with parents, legislators, marketers, advertisers, the media, and children and young people, a set of standards be developed that will ensure that the healthy and positive development of children is promoted in Australia's contemporary media environment.
- That these standards are developed using ARACY's *Commitment to Young Australians* as its guiding principles, and that industry and organisations are encouraged to become signatories to this Commitment.
- That the ASB seek and receive objective advice from child development experts when considering complaints about advertisements that have an adverse effect on children.

⁸ Stanley, F. 'The Importance of Caring for Children in Australian Society', in *Family Matters*, Issue No 76, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2007, p47

⁹ <http://www.kf2bk.com/ads.htm>

- That, in moving forward, the Committee is mindful of Government's responsibility to support parents and families in nurturing, protecting and promoting the child's healthy development.

Please do not hesitate to contact me on (08) 9264 6375 should you wish to discuss this submission in more detail.

I look forward to receiving further information on the progress of this Inquiry.

Yours sincerely



Michelle Scott
COMMISSIONER

15 April 2008

A Commitment to Young Australians

Children and young people are valuable because of who they are today and what they may become. They make a unique and important contribution to society.

Each child and young person is a citizen now. They are entitled to expect that their rights will be respected, their essential needs met and their voices heard.

Rising to meet these expectations means getting into the thorny areas where progress can be difficult. It means looking at what is harming children and young people and deciding how to fix it.

Most children are doing well, but some are not. Concerted action by everyone with concern for Australia's young will open up opportunities for all, not just the fortunate.

Members of ARACY are working to create the social, cultural, political and economic environment in which the wellbeing and development of all children and young people can be assured. That is their commitment to young Australians.

These seven principles have been written to guide the decision making and actions of ARACY member organisations and to help them demonstrate their solid commitment to Australia's children and young people.

The wellbeing of children and young people needs to be a national priority.

The whole community is responsible for the wellbeing of children and young people.

Families need support and resources to nurture children and young people.

Children and young people should grow up in a safe environment.

Children and young people should be valued and respected.

Children and young people should have learning and development opportunities which encourage them to realise their potential.

The capacity of children and young people to contribute to the community should be acknowledged and enabled.



**Australian Research Alliance
for Children & Youth**

Organisation _____

Name _____

Title _____

is proud to be a signatory of the Commitment to Young Australians.