



*Sexual Health and Family Planning Australia Inc*

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Committee Secretary  
Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts  
Department of the Senate  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600Australia  
[eca.sen@aph.gov.au](mailto:eca.sen@aph.gov.au)

Dear Secretary,

**Re: Submission to the Standing Committee on Environment,  
Communications and the Arts - Inquiry into the sexualisation of children  
in the contemporary media environment**

### **Organisation making submission**

Sexual Health and Family Planning Australia (SH&FPA) is a national federation of eight independent state and territory sexual health and family planning organisations. These organisations provide one to one clinical and counselling services as well as community and workforce education programs, research, clinical practice training, resource development and community participation programs.

The advocacy work of SH&FPA seeks to achieve specific changes in policy, strategy, laws, funding, program and service provision to improve sexual and reproductive health and rights for all Australians. SH&FPA is also responsible for an international program which contributes to sexual and reproductive health in the Asia Pacific Region.

SH&FPA believes that knowledge and freedom of choice in sexual and reproductive health is a basic human right and that people of all ages are treated with respect.

SH&FPA believes that the sexualisation of children and young people in all forms of media is exploitation and has significant negative impact on health, wellbeing and safety of young Australians.

### **For further information please contact:**

Dr. Devora Lieberman  
President SH&FPA

### **General comment**

*A member of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF)  
Representing Australia's eight State and Territory sexual health and family planning organisations*



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SH&FPA congratulates the Senate for undertaking this important inquiry.

SH&FPA believes that urgent Government action is required concerning:

Sexualised imagery on billboards.

Sexualised music video clips.

Content, visual and script in girls magazines which is not regulated.

Sexualised merchandise such padded bras and bikinis sold as clothes to pre-pubescent girls.

Pornographic Magazines available to be viewed by children and young people.

Sexualised advertising on radio.

Inappropriate TV programming and advertising in children's viewing hours.

Easy access to Pornography on the internet.

Self-Regulation of the advertising industry which is reactive. The Advertising Standards Bureau receives complaints from individuals about any form of advertising. But few members of the public would know of its existence or how to make a complaint.

The Advertising Standards Bureau website [www.adstandards.com.au](http://www.adstandards.com.au) publishes a case report on complaints from the public. For example, there are many complaints from the public about one particular company which advertises erectile dysfunction treatments. Advertising for "Great Sex" appears on yellow and red billboards, radio, television, the back of shop a dockets, in magazines and newspapers, all accessible by children. However, not one complaint that has been made has been sustained by the Bureau. Clearly, the advertising industry is complex and not capable of self-regulation in the face of this complexity.

If Australians wish to reduce the potential for children and young people to be harmed in a variety of ways by premature sexualisation and exposure to explicit sex, it seems that some sort of formal government restraint beyond existing regulation of relevant areas will be necessary.

## **Issues**

For most Australians sexual health is not a comfortable topic and this is reflected in the silence around sex and sexuality and in the delivery of many health, education and support services [2]. Many politicians and other community leaders prefer that these issues remain invisible and off the public agenda. Many parents lack the skills to critically analyse and understand the longer term impacts of sexualisation of girls in the media and the impact these messages have on the behaviour of boys towards girls and eventually men towards women. Often, issues of sexuality, sexual health including relationships and sexual health education for children and young people are contextualised in a moral rather than a human rights discourse.



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TV, Internet, radio, music videos, music lyrics, movies, magazines, sports media, video-games and advertising increasingly portray sexualised images which promote narrow and unrealistic 'standards' of physical beauty and sexual interest [3]. Females are more often than males portrayed in a sexual manner and objectified (eg used as a decorative object or as body parts). Males are raised in a society that glorifies sexually aggressive masculinity and considers as the norm the degradation of women[6].

There is a serious imbalance between the profile, importance and resources invested in the selling of sex and that invested in dealing with the problems potentially caused by this promotion. For example, Australia is one of the last developed countries without comprehensive relationships and sexual health education programs delivered to children and young people as a part of the compulsory core school curriculum. This reflects in higher teen pregnancy rates and much earlier initiation of sexual activity than Scandinavia and most of Western Europe.

### **Impacts of sexualisation**

Research has linked sexualisation to unrealistic and unsafe attitudes, expectations and behaviours, feelings of anxiety and shame about sexuality and appearance, eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression [3]. This is especially the case for young women and young men with intellectual disability, whose capacity for interpreting media images is affected by cognitive and developmental impairment, and whose vulnerability to sexual exploitation is among the greatest in our community [7]

In our experience, we see the impact on boys and girls (men and women) of the portrayal of girls and young women as sex objects without a balancing amount of accurate, realistic information provided by parents, schools and the community.

Over-promotion and exploitation of sexuality in all forms of media works against healthy behaviours, including decision making around personal safety in girls and boys. The media reinforces the concept that "risky people and risky behaviours" are the cause of sexual health issues such as rape, abortion and sexually transmitted infections among teenage girls (and younger) and not lack of appropriate policy and strategy. Sexualisation in the media reinforces the message and tolerance of gender inequity and violence between men and women [1]. Images and messages that imply children are 'seductive' places judgemental focus on the character of the child not on the people who manipulate and abuse them. A culture that normalises misogynistic attitudes only benefits the perpetrators who target children and as such continues to put women and children at risk [6].



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## **Interventions**

Parents, other adult family and friends, peers and particularly the school community can reinforce or attempt to counter sexualised societal messages.

Evaluation research has highlighted promising interventions to reduce the negative effects of sexualisation and promote healthy, respectful relationships [3, 4, 5 ]; these include:

Comprehensive age-appropriate relationships and sexual health education programs in schools beginning in early Primary years and delivered by trusted and trained teachers.

School-based media literacy programs that teach critical/analytical skills in viewing and consuming media.

Increased access to physical activity (particularly for girls), peer-education and other empowerment programs.

Parent education about the impacts of sexualisation and about relationships and sexual health.

Action by parents, community groups and organisations to counter sexualisation, model alternative values and ways of being, and focus on people's abilities and character rather than on their appearance.

Alternative media that encourage and support people to build social connections, speak out and develop their own healthy ways of being

The promotion of healthy respect is most effective when the messages are:

Based on research evidence so that they are factual, comprehensive and non-judgemental.

Clear and consistent, and constantly reinforced over time.

Communicated using a variety of different formats.  
targeted to particular groups.

Respectful of the target audience and involve them in design and delivery.

Reinforced by a range of supporting strategies.

Designed to challenge underlying sexism and male dominance.



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