

# **SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO THE SEXUALISATION OF CHILDREN IN CONTEMPORARY MEDIA**

**BY FAMILY PLANNING QUEENSLAND  
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Family Planning Queensland (FPQ) is the leading provider of sexual and reproductive health services in Queensland. FPQ offers a comprehensive range of clinical, counselling, education and training services from metropolitan and regional locations throughout the state.

This submission is based on current research and our unique experience in working with the community for the sexual and reproductive health of children and young people.

FPQ welcomes the inquiry and debate on this issue.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Children learn about sexuality from the messages they receive from the TV, music, magazines, advertising, Internet, art and fashion. They also receive messages and information about sexuality from many other sources including their peers, family and school (FPQ, 2007). This learning is a lifelong process and an important part of their development.

Messages related to sexuality can be both positive and negative. This happens regardless of their parents', teachers' or community's intentions. Trying to eliminate the presence of all sexualised messages in the media is a limited approach and without merit. FPQ believes that the application of an holistic, community based approach to help counter the negative and stereotyped messages delivered by the media would be more effective.

## **INTERVENTION THROUGH BETTER EDUCATION**

FPQ uses the term 'sexuality education' rather than 'sex education' because sexuality is not limited to genital behaviour or intercourse. Sexuality encompasses sexual behaviour, gender identity, sexual orientation and relationships (SH&FPA, 2006).

Parents, carers and the community have an obligation to provide positive, factual messages (FPQ, 2007). As such, we believe that the foundation for promoting healthy sexual development should be through comprehensive sexuality education.

It is our view that children who receive comprehensive age-appropriate sexuality education from early childhood are better equipped to deal with the sometimes negative and stereotyped messages from the media and marketing industries.

FPQ's position is that parents and carers should be the main providers of sexuality education for children. Teachers can assist and enhance parental sexuality education, and parents and schools can work together to promote healthy attitudes and sexual development (FPQ, 2007).

To do this effectively, carers, teachers, schools and the community at large need to be supported through the provision of well-researched, evidence-based programs and resource materials. FPQ supports the community in this through a range of programs for young people, schools, parents and professionals, which equips them to provide a range of age appropriate interventions for children and young people.

## **FIRST LINE OF DEFENCE**

Well-delivered evidenced-based sexuality education helps strengthen awareness. This should be our first line of defence in countering the negative, sexualised messages that children may be exposed to, both in the media and elsewhere in the community.

In 2007 the American Psychological Association (APA) prepared a report on the issue of girls being sexualised in the media, *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls*. The report argues that the “key in combating the influence of sexualisation” is the “development and implementation of school-based literacy training programs.” The report goes on to state “there is an urgent need to teach critical skills in viewing and consuming media, focusing specifically on the sexualisation of women and girls.”

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Without comprehensive sexuality education across a range of community areas to counter-balance the sexualised images in the media to which children are exposed, children will continue to act-out inappropriate sexualised behaviours.

FPQ recommends a range of interventions, however any intervention strategy should include a variety of programs. These should include but not limited to the following:

- Comprehensive evidence-based sexuality education programs for all school children tailored to specific age groups
- Critical literacy programs that teach and strengthen the analytical skills of children and young people in their consumption of the media
- Parent, carer and teacher support programs for developing their capacity in teaching and developing critical literacy skills to children and young people
- Collaboration programs which bring together the media and marketing industry, with the government and non-government organisations, such as FPQ, for the development of more effective interventions.

## CONCLUSION

The delivery of sexuality education in Queensland and across Australia is varied. FPQ estimates that only a small percentage of school children receive high quality sexuality education delivered consistently throughout their school years.

If we are to address the effects of what messages children receive through the media and marketing industries, it is important that the lack of current school-based sexuality education is addressed.

The APA in their study make the point that “extensive analyses documenting the sexualisation of girls... is yet to be conducted” and that “research documenting the pervasiveness and influence of such products and portrayals is sorely needed.”

If regulatory interventions are to be recommended by this inquiry, then comprehensive research in this area needs to be undertaken as a first step. This evidence should then contribute to the development of comprehensive sexuality education programs for children, and training programs to assist parents, carers, and other professionals, including those in the media, to deliver an age-appropriate curriculum that will enhance children’s development in the area of sexuality.

## REFERENCES

Family Planning Queensland. (2007). *Communicating about sexuality with children*. Brisbane: FPQ.

Sexual Health and Family Planning Australia. (2006). *Sexuality Education Position Statement*. Sydney: SH&FPA.

Report of The American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls. 2007, online (cited 17/04/2008): <http://www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualizationrep.pdf>