

Submission by Catholic Women's League Tasmania Inc to the inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment.

Members of Catholic Women's League Tasmania Inc view with alarm the continuing use of sexually explicit images and concepts in the contemporary media environment:

- where children appear in advertising material
- where children are the marketer's target group
- where women and girls are depicted as mere sexual objects, with personality, intelligence, inner life and dignity of no account.

We regard this as abuse and an exploitation of women and children for profit.

We urge the Australian Government to

1. amend the AANA Advertiser Code of Ethics and the Advertising to Children Code to take into account well documented evidence of psychological and developmental harm done to children by the sustained high level of sexual content in advertising in all media
2. appoint health professionals in the field of child and adolescent development to the Advertising Standards Board
3. allot responsibility for these matters to the Minister for Families with a requirement for an annual report to the Parliament.
4. review unsatisfactory complaints procedures, to facilitate access by parents and others.

The sources and beneficiaries of premature sexualisation of children in the media the winners

Undoubtedly in both cases these are product manufacturers with their marketers and advertisers, proprietors of magazines and newspapers, owners of electronic advertising outlets and retailers generally.

The evidence of harmthe losers

The advertiser's task is to alert us to products. To achieve this, innovation, shock and surprise are used. Sexualised images of children are alerting, but their use is unethical and exploitative.

They should be off limits.

1. In December 2006, an open letter was published in The Australian from 12 representatives of organisations such as the Australian Psychological Society, the Royal Australasian College of Physicians (Paediatric and Child Health Division), the Australian Council of State Schools Organisations and the Australian Centre for Child Protection.

They expressed alarm at the premature sexualisation of children and the harms which they have observed, claiming that the marketers ‘should bear the primary responsibility for the adverse outcomes of their practices’.

They called on government to ‘urgently’ examine difficulties which parents and caregivers face in trying to prevent the harmful effects on their children.

2. The American Psychological Association recently found that sexually objectifying material contributes to significant harm to young women:

... there is evidence that sexualisation contributed to impaired cognitive performance in college-aged women, and related research suggests that viewing material that is sexually objectifying can contribute to body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, low self-esteem, depressive affect, and even physical health problems in high-school-aged girls and in young women.

In addition to leading to feelings of shame and anxiety, sexualizing treatment and self-objectification can generate feelings of disgust toward one’s physical self. Girls may feel they are “ugly” and “gross” or untouchable. ... strong empirical evidence indicates that exposure to ideals of sexual attractiveness in the media is associated with greater body dissatisfaction among girls and young women.

Ameliorating the effects of the sexualisation of children in the media

It can be said that Australian children get the majority of their sex education from the print and electronic media, the principle providers of information on human sexuality and behaviors. Unfortunately, young people are being persuaded that sexual licence is appropriate, in fact a necessity for being accepted by their peers.

This leads to harm to mental health as well as fertility health and inhibits their ability to become well-functioning adults.

School-based sexuality and reproductive health education’, two of the options are:

- 1) to leave them with these attitudes and behaviors and adopt the harm minimisation approach, teaching them about contraceptive use, or
- 2) to tackle the avalanche of damaging messages, by means of education programmes which teach the student facts about human needs and human relationships, and encourage responsible decision making regarding their sexuality and life choices.

Many Australian programmes have been compiled.

We strongly advocate ‘Choices, Decisions, Outcomes’ www.cdo.net.au

Clearly the most efficient way to ensure that our young people have the greatest chance of avoiding damage to their lives from the barrage of harmful and highly manipulative messages is for the government to recognize the problem and act without delay to rule them out.

It is the responsibility of governments to provide the physical and social environments in which children will thrive.

Australian children have a right to enjoy childhood and adolescence free from the exploitation of profiteers, and enter adulthood with their psychological and fertility health intact. To achieve this, Australia should adopt nothing less than the gold standard