

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media

**From The Most Reverend Dr Philip Freier
Archbishop of the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne**

17 April 2008

Last year I called for a National Inquiry into the state of childhood in Australia. This followed a public event where 250 people at Federation Square in Melbourne attended a Breakfast Conversation between myself, Melinda Tankard Reist (CEO of the Women's Forum Australia) and Professor Alasdair Vance, Head of Academic Child Psychiatry, Department of Paediatrics, University of Melbourne. We collected signatures through our website to support this call, and their comments are attached (Appendix 1). The concern from the community is clear.

I note that this Senate Inquiry is limited to the context of the media but this will, I trust, be the start of an effort by the Commonwealth Government firstly to recognise the nature and extent of the problem, secondly to widen the inquiry and thirdly to implement some positive outcomes to redress the situation.

Many parents feel powerless to protect their children from a constant stream of sexualised and violent images in the media. The period of childhood innocent of body image, sex, drugs and violence is becoming increasingly short. From the various forms of the media, children become aware of such matters at an early age. The result is children obsessing about their body image and fashion and young people becoming caught up in a culture of sex, drugs and violence.

A critical measure of the health of our society is the mental health and wellbeing of our children. This is being diminished through advertising, the media and the internet. There are pressures on children and young people to be obsessed with body image, fashion and sex. Childhood depression is heading toward a crisis point. I understand that an estimated 100,000 young people in Australia are suffering depression and 20,000 prescriptions are written annually for antidepressants for young people and children. As many as one in five are suffering from some sort of eating disorder, with children younger than twelve vomiting and fasting to lose weight.

The causes behind this epidemic of childhood depression need to be understood. Professor Alasdair Vance reported that Australia's young people are facing a "true slow burn crisis". "Depressive disorders are happening more frequently and younger. We know this is not because genetics have changed. It's because the environment has changed. Such a national inquiry can provide a forum for information that can help us shape the (social) environment and allow human beings at their earliest stage of life to develop optimally."

I applaud the Senate Inquiry and look forward to learning of its findings.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Philip Melbourne". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "P".

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