SEXUALISATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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To:
Melanie Gibbons, MP
Chair
Joint Committee on Children and Young People
Inquiry into sexualisation of children and young people.
Parliament of New South Wales

Dear Minister,

Thank you for your invitation to make a submission to the Joint Committee on Children and Young People's inquiry into the sexualisation of children and young people (dated 4 November 2015).

I admit that in relation to this present inquiry, I was unclear as to how 'sexualisation' should be defined. Term of Reference iii, for example, appears to take it as read that children and young people *are* "growing up in a sexualised culture", without outlining the nature or context of this state of being. I hope the Committee's published findings define term 'sexualisation' more precisely, in order to assist in policy design and implementation. A number of Australian and international researchers in the field of youth and sexuality have noted the imprecise and 'slippery' nature of this term (see Lumby and Albury 2010, Egan, 2013, Robinson 2012).

In terms of clarification, I suggest the Committee the following questions: does *any* access to images of semi-naked or naked bodies, or overt conversations regarding intimate relationships constitute 'sexualisation'? Or does the term only apply in situations where young people are exposed to sexual materials or behaviours that distress or harm them (see Livingstone and Smith 2014)? Is exposure to media representing marriage as a desirable state of being considered to be 'sexualising'? After all, the institution of marriage legitimates (and in some contexts encourages) sexual activity. Or is it only representation of pre- or extra-marital sexuality that is deemed problematic?

By asking these questions, I am not seeking to insult the Committee, or to trivialise the important issue of child sexual exploitation. In fact, as the current Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse of children within religious and other institutions has tragically demonstrated, even where children and young people have little to no access to electronic, print or social media, they may be at serious risk of harm.

Having raised my concerns regarding the term 'sexualisation', I feel more confident in responding to Term of Reference Part vii, which invites input regarding 'possible measures that the Children's Advocate can take to assist children and young people to navigate the cultural environment successfully':

I recommend that the NSW Children's Advocate supports and actively defends universal delivery of comprehensive sexuality education that recognises the rights of children as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). This education should be evidence-based, and should focus not only on enhancing children and young people's understanding of human biology, reproduction, and respectful relationships, but should encompass what Corrêa et al (2008) have termed the "new human rights discourse [centred] around the body and its needs for security, health and pleasure" (Corrêa et al 2008: 165).

Many State bodies and non-government organisations who support young people's human rights in the context of sexuality and relationships have primarily advocated for 'negative' rights (in the sense of a right to protection from coercion & violence) as opposed to positive rights – for example a right to access sexual information, or a right to experience sexual pleasure (either alone, or with a consenting partner) (Corrêa et al 2008: 212-213). However, as Petchesky (2000) observes, the categories are not antithetical – that is, the ability to take pleasure in one's own body and desires is contingent on a range of "enabling conditions and material resources", including (but not limited to) freedom from violence and sexual coercion (2000: 97).

In a report commissioned by the European NGO Alliance for Child Safety Online, Livingstone and Mason (2015) recommend that school-based curricula addressing children and young people's sexuality in relation to digital technologies should:

> cover emotions, consent, sexual identity, dynamics of healthy (and unhealthy) relationships, sources of trustworthy information, critical media analysis tools and critical analysis of pornography, in addition to sexual and reproductive health issues. Further, rather than (or as well as) designing dedicated ICT-related or digital literacy sessions, the importance of the internet in exercising sexual rights and ensuring sexual protection would be better embedded in teaching and resources for sex and relationships education (Livingstone and Mason 2015:11).

The authors further advise that "policy and practice should be soundly evidence-based, and further research is needed to develop and evaluate interventions and educational approaches" (Livingstone and Mason 2015:11).

Similarly, in a recent review of global approaches to comprehensive sexuality education, Haberland and Rogow (2015) call for "rigorous evaluation of interventions aimed at… health, social, and education outcomes" that "identify 'key characteristics' of effective programs and that recognise the multiple contextual factors that influence adolescent sexual behavior" (2015: 19). The authors further recommend that researchers "document implementation of interventions, for program improvement, interpretation of

study findings, and to provide adequate detail in study write-ups", concluding that "it will be important to translate and disseminate useful curriculum resources" (2015: 20).

The Children's Advocate has a key role to play in terms of promoting this kind of rigorous critical inquiry, and insisting on the implementation evidence-based policy within NSW, and Australia more broadly. In conclusion, I suggest that regulation and/or restriction of 'exposure' to commercial and non-commercial media imagery is unlikely to positively impact on children and young people's current and future sexual health and wellbeing unless other enabling conditions are in place. I therefore commend the following evidence-based resources listed below, to support the Children's Advocate's future advancement of NSW children and young people's 'negative' and 'positive' rights to sexual health, wellbeing and safety, in both school and non-school settings.

Kind Regards,
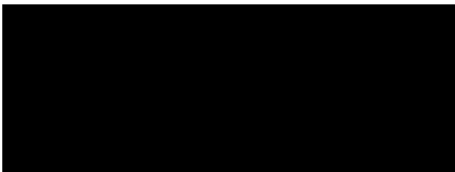
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