

**Submission
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SEXUALISATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Organisation: Australian Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools - NSW
Name: Ms Meagan Cooke
Position: Chairperson
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APACS NSW is a professional association for psychologists and counsellors working in educational settings with children and adolescents. Our aim is to enhance quality psychological counselling services to the full range of school communities by providing support to members for their professional and personal growth, local and national networking opportunities, and consultation on professional issues.

APACS NSW recognizes the importance of mental health and wellbeing in children and adolescents, and promotes the positive impact of psychologists and counsellors in schools.

This inquiry has identified a significant factor in the development of children and young people today. Following consultation with the APACS NSW membership, we provide the following summary of common *experiences* and *opinions* amongst our members.

i. The sexualisation of children and young people in electronic, print and social media and marketing

- Social media is a growing and exciting development in the socialisation of children and young people (being a great way to connect with others) however, more needs to be done to teach young people and their parents about the dangers, legality and problems associated with social media in relation to sexualisation.
- Social media largely remains unchecked except when parents are vigilantly watching.
- Students need to be explicitly taught so that they can apply this knowledge when using the internet without their parents.
- At a primary school level, it is not uncommon to see stage 2 students using vulgar language without understanding the meaning.
- Clothing overtly made for, and marketed to very young children, often mimics provocative adult wear.

ii. The exposure of children and young people in NSW to sexualised images and content in public places, electronic, print and social media and marketing

- Marketing today is visible everywhere and despite the majority of sexualised marketing material being aimed at adults, children are most definitely exposed to this and consequently are aware from a young age of how there are “supposed to” dress, act and look like to be desirable.
- Very young children are exposed to this type of content and subsequently children begin acting in a sexual manner before they are developmentally ready.
- Exposure to sexualised images is significant through electronic media including games where children are allowed to play games beyond their understandings and age. Ratings of games often don’t reflect their content and/or seem to be unnoticed, unsupervised or ignored.

iii. The impact on children and young people of growing up in a sexualised culture

- The impact on the children and young people of growing up in a sexualised culture include normalising sexualised behaviours at an inappropriately early age. This can impact their perceptions of self and encourage inappropriate relationships to be formed which they may not have the emotion or physical capacity to deal with.
- The age that children and young people start experimenting sexually seems (anecdotally) to be getting younger and younger. Often they are not fully aware of how to protect themselves properly during sex and end up with a potentially life changing condition/situation- for example sexually transmitted disease or pregnancy.
- Inappropriate language and images being shared as "jokes" are impacting negatively on the students who have not had prior exposure to such materials.
- Young students, particularly girls, try to fulfil the "ideal" portrayed in the sexualised content they are exposed to, for example wearing make up at a young age.
- Body image issues are a concern in high schools.

iv. Adequacy of current measures at state and federal level to regulate sexualised imagery in electronic, print and social media and marketing, and effectiveness of self-regulation measures

- Improved measures at a state and federal level are required. There seems such a low threshold of regulation in electronic and media. Furthermore, there needs to be greater government regulation of gaming and music industry around ratings and the sale of age-inappropriate content to minors.
- By the nature of the internet, regulation is very difficult. For example, even if a website has an age restriction, by simply putting in a false birthday, you can gain access to inappropriate content. Much more needs to be done for example, holding internet corporations liable for the promotion of inappropriate materials.
- Ultimately self-regulation should be the aim. However, self-regulation for primary school children is very difficult; they often come across sexualised content and materials by accident. More measures at the government level needed.

v. Measures to assist parents in fulfilling their responsibility to protect and education children

- Improved measures to assist parents are needed. It is a difficult balance parenting adolescents in the current culture; social media and the internet has become a vital part of being a teenager and if it is monitored too heavily by parents this could pose a risk to important relationships between peers and lead to isolation.
- Parents often seem unaware of the impact of media on children's development. They feel under pressure to buy the latest electronic game as pushed by expert marketing.



vi. Measures to educate children and young people and assist them in navigating the contemporary cultural environment

- Relationships as presented in media, including popular television shows, are often poor models for real life. Children and young people need to be exposed to models of working steadily to develop relationships (and equally to master a skill), of living with ambiguity, of not judging or measuring against some populist standard, and of the normal amount of time spent with same sex peers.
- There is a distinct need to give teens as much information about dangers as possible in a contemporary way that they can understand and respond to. As it stands, a lot of the preventative information/content is not delivered in a way that the young people will respond well to.
- Current measures to educate children and young people often start too late, in high school. Education needs to start as soon as children have ability to access to the internet.