

**Submission
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SEXUALISATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Name: Dr Andrew Mullins

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Committee on Children and Young People
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Submission: Inquiry into sexualisation of children and young people

Dear Committee Members

My submission draws upon my work on the impact of experience and environment on the neural development of young people. This work formed the core of my doctorate in moral philosophy and neuroscience in 2013. I am the author of *Parenting for Character* (Finch 2005), now also published in several overseas editions, and have been the principal of two independent schools in NSW: Redfield College (1996-2010) and Wollemi College (2011-2014). I have been invited to present about my work in various overseas countries, most recently at Mexico in October 2015 where I was keynote speaker for a biennial IFFD conference of family educators from 40 countries. I have accepted invitations to talk in May this year in Canada and in the UK. For the last two years at ADFA I have lectured and conducted workshops on character and leadership for all second year cadets.

My academic work draws attention to the neural mechanisms that make children such effective learners. The data show the necessity of regulation via cognitive pathways of emotional responses, if they are to learn self management and to think for themselves, and ultimately to take responsibility for others. Amongst these mechanisms for ready learning in a child's brain is the capacity for imitation, a very specific neural system. Imitation in the affective domain establishes motivation. This can of course be a very good thing: children learn what is good for themselves from the joy it brings their parents and teachers. However when children are precociously exposed to explicit sexual content, because of the capacity of sexual content to arouse unregulated emotion, misleading expectations and false attitudes are inculcated. Because of the plasticity of the brain, repeated behaviours, if pleasurable and therefore reinforced by reward systems, quickly become established conditionings. In some people with particular genetic predispositions conditionings of the reward system can become addictions.

Combine all this with the neural reality that, when critical periods of development commence, the developmental window remains open only until relevant experience is obtained. Hence, for example, a newborn is imprinted to its first carer and equivalent bonds can no longer be established with subsequent carers. First experiences can be virtually indelible. Something analogous happens in the sexual realm. Initial sexual experiences are profoundly powerful, be they real or virtual: neural studies demonstrate time and again that visualisation and exposure activate the same neural circuitry as actual experience (hence visualisation in sport is such a powerful training tool). If these experiences are linked to self-centred motivations, a young person is at great risk of subverting the beautiful potential of sexuality to cement loving relationships into nothing but entrenched egotism. Aristotle's observation, "We (human beings) always like best whatever we first experience," is borne out indeed by neuroscience.

My almost 20 year experience as a school headmaster is that most children and early-to-mid teens cannot self manage their responses to the ready presence of aggressive pornographic content on the net. They are up against an attraction that they have had no experience in moderating themselves. Hence is up to the adults to protect them. Not to do so, when in a position of responsibility for minors, is to place a child at risk of harm, and so is culpable and a form of abuse. It is obvious that

our main task as parents and educators is to form in a child the capacity to self manage, but this result cannot happen if a child's expectations are distorted before they are educated. I draw the Committee's attention to the alarming findings of the 2012 UK cross parliamentary report on children and pornography: some 80% of 16 year olds regularly access pornography. These figures are substantially up on comparable studies five and ten years before. The challenge is most evidently escalating. We can only speculate on the extent these figures may predict a generation of more narcissistic parents, and dysfunctional families for our country... all too soon, however, we may find out.

We continue to see deterioration in the will-to-protect in our community. For example, my local library in its DVD shelves now has movies with the notification on the cover 'real sex acts depicted': a child or teenager may view them in the library without even having to ask. This could not, and did not, happen five years ago. Similarly, the graphic novel section of the library now contains numerous comic books, again able to be borrowed by children, presenting nothing-left-to-the-imagination sex acts. Some present eroticised homosexual acts; yet I have witnessed the life-changing turmoil created in teenagers who have developed the habit of viewing homosexual pornography on the net, and I am very concerned for children who could stray into this material.

Even worse, if possible, than the precocious exposure of young persons to irresponsible sexual material is that we allow this exposure to take place in the absence of effective sexual education that establishes the convictions in a child's mind that sexual expression should be linked to permanent commitment, that feelings are not always good guides, that others are always to be respected. Precocious sexual experience (even of a virtual nature) has for children the very real capacity to establish deformed expectations of sex without responsibility, of unhealthy attitudes towards the opposite sex, of emotional insecurity and a lack of resilience, and of profound selfishness.

What are the solutions?

In my leadership experience, a problem may only be surmounted if it is acknowledged and if there is a will to address it. Leadership, political leadership in this case, is essential; leadership which presents the challenge positively, which creates a consensus, and which identifies specific and realistic mileposts needed to reach the final goal. Some in our community will never offer their consensus but I do believe the great majority of parents, who are all too often disenfranchised by media and commercial interests, know innately what is best for their children. It is therefore the lawmakers' role to create a broad and positive coalition of media and family that can address this issue.

I will be happy to appear in person before the committee. I will be happy to present more detailed scientific references and data should this be requested.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Mullins
Associate Professor (Adjunct)
University of Notre Dame Australia
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