

**Submission
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SEXUALISATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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The Sexualisation of Children and Young People

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In one Queensland primary school a seven-year-old girl is sexually assaulted over two months by a boy her age. Hitting her and threatening to kill her if she spoke out, the boy repeatedly forced this young girl to perform oral sex. In another primary school in New South Wales teachers struggle to deal with a 'rash' of 10-year-old girls photographing themselves topless, then sending these photos to peers.ⁱ These incidents were shocking, when they were reported 8 years ago. What is more shocking is that such incidents are no longer uncommon primary schools across the country. Sexting, for example, is now something children age 8 up now participate in, when kids get their first (camera-enabled) phone. At age 8 the inappropriate photos tend to centre around bare bottoms and breasts. By high school the images would make any x-rated movie proud.

The sexualisation of this generation doesn't just impact our teens, it's a growing issue for tweens (children aged 6-12) and preschoolers too. Life has changed radically in a few short years, and our young people are at the cutting edge of these changes. This is happening at a time when many parents have lost confidence in their ability to parent, while others simply want to be cool.

The current generation gap is possibly greater than it has ever been, which makes this generation more vulnerable to the sexualised material they are subjected to. Kids are also acutely aware of how ill-informed adults are of their world, their challenges, and find this endlessly frustrating. That's why they tend to turn to their peers, the media or the internet for answers. While the information they get may be misleading or inaccurate, it's accessible and immediate – something we as adults generally are not.

This Generation Is Highly Vulnerable to Suggestion. It's vital we don't underestimate the impact of the multi-million dollar marketing campaigns on children as young as 3 which, according to early childhood professionals is in turn creating new levels of anxiety around body image, looks and possessions. They report that pre-schoolers up are eager to have the branded products associated with the fun figures they see constantly on dvds – Bob the Builder backpacks, Barbie lunch boxes, Thomas the Tank drink bottles and so on. Figures that are a familiar part of their world. Figures that help them belong. This need for branded products intensifies during tween years, given a tween's fragile sense of self and eagerness to fit in. As marketers know well, tweens are extremely suggestible. This makes them extremely

vulnerable to sexualised images and storylines too. Increasingly tweens are quick to assume unhelpful aspirations and behaviours, in their ongoing quest to belong.

This is not a time to be complacent. Early childhood professionals and parents report unacceptable sexual behaviour and language at pre-school. They speak of tongue-kissing, and children's inappropriate and determined exploration of each other's bodies, of the use of words such as 'sexing' when talking about love and affection. Many parents are now expressing concerns around sudden sexualised behaviour in children this age. One mother of a five-year-old recently told of her daughter's distress at constantly being pressed by a little friend to play 'vagina to vagina'. A day later the mother of another small girl in a different city confided how her daughter was battling the same harassment.

New Technologies Have Created Radically Different Childhood Experiences.

When we assume lives of children, and our teen boys and girls are much the same as they've always been, we leave them vulnerable. While superficially childhood and teen experiences appear largely the same, they are not. Our children and young people inhabit a highly complex landscape with ready internet access and mobile phones, video and camera-enabled phones, and phones able to download direct from the internet. With these and other devices they can access to a world of information and experiences in seconds. This, along with a steady diet of magazines and sitcoms, movies and music videos, has a massive influence on their actions and aspirations. The formation of their values. Most of this material is beyond parental supervision. Some is harmless, much is not.

Affluence Is A Mixed Blessing. With these technological developments has come an explosion in spending on children, tweens and teens, and the ability of manufacturers to access kids direct. The highly competitive tween and teen market, literally worth billions, has sparked a proliferation of sexy images and content on billboards, clothing, product wrappers, on screen, in newspapers and magazines, promising young people they can be everything they long to be - attractive, popular, grown-up.

Sexy Images And Messages Are Good For Business. For many kids the combination of sex and shopping is irresistible. The seductive images and language targeted at young people are all the more potent because major companies employ cultural anthropologists and child psychologists. So they know our children's lives

intimately and which buttons to press. How then, if at all, does this hyper-sexualised environment impact our tweens?

Puberty Issues Are Happening Much Younger. ‘Some girls are now fashion-conscious as young as three or four,’ reflects Debra, a community liaison officer and mother of two girls. With this focus on fashion comes a desire to act in a more adult way. Sexy behaviour is sold as desirable, necessary if they want to be cool, to fit in. For children desperate to grow up, this is an obvious way to dress, to behave. The fallout, however, is far less glamorous. ‘We’re now seeing six, seven and eight-year-olds involved in coercive, manipulative sexual behaviours, because there’s a confusion around what sexuality means,’ says Dr Joe Tucci of the Australian Childhood Foundation. ‘This can be very traumatic to the child they’re doing this to.’ Victims often have to undergo intensive counselling to deal with their trauma, he explains.ⁱⁱ

Teen Girls Are Genuinely Concerned For Younger Girls. They see clearly how this new climate is impacting young girls. ‘It’s noticeable the girls wearing makeup and stuff are getting younger – wanting to grow up,’ Whitney, 18, reflects. ‘When I was like eleven I didn’t notice girls doing this. I think they should try and enjoy childhood, and enjoy what they have. It’s all the media influencing them.’ Sandi, 14, agrees. ‘You see some girls wearing like trashy pants, and some girls wearing like massive eye shadow and bright red lipstick as if they were going to a ball, and I think it’s really sad, because you had freedom back then to wear what you wanted. You had freedom, because there wasn’t anything you had to be.’

The Generation’s Immaturity And Exposure To Highly Sexualised Content Is Not A Good Mix. British neuroscientist Susan Greenfield warns that contemporary lifestyles and computers keep boys and girls, childlike - in need of constant reassurance, instant gratification, and assuming the world revolves around them. This growing immaturity amongst our young comes at a time when they have ready access to a world of information, including the worst possible kinds of material imaginable, including porn. Without the maturity to deal with the disturbing sexual material they can readily access, again they become vulnerable – not understanding where the boundaries around appropriate sexual conduct are.

A growing number of professionals who work with girls are concerned about the objective way in which many girls now view themselves. ‘What troubles me

is that it's like girls don't feel they have any rights,' one high school teacher tells. 'It's like they want to be objects to be desired.'ⁱⁱⁱ 'Professionals are concerned there is little dialogue around a girl's right to say no. Instead increasingly girls accept that they will have to perform sexual acts that may be embarrassing, painful and humiliating, because that's what they're meant to do. 'You just do all this sex stuff with boys,' explains Poppy 12, 'you don't have to love them or anything.'

Other professionals report a deteriorating sexual climate around teen girls. 'When I first started teaching in 2000 there was a sense of wanting to be sexy, but it wasn't common for girls to be having sex at twelve – it was more likely at fourteen,' one young teacher explains. 'Now it's (having sex) more common at twelve. It's like girls want to be wanted and loved in that moment, and that's enough.'^{iv}

With the shrinking of childhood and the collapsing of valuable life experiences, girls are even more willing to do whatever it takes to fit in. This same teacher spoke of one student aged fourteen, who took off with a friend in a car full of boys. During the ride the girl was pressured into taking her top off. She complied because she didn't want to look 'silly'. The boys then took a photo with their mobile and sent it to other kids. When the girl told her teacher, she had no sense of being violated. 'Girls are terrified of being isolated and not being seen as cool,' this teacher explained. 'It was like the girl could only see herself as how boys were seeing her.'^v

Another teacher told how one girl she was counselling admitted to having sex with several boys and her stepfather. The way the girl related her experiences she had no sense of being violated by her stepfather. Agreeing to sex, she believed, was what you were meant to do.

A Recent UK Study Of Anal Sex Amongst Ages 16 To 18 From Diverse Backgrounds headed up by Cicely Marston, senior lecturer in social science at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, sheds further light on the concerning dynamics surrounding teen sex, in this case anal sex. Sometimes inspired by pornography, sometimes not, the male teens in this survey saw anal sex as part of their range of sexual experiences. They mainly initiated anal sex, sometimes pushing girls to participate in anal sex, and expected to have to take a coercive role if necessary to bring this about. They expected to enjoy the experience, whereas most girls saw themselves as having to endure the resulting pain or damaged reputation, as that was what was expected of them.'^{vi}

Some Professionals See Clear Links Between The Hypersexualised Imagery Girls Are Constantly Exposed To And Their Sexual Behaviour. ‘There is a huge desensitization around sexualized images,’ agrees one clinical psychologist, who heads up a sexual assault team at a major NSW hospital. ‘The boundaries have become blurred not just for girls, but their parents, and the whole of society. You can’t drive down the street without seeing this material. If these images were put up at work, they’d be seen as sexual harassment, but we constantly see women in pornographic poses on buses and billboards. So, why are we surprised that young girls are participating in rainbow parties and having anal sex? It’s been sold to them as empowerment, it’s a great con job.’

Once Acts Such As Oral Sex, Were Available Only From Sex Workers. Now they are mainstream. When we first became aware of this trend even professionals failed to see the seriousness of this issue. ‘For young people it’s an almost universal practice now,’ says Basil Donovan professor of sexual health at the University of NSW. ‘Among teenagers it’s the new abstinence in the Clintonesque sense, because it’s a way of having sex without having sex, and there are obvious contraceptive advantages too’^{vii}.

Those working with children and teenagers now take a different view. ‘We’re seeing a collapsing of childhood,’ warns another psychologist who supports victims of sexual assault. ‘Younger and younger children becoming victims of sexual assault. In our performance culture, ‘performance’ is part and parcel of what’s going on with girls.’ In their desire to perform for peers, girls are putting themselves in increasingly risky situations. ‘Oral and anal sex are now just like kissing. To girls it’s not really sex. When their relationship with a boy begins at this level, then the expectations are that they’ll be up for a whole lot more.’

Teen Culture Suggests Girls Need To Be Primed And Ready For Sex At All Times. As competition for attention in this new performance culture is fierce, the sexual boundaries continue to be pushed. Some girls keen to extend their ‘repertoire,’ access porn for new ideas. Others get together with girls, kissing and touching each other, purely to get boys interested. Along with faux lesbianism, teachers talk of a growing interest in threesomes. “From what the girls say, the boys will think nothing of asking, ‘Can I have sex with your friend at the same as well,’” one teacher tells. “The way things are, it’s like it’s prudish to say no.”^{viii}

Unwittingly Adults Contribute To The Performance Culture. ‘Young girls grow up with their lives captured on camera and video by friends and family,’ one psychologist pointed out, ‘It’s only a relatively small step for them or their peers to capture more intimate details of themselves and their life.’ She goes on to explain, ‘We’re seeing a growth in girls being encouraged to take photos of themselves, which can then be used for bribery. With threats to tell their parents or new boyfriends what they’ve been up to, these girls can then be groomed to take more and more explicit photos of themselves. The trauma from these situations can be as bad as physical assault for girls, causing sleeplessness, flashbacks, not wanting to go out – the symptoms of post traumatic stress.’

Secret Lives Promoted and Aided By Technology and Pop Culture The capacity for kids to lead secret lives is perhaps greater now than at any other time. It’s not only adults who are sexual predators on and offline. With the new technologies, and increased access to adult content, we now have kids grooming others for sex. And, as teens now have their own secret language, can assume hidden identities and enjoy covert friendships, increasingly parents are in the dark. It’s vital parents get up to speed with the furtive aspects of teen life.

Sexual Assault. While sexual abuse of girls has always existed, according to experts this too is taking new forms. ‘We’re now seeing girls vulnerable to the same range of risks adult women face – being harmed on their way home, by taxi drivers, by boyfriends,’ one professional tells. The objectification of girls, raise earlier, doesn’t help. ‘Sexual offenders have less empathy,’ one psychologist explains. ‘They see their victims as objects. So the more we encourage girls to view themselves as objects without depth or difference, the more we place them at risk.’

Those at the cutting-edge of teen issues are in no doubt as to the vulnerability of this generation of girls. ‘Personally I have huge concerns. Young girls are now being targeted by older boys,’ admits one senior clinical psychologist, who heads a sexual assault support team at a major hospital. ‘We see a lot of 12 to 14 year-olds, targeted by boys 17 to 18 years. These are young girls wanting to be grown up, who’re still very young and trusting, who fall prey to pre-planned situations. They’re plied with alcohol, and possibly drugs, and often raped anally. In the past it was rape by one boy, but now it’s two or three boys, and often filmed. The severity of assaults is also growing.’

The Language Used By Many Teen Girls Suggests They're Inhabiting A War Zone. Teen girls speak of a night out of 'sticking together' and 'watching out for each other', making sure they're never alone, or their drinks are left unattended. They tell of pretending to drink to look part of 'the scene,' so they won't be made fun of, and of making sure they all leave together.

Older Teenagers See The Ramping Up Of Sexualised Behaviour In Younger Teens. 'You're now seeing guys and girls together at twelve and thirteen with serious commitments and doing crazy (sex) stuff,' Daryl, 17, tells. 'They're just kids, but it doesn't surprise me, because we're made to grow up faster.' Some see these changes as inevitable. Other teens are concerned by them. 'I see younger kids doing stuff at thirteen and fourteen, like sex, alcohol and drugs, and I am appalled,' says Gary, 17. 'Young teens have sex, because that's what you do. You've got young girls reading things like how to give the perfect blow job at thirteen,' Dylan, 18, tells. 'That stuff's everywhere. You can't escape it. There's not many TV shows that don't have sex. A lot of the stars are now in their teens.'

So how does this impact girls? 'When we encourage girls to see themselves without depth or difference, they take massive risks,' warns one clinical psychologist, who runs the sexual assault unit at a leading hospital. She went on to point out that sexual predators see their victims purely as objects. Encourage girls to objectify themselves, and you make them more vulnerable to predators.

A number of fathers express similar concerns. 'Boys do have a certain disrespect towards girls now,' says Dave Mallard, father, senior executive and men's group facilitator. 'They see girls gyrating and being overtly sexual, and so boys assume that's what girls want. They get caught up in the moment and with peer group pressure, seeing girls as a commodity. They don't have the life experience to handle what they see.' Sara, a high school teacher, agrees. 'It all starts with the language – how sex is referred to. Young boys talking about 'fucking a girl', 'having a fuck'. They wander around the school grounds saying 'I'd tap that', or 'I wouldn't tap that'. Or they talk openly about 'fingering her'. It's this grotesque, yet casual way they talk in a demeaning way about girls as sex objects.'

What's The Point Of Virginity Anyway? As it's not cool for a teen, even a young teen to be a virgin, what are teens meant to do about this pressure to 'come across'? In one coastal town, professionals were dealing with the fallout of girls as young as

thirteen who were going out and getting drunk, then finding someone to have sex with, so they could say they were no longer a virgin. The boys they had sex with were picked at random.

It's Hard For Today's Boys And Girls To Have Relationships Without Sex, Because Sex Is Now Part Of The Deal. A number of teens admit to liking someone, but not even considering going out with them, because of these expectations. 'Yeah, sex is now expected as part of relationships,' Dylan, 18, tells. 'Young males are starting to expect it, because that's what's shown on films and stuff.' These expectations can leaves girls vulnerable to assault, and boys to assault charges.

When Boys Are Vulnerable. With this level of full-on attention to sex, it is doubly hard for boys not to take advantage of what is on offer. Those who do, may well wear the consequences for years. 'It's a concerning scenario,' explains Sam, a youth worker. 'Boy meets girl. Girl likes him, so takes explicit photos and sends it to the boy. They get together. The relationship splits up. The boy is hurt and angry, so he circulates the photos. Then he's in trouble. If she is under sixteen and, depending on where he lives, he can be up for a whole range of charges from indecent treatment of a child under sixteen, to circulation of child exploitation material. Just to hang on to the explicit photos means he can be charged with child exploitation.'

Boys And Porn. These days a boy's access to porn is a given. For some it starts as young as six and seven, for some porn comes later. 'There's the porno aspect of the internet now,' explains Harrison, 15. 'Kids don't have to buy it off older boys like they used to do. It's readily accessible to. Some boys use it quite regularly. There's quite a culture of it. Inside jokes and words. A lot of boys talk about it in an open and relaxed manner. Most of my peer group admit to doing it. What they know about sex becomes quite sensationalised. They realise sex isn't exactly like that, but it's quite pleasurable. It can change the way boys talk in groups.'

Boys Just Being Boys? Some parents regard boys accessing porn as purely a sign their boys are growing up. There's also the view that if porn is accessed in the privacy of the home, it doesn't impact anyone else, but this clearly is not the case. 'When we go into a boy's background after a sexual offence it's clear the majority have been accessing porn,' explains Sam, who works with troubled youth. 'You can see this also from the kinds of acts they have performed, it's an obvious imitation of something they've seen.'

Porn Can Be A Family Problem. Sam also told how frequently the under-age boys he's dealt with, who are charged with sexual offences, come from homes where porn is regularly consumed by their parents. Some parents hide the porn, but the boys find their parent's stash anyway. In other homes he has visited, this material was lying around accessible to the whole family.

Once Boys Get Into Pornography, Their Whole Way Of Relating To Girls Changes. Some boys are aware of this. 'Some boys will definitely see girls differently after looking at pornography. It doesn't have a good impact at all,' admits Lucas, 15. In one local incident a thirteen-year-old girl went off to meet a school boy she'd met a few days before in a park. To her surprise they were joined by several of his friends. Over a number of hours she was sexually assaulted and repeatedly raped. Forced to perform oral sex on a number of the boys, she was told repeatedly to 'just smile like you're enjoying it'. The incident was filmed and circulated. Those reporting the court case remarked on the complete lack of remorse shown by the boys, who were said to come from good homes.

The Brain Science In a whole range of literature including the international best-seller *The Brain That Changes Itself*, psychiatrist Norman Doidge explains how porn rewires the male brain, leaving viewers wanting more. Continued access to porn leads to addiction, obsessively seeking out certain sexual experiences, needing increasingly heightened levels of stimulation, and experiencing withdrawal symptoms when porn isn't available. In his male patients he noticed interest in making love was replaced by simply needing a f**k, and that their 'sexual creativity' was dying as increasingly they needed to experience the scenarios they'd 'downloaded' to become aroused. The end-result was a decrease in interest in their regular partners, potency issues and handling their ever-increasing hardcore tastes.^{ix} Norman Doidge sees teen access to porn as particularly problematic. 'Softcore pornography's influence is now most profound because, now that it is no longer hidden, it influences young people with little sexual experience and especially plastic minds, in the process of forming their sexual tastes and desires.'^x

Porn Is Abusive To Boys. It is easy to blame boys for accessing porn. Yet increasingly experts are realising just how abusive early access to porn can be, as porn shuts down a boy's emotions and distorts their views on sex. 'Pornography has given boys a shared 'language, a sense of entitlement around sex, and a belief that

the sexually explicit material seen in pornographic material is what girls want to do,' explains one psychologist who works with sexual assault victims. 'Seeing it in their living room normalizes pornography. It gives young guys a way of relating to each other, which in turn reinforces abuse.'

Boys Are No Longer Accessing Porn in Private. In one Canadian study of boys 13 to 14 in urban and rural areas, more than a third of the boys said they viewed pornographic movies and dvds 'too many times to count'. Just over seven out of ten of these boys accessed pornography on the net. More than half saw it on a specialty TV channel.^{xi} In this same study two out of ten boys aged 13 to 14 viewed porn at the home of a friend.

As teenage life is pressured, it's natural for boys to look for an escape. Cyberspace offers boys an infinite number of ways to do so. As they mature, boys are also looking for new experiences of intimacy and ways to belong. They want somewhere to express their concerns and frustrations, and explore new ideas. Social networking is the perfect vehicle for these needs, and is attractive as it removes the awkwardness of face-to-face encounters.

With these new possibilities, it's tempting for teens, especially boys to drift away from family and real life friends, into a virtual world where little is as it seems. In the fantasy and science fiction online games MUDs (multiple user dungeon virtual games), and MMORPGs (massively multiple player online role-playing games) such as Rune Scape, there are opportunities for boys to take part in virtual sex, also known as cybering or mudsex. Able to move about their avatars, their online personas, simulate sex with other consenting avatars. Those who know can also hijack someone else's avatars and use them in violent or sexual ways.

In virtual worlds, such as Second Life, there are thousands of sex workers willing to perform virtual sex for Linden dollars, Second Life currency, or for real money. While other sites such as RedLightCenter offer virtual sex.^{xii} As well as Utube, for those in the know there's also the Xtube, Pornotube, Pornhub, Spankwire, and Megaerotic sites, to name but a few. Here have million of viewers can watch endless video clips of live sex. Some videos are professional, many homemade. While some content is free, others charge people to view. Described as 'authentic, sincere' 'visceral and raw' these sites offer 'fat people, ethnic people, old people, fisters, gay people, bi people,

ugly people, hot people, S&M people, self-suck fetishists, dildo-play lovers' and so on.^{xiii}

There Are Many Concerning Aspects To Boys' Repeated Access To Porn.

Perhaps the true impact of porn is best summed up by British philosopher and academic Roger Scruton, 'This, it seems to me, is the real risk attached to pornography. Those who become addicted to this risk-free form of sex run a risk of another and greater kind. They risk the loss of love, in a world where only love brings happiness.'^{xiv}

The measure of a healthy society is one that nurtures and protects its young. Our current sexualised climate is abusive to boys as well as girls. What will this new generation be like as adults when increasingly sexual acts centre around performance? How will their relationships fare with the massive exposure now to porn, where boys and girls witness the torture of women and girls for pleasure? Already we are seeing growing numbers of victims to domestic violence. There is growing evidence that porn changes brain pathways, and behaviour also. We also know that those addicted to porn are unable to connect meaningfully with those they care about, to sustain healthy relationships, and even when seemingly successful in other aspects of their lives they end up living on the fringes.

There is no doubt this current generation are struggling in this hyper-sexualised environment. Struggling for intimacy, meaningful connections, with what it means to be a boy or girl right now. What kind of men and women will they be? How do they get to experience the nuances of relating, of intimacy? What will this sexualised landscape look like for their children, and their children's children? There is an urgent need to reclaim the hearts and minds of our children, to review the usage of our public spaces, the products and games marketed to our young, to better understand the impacts of sexualised images and messages so effectively targetted at our children and teenagers, content generated purely for profit. There is an irgent need also for parental education for parents whose children are at preschool and primary school. If we are serious about tackling this issue, then we need to add another consideration to the bottom line, and that is the social impact of the products and games our children and teens are exposed to.

About Maggie Hamilton

As a writer and social researcher Maggie gives regular talks, lectures and

workshops; writes for magazines; and is a keen observer of social trends. She presents frequently at parents' evenings, professional development forums and at conferences. Her books have been published in Australia, New Zealand, Holland, Italy, Korea, China, the Arab States, Lithuania and Brazil, and include *What Men Don't Talk About*, *What's Happening to Our Girls?*, and *What Happening to Our Boys?* which look at the 21st century challenges of our girls and boys respectively. Since her latter books have been published Maggie has addressed over 50,000 Australian parents, and countless professional forums across the country, adding additional ongoing dimensions to her work.

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ⁱⁱ Maggie Hamilton, *What's Happening to Our Girls?*, Viking, Penguin, p 53

ⁱⁱⁱ Maggie Hamilton, *What's Happening to Our Girls?*, Viking, Penguin, p148

^{iv} Maggie Hamilton, *What's Happening to Our Girls?*, Viking, Penguin, p 158

^v Maggie Hamilton, *What's Happening to Our Girls?*, Viking, Penguin, p148

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