

**Submission
No 19**

SEXUALISATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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SUBMISSION TO COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE, NEW SOUTH WALES PARLIAMENT

Inquiry into sexualisation of children and young people

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The Australian Council on Children and the Media (ACCM) welcomes this opportunity to comment on the sexualisation of children and young people.

ACCM will provide further comment on matters raised in this submission if needed. Please contact Prof Elizabeth Handsley (President) or Barbara Biggins OAM (Hon CEO).

INTRODUCTION

The ACCM is a peak not-for-profit national community organisation whose mission is to support families, industry and decision makers in building and maintaining a media environment that fosters the health, safety and wellbeing of Australian children.

The ACCM has a national Board representing the states and territories of Australia, and a broad membership of organisations and individuals who support its mission.

The ACCM's core activities include the collection and review of research and information about the impact of media on children's development, and advocacy for the needs and interests of children in relation to the media.

This submission is submitted on behalf of the Board and executive Committee of the Council.

BACKGROUND

For a number of years, marketing communications and media representations have combined to place increasing pressure on children to look hot, thin and sexy. Evidence suggests that children as young as six are being subjected to targeted marketing for clothing, makeup, music, and other goods designed to encourage them prematurely to think they need to look sexy. They are also frequently exposed to messages about, and representations of, adult sexuality in public places. Such exposure takes away from parents and carers the opportunity to decide how and when children learn about sexuality.

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Australian Council on Children and the Media (Incorporating Young Media Australia)

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The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Child Psychiatrists (2008) has defined the problem as:

‘the imposition of adult models of sexual behaviour and sexuality on to children and adolescents at developmentally inappropriate stages and in opposition to the healthy development of sexuality. It encompasses sexual objectification and representation of children in adult sexual ways and in ways that imply the child’s value is dependent on conforming to a particular appearance, sexual display or behaviours. Children may experience secondary sexualisation through exposure to sexualised advertising material and products aimed at adult customers.’

Why be concerned?

Numerous agencies with responsibility for children’s health and welfare have expressed concern about the unhealthy pressures placed on children from these sexualised representations, and from the unavoidable exposure to depictions of adult sexualised behaviour. These include the Australian Medical Association (2012), the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Child Psychiatrists (2011, 2008) and the Australian Psychological Society (2007).

The period of middle childhood in particular is crucial for the development of a healthy sense of self and self esteem. If children see their appearance and ‘looking sexy’ as important at this time, many aspects of development can be seriously affected:

- girls, and sometimes boys too, may adopt restrictive diets as they try to fit the media’s standards for appearance;
- these sexualised images can give boys a distorted view of girls and women and of their own masculinity;
- children exposed to sexualised media may adopt sexual behaviours before they have the maturity to deal with the consequences;
- children are in danger of finding inappropriate material on the Internet, meeting predatory adults, or posting private information and photos of themselves; and
- the sexualisation of children in advertising may suggest to some adults that children are interested in, and ready for, sexual activity.

These concerns are shared worldwide. There have been strong statements from the American Psychological Society (2007), and from the UK Bailey report (2011) with immediate follow up action from the UK Government.

The need for action

Despite such strong concerns, and those expressed during the 2008 Senate Inquiry into the sexualisation of children and young people in contemporary media (Australia. Senate 2008) little effective action to tackle the issues has been taken in Australia. There has been an overreliance on self regulation by industry.

Promoting healthy choices and stronger voices in children’s media since 1957

Parents continue to be concerned. In a survey conducted at an ACCM seminar in Adelaide, attended by 600 parents in late 2011, there were strong indications that exposure to music videos and an inability to buy age-appropriate clothes for their children were issues of high concern to them.

In addition, the Australian Medical Association has called for immediate action. President Dr Steve Hambleton said in April 2012 that there had recently been renewed debate in the media and in the community, sparked by advertising that features young children in images and with messages that were disturbing and sexually exploitative.

‘These are highly sexualised ads that target children, and the advertising industry is getting away with it There is strong evidence that premature sexualisation is likely to be detrimental to child health and development, particularly in the areas of body image and sexual health The current self regulatory approach through the Advertising Standards Bureau is failing to protect children from sexualised advertising.’ (Australian Medical Association 2012)

In the UK, Children’s Minister Sarah Teather has said:

‘It’s clear that many parents are fed up with their children being surrounded by adult images as they grow up and being targeted aggressively to get the latest ‘must-have’ items....

‘We’re making progress but we’re keeping the pressure up on businesses so they listen and act on parents’ concerns. It’s not acceptable for industry to simply ignore families’ worries.’

UK Government action has also included the establishment of a Parentport (a single website which enables parents to express their concerns about programs, adverts, products or services www.parentport.co.uk) UK. Department for Education 2012

TERMS OF REFERENCE

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

There has been much public debate about the sexualisation of children in the past decade. The release of Australian, American and British reports on the sexualisation of children over the past few years has led to significant attention to the issue. Much of the content presented in these reports relates to the influence of sexualised advertising and the media in sexualising children; however, they also identify products such as clothing, magazines and toys (Bailey, 2011; Buckingham, Willett, Bragg, & Russell, 2010; Papadopoulos, 2010; Rush & La Nauze, 2006a, 2006b; Zurbriggen et al., 2007). The publication of the Australian report, *Corporate Paedophilia*, drew attention to the then-recent development of corporations positioning children in sexually alluring ways for the purpose of advertising (Rush & La Nauze, 2006a). This new form of sexualising children identified a shift from children’s accidental exposure to sexually signified material, to children being exploited for the purpose of selling products.

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

Sexualised images and messages have become ever-present in Australian culture. Depictions of scantily dressed women and men, sexualised connotations and sexual products have erupted over billboards, bus stops, television programs, movies, magazines, music videos and other media. Much of this has resulted from the intention to sell products or programs. Although using sex to sell is not a new phenomenon, contemporary marketing has become more sexually explicit and many images accessible in public places or forums align closely with traditional sex industry representations. Australian children cannot avoid sexualised imagery and messages as they are immersed in a sexualised culture. Of concern is the phenomenon of sexualised products being created and marketed towards young children. For example, some businesses offer children's pole dancing classes (<http://princessmemespoleschool.com/classes/>), whilst others provide glamour parties (<http://www.kidspot.com.au/parenting-directory/Birthday-Party-Venues+154/Twigs-and-Blossoms+44300/Sydney.htm>). Sexualised toys such as Bratz dolls are marketed to children as young as 4 years old and some clothing produced for children mimics styles that adult women use to draw attention to their sexuality, such as low slung jeans, gaping tops and micro-mini clothing, such as shorts or skirts. In addition, the rise of child beauty pageants (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Australian-Royalty-Pageants/423895797655224?fref=ts>) encourages children to value beauty ideals as their whole sense of worth.

The internet has brought with it millions of pornography sites, making access to pornography relatively easy for children and young people. According to Flood (2007) approximately 75% of young people aged 16-17 voluntarily or accidentally viewed pornography on the internet.

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

Many advocates and scholars argue that Australia's sexualised culture is having negative effects on children's healthy development. Hamilton (2009b, 2010) draws attention to very young children acting out sexually in schools, claiming that this is the result of growing up in a sexualised culture. Tucci supports this argument, stating that many of the children he sees for problematic sexual behaviour are not victims of sexual abuse, rather they have learnt this behaviour from sexualised media (Betts & Rowlands, 2011). This places children at risk of engaging in sexual crime. Research with Australian primary school aged children found that children are mimicking the sexualised dress and behaviour of sexualised music artists in a school disco context (Ey & Cupit, 2013). Dines (2010) and Rush and La Nauze (2006b) argue that when children present sexually, they place themselves at risk to predatory behaviours, including paedophilia.

A culture that commonly sexually degrades women is also impacting on children's sexual identity and attitudes. UK psychologist Papadopoulos (2010) claims that attitudes towards females are particularly affected because many images degrade and debase women, thus reinforcing and perpetuating inequality. Hamilton (2010) states that primary-school-aged boys speak of the 'need' to have a girlfriend. Her discussions with these boys revealed that they saw girlfriends as little more than

accessories. Consequences of such attitudes include boys displaying voyeuristic behaviours and denigrating attitudes toward young girls, a phenomenon that is increasing in Australian boys, according to Hamilton. Such attitudes and behaviours are evident in research with older groups which suggests that young boys' adverse attitudes are likely to escalate in their later years. Ey's (2014a) research with Australian children, aged 6 and 10 years, found that children 'expect girls to focus on appearance and sexual presentation' and 'viewed boys as the dominant gender' (p. 157), which she argues is a result of children growing up in a patriarchal culture that values sexualised presentation. In addition, research conducted by Miller, Lurye, Zosuls, and Ruble (2009) found that children as young as three consider appearance important when describing girls which they argue is partially because of media representations of women.

There is an abundance of research which demonstrates that children from as young as five years old are already focusing on body image, in particular the desire to be thin (Collins, 1991; Field et al., 2001; Hamilton, 2009a, 2009b; Jung & Peterson, 2007; Kinlen, 2006), which researchers attribute to media influence. Recent research found that Australian girls, aged 6 and 10, recognise female music artists as underweight and desire an underweight body shape for themselves (Ey, 2014b). Media that portrays thin ideals as sexy generates body-image anxiety.

Children raised in a sexualised culture are becoming confused about popular culture and how they are expected to act. For example, Freeman-Greene (2010) wrote about a 12-year-old girl who was suspended from her school for posting a 'pornographic poem', which reads like a call girl's graphic boast, on the school's intranet. The girl claimed she was trying to write a top-40-style song and was confused, stating 'what I wrote didn't seem so bad when everyone else writes and talks like that' (2000, unpaginated).

This section clearly demonstrates that children are being negatively affected by sexualised media, raising concerns about children's sexual, physical and psychological health.

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

Arguably there are no regulatory measures to address sexualisation, except the self-regulatory ones which are manifestly inadequate.

As the Committee would be aware, the major action taken to date has been the Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts' Inquiry that reported in 2008. For ease of reference, we provide a table here, summarising the recommendations and the government's responses:

| Recommendation | Addressed to | Government response |
|--|--|--|
| 1. Demands action by society; follow up in 18 months | Broadcasters, publishers, advertisers, retailers and manufacturers; Senate | Noted |
| 2. Longitudinal study | Commonwealth government | Agrees in principle; undertakes to explore opportunities for conduct of proposed research |
| 3. Revise scheduling requirements for Children's Television Standards quota content | Commonwealth government (Australian Communications and Media Authority) | Supports |
| 4. Review classification of music videos | Broadcasters | Noted (but see below) |
| 5. Establish dedicated children's channels | Broadcasters | Noted; funding provided for ABC children's channel |
| 6. Reader advice on magazines | Publishers | Noted; recognises 'considerable practical difficulties for publishers in implementing such a system' |
| 7. Review in 18 months of effectiveness of Australian Association of National Advertisers' Code for Advertising and Marketing Communications to Children | Senate | Noted |
| 8. Complaints clearing house | Advertising Standards Board and Free TV Australia | Noted |
| 9. Consolidate half-yearly list of complaints | Advertising Standards Board | Noted |
| 10. Consider adopting advertising pre-vetting system | Advertising Standards Bureau | Noted; already in place for free-to-air TV, undertakes to ask the ACMA to raise this with subscription TV and commercial radio broadcasters when Codes of Practice next reviewed |
| 11. Formal schedule or process for community consultation | Advertising Standards Bureau | Noted |
| 12. Rigorously apply standards for billboards and outdoor advertising | Advertising Standards Board | Noted ASB is independent; outdoor advertising within purview of local councils etc |
| 13. Comprehensive sexual health and relationships education programs | State and territory governments | Leaves to those governments to consider (but see below) |

Of the 13 recommendations, only number 3 suggested a regulatory measure by the Commonwealth government.¹ It is understandable that the government should have only noted those that were directed to industry. However it is striking that the government's response to Recommendation 4 used exactly the same distinctive turn of phrase ('no level of concern') as the commercial television industry

¹ Recommendations 1, 2, 7 and 13 are also directed to government institutions; but the first 3 of those do not relate to regulatory measures and the last is directed to the States and Territories.

body Free TV Australia had used in its submission to the Inquiry.² When the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice was reviewed the following year, not a single word about classification of video clips was changed, and the ACMA registered the code anyway.

We note further, with irony, the response to the Recommendation 13 on sexual health and relationships education, that it 'should be implemented in consultation with the school community; be respectful of religious and philosophical views; and be age appropriate' - that is, everything that sexualised advertising is not.

The AANA released a new version of its *Code on Advertising and Marketing Communications to Children* days before submissions closed on the 2008 inquiry. It introduced a new provision, section 2.4, which read as follows:

2.4 Sexualisation

Advertising or Marketing Communications to Children:

- (a) must not include sexual imagery in contravention of Prevailing Community Standards;
- (b) must not state or imply that Children are sexual beings and that ownership or enjoyment of a Product will enhance their sexuality.

In a radio interview around the time it was first introduced, a spokesperson for the AANA, when interviewed on radio, was unable to identify an advertisement then in circulation that would no longer be allowed under the new provision. This is not surprising, since it required an ad aimed at children, for a product of primary appeal to children, to include sexual imagery or make some kind of statement about children's sexuality. However it confirms that the introduction of the new provision was hollow gesture. We note further that due to the narrow definition of 'advertising to children' - that is that the ad must be of such a style as to appear to be aimed at children and be for a product of primary appeal to children - the children's code cannot address a large proportion of the sexualised advertising to which children are casually exposed in public places and in broadcast media.

Generally the provision appeared to misunderstand the issue entirely. For example it referred to what an ad might state or imply about 'children's sexuality' when in fact sexualisation has little if anything to do with sexuality, at least in the short term. Rather it tends to engage the cultural trappings of sexuality and to associate these with desirable things like popularity and power.

The section has been slightly amended since then and now reads as follows:

Advertising or Marketing Communications to Children:

- (a) must not employ sexual appeal;
- (b) must not include sexual imagery in contravention of Prevailing Community Standards; and
- (c) must not state or imply that Children are sexual beings and that ownership or enjoyment of a Product will enhance their sexuality.

² See eg the heading to Chapter 4 of that submission.

The addition of the new paragraph (a) goes some way towards addressing the issues just raised, but ACCM believes it is still too vague to be of much use. And the problem of the narrow definition of advertising to children remains.

The AANA has also adopted a provision in its Code of Ethics which is commonly referred to as the 'objectification' provision even though it does not contain the word objectification anywhere. This provision states:

2.2 Advertising or marketing communications should not employ sexual appeal in a manner which is exploitative and degrading of any individual or group of people.

It is noteworthy that the wording of the section contemplates advertising that is exploitative but not degrading, and vice versa. It could theoretically address some inappropriately sexualised advertising, but if it did so, this would only be incidental. It is therefore not an adequate response to the sexualisation of children.

It is worth noting that these initiatives apply only to advertising and marketing communications, whereas the concern extends to a broader range of media content, for example music videos and editorial content in children's magazines. If anything has changed on these fronts in the last 10 years it has been more a result of commercial decisions than of regulatory measures. This means, of course, that any such changes could be reversed at any time.

More recently, in 2013, the Commonwealth government established a task force to devise an Issues Paper on the Sexualisation of Children. As far as we have been able to determine, this was never publicly released. If this is true, the best guess for a reason would appear to be lack of political will.

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

Such measures are vitally important. It is unfair to parents to leave them on their own to mitigate the impacts of very strong cultural forces which are at odds with their children's best interests.

Reg Bailey, Chief Executive of Mothers' Union, whose own 14 recommendations to Government (Bailey Review 2011) have largely been met, agreed that more still needs to be done to maintain vigilance on the way commercialisation affects children. On his retirement last year he said:

'We're not looking to wrap children up in cotton wool. We want to say to parents, government, industry and all those who support children, that developing emotional resilience is a key part of enabling our children and young people to deal with the challenges and pressures they face as they engage with the commercial world. Nevertheless, this shouldn't have to be an uphill struggle for parents – they too need to be provided with effective support.'

Currently, there are very few resources available to assist parents in protecting and educating children about media that is likely to have negative effects on children. ACCM provides research evidence-based information about media and children on our website. They also provide some services including movie and app reviews. Other organisations, such as Raising Children Network similarly

provide research evidenced information about media and children, but neither of these organisations is positioned to provide educational resources. This gap means that parents are not resourced to be able to educate their children, and given the inadequacies of media codes and regulations in fulfilling their role in protecting children from sexualised media, this is problematic.

ACCM has extensive experience in the delivery of research-based information and guidance to parents by means of evening seminars. For example, between 2009 and 2013, ACCM developed and presented a total of 8 seminars for parents in South Australia (2009, 2011 and 2012) Western Australia (2010) and Victoria (2011) under the titles, *Bratz, Britney and Bralettes*, or *Too Much Too soon: guiding your child through a sexualised world*. These ACCM seminars were well received, with evaluation surveys showing a high degree of appreciation: see attachment B. They were attended by all sectors including parents, educators and health professionals. A similar model could well be used in providing the kind of support referred to in point v.; with the addition perhaps of webinars and online videos, further supported by materials such as an informational brochure (see eg Australian Council on Children and the Media 2009).

Such activities and materials should equip parents with reliable, research-based information about:

- the highly sexualised world their children are growing up;
- strategies to minimise their children's exposure to sexualised images on TV and in magazines, movies and music videos;
- how to monitor Internet usage closely and keep computers in family areas;
- how to expand what their children are seeing and doing by exposing them to a wide range of competent female roles models in books, movies and television programs;
- how to promote media literacy and teach their children to question media messages;
- encouraging their daughters and their daughters' friends to be interested in a range of activities which encourage competence and creativity (rather than shopping, makeovers and pop stars);
- how to answer children's questions about sex honestly but only to give information that is age and developmentally appropriate;
- the importance of acknowledging their children for their personal qualities and abilities rather than their appearance;
- leading by example as a parent. This is important because ideally parents are children's strongest role model, especially in the early years; and
- how they can take action to work against the sexualisation of children.

All of the above assumes that parents are sufficiently concerned, and feel sufficiently empowered, to take the initiative in seeking out this information and these activities. As that cannot be assumed of all parents, it would also be appropriate to adopt measures at normal points of contact, for example child

health visits and school enrolment. These could be used as opportunities to engage parents in a discussion about the matters listed above.

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

Children receive some education about media influence through formal schooling in the English, Health and PE, and Media Arts curriculum strands, but education specifically about the influence of sexualised media is absent. Given that children are growing up in an overtly sexualised culture, it is unclear why education about this is absent. Children have the right to learn about issues that can potentially negatively affect them so they are able to make informed choices.

ACCM believes that points v. and vi. on the Terms of Reference are inextricably linked, not least because of the importance of starting early in establishing healthy media use habits in children. To start early, it is necessary to engage parents as well. We also believe that even for older children, a conversation between parents and their children is one of the most promising ways of reducing the impact of sexualised content.

One rarely-acknowledged aspect of the issue of sexualisation is the discomfort both parents and children experience in conversations about sex. Participants in the debate about sexualised advertising often blame parents for being unwilling to decode that advertising for their children, but this overlooks the fact that the discomfort goes both ways: children do not like being confronted with evidence of their own parents' sexuality, and yet it is difficult to have such conversations without doing so.

For these reasons, we see a role for programmes that support parents and children to have the necessary exchanges of views and insights on sexualised advertising. It is probably no coincidence that a precedent exists in the field of sex education: in that field there exists a model where parents and children attend a presentation during which the presenter tasks the parents and children with discussing certain defined matters, and gives them time to do so. Such a model takes the pressure off parents by prompting them to discuss sex-related matters with their children, rather than leaving it up to them to take the initiative, thereby creating a safe space within which the conversations can take place. This could be an appropriate model for helping children to navigate the contemporary cultural environment as well.

vii. Possible measures that the Children's Advocate can take to assist children and young people to navigate the cultural environment successfully

Such assistance could presumably be worked into the Children's Advocate's current program of engagement with children and young people. The important thing is that it should be based on research evidence, and avoid any overtones of moralism.

As the national peak body on children's interests as media consumers, ACCM would be pleased to work with the Children's Advocate to develop such programs.

viii. Any other related matter

Given that evidence presented above that demonstrates that children's wellbeing is being negatively affected by sexualised media, it is imperative that government fund and support organisations positioned to support parents in protecting and educating children about this phenomenon.

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Signed



President

ATTACHMENT A: CHILDREN, SEXUALISATION, BODY IMAGE AND MEDIA SELECT READING LIST 2007 - 2016

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ATTACHMENT B: ACCM SEMINAR TESTIMONIALS

Bratz, Britney & Bralettes: the sexualisation of childhood, Melbourne 19 May 2011

This presentation should be compulsory for all parents (if only) and teachers!!..then society as a whole!

There was an excellent balance of considerations relating to society and of recommendations for parents.

Do this more!!

We need more like them (seminars) – they're needed.

Excellent content and fabulous to have multiple points of view put forward. WE NEED MORE OF THIS! Build awareness and dialogue in the community. Also address practical issues around parenthood and peers.

An eye opening and helpful seminar on many levels. Inspiring to know my voice can change things. Strategies to help the direction of my parenting and a ndw awareness of the playing field or mine field of our society. Thank you.

Too Much Too Soon: guiding your child through a sexualized world, Adelaide 21 June 2012

Very informative. Knowledge is a powerful tool as a parent for prevention is better than cure

Stunning! Excellent content, well presented, good pace, call to action, was very inspiring.

Well organized and good time management. Lots of information.

Informative speakers with up-to-date knowledge and very scary statistics. Helpful info. For how to deal with media practically.

Extremely informative and interesting. It was a great seminar with lots of informative information.

Informative and engaging. Quite confronting and a bit depressing, especially when you think of all the parents that don't come to these seminars.

Confronting but encourages me to continue limiting screen time for my 10 & 12 yr olds, lots to think about.

WOW! Fantastic – got a whole lot out of it but also feel more confident with what we do with our preteens currently at home.