

**Submission
No 25**

SEXUALISATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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The Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA) Response to the NSW Inquiry into Sexualisation of Children and Young People

About ACWA

The Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA) is the non-government peak body for NSW and the ACT representing the voice of community organisations working with vulnerable children, young people and their families.

With a membership of around 100 agencies, ACWA works with members and partners, government, non-government and other peak bodies to bring about effective reforms that will deliver better outcomes to the lives of vulnerable children, young people and their families.

The ACWA Best Practice Unit integrates research, practice and training capacities to provide member networks with relevant training packages, policy advice and active involvement in research.

The Centre for Community Welfare Training (CCWT) is a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) providing cost effective and accessible training opportunities for people working across the community welfare sector - with a particular focus on organisations working with vulnerable children, young people and families.

Introduction

ACWA thanks the Legislative Assembly Joint Committee on Children and Young People for the opportunity to provide comment on this issue. We note that there has been extensive reporting and analysis on the sexualisation on children and young people by different state governments, that have explored the impact of media and that should not be repeated here.¹

¹ Scoping review: Evaluation of out of home care practice elements that aim to prevent child sexual abuse parenting Research Centre and the University of Melbourne, Commissioned by the Royal Commission, 2015; Commissioner for Children and Young People, WA; A scoping paper prepared Under the *Second Three Year Action Plan 2012-2015* (Second Action Plan) of the *National Framework to Protect Australia's Children 2009-2020*; Senate Committee Inquiry into the Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media Environment The Senate Select Committee on Cyber Safety; On 27 June 2013 the Senate appointed the Select Committee on Cyber Safety to inquire into and report, by 30 August 2013, on options for addressing the issue of sexting by minors.

This submission will seek to draw out the implications of the current environment on children and young people who are vulnerable due to their experience of abuse and or neglect and current circumstances.

Definitions

Acknowledging that there is no single accepted definition of the sexualisation of children, the 2008 Standing Committee on Environment, Communication and the Arts' *Inquiry into the Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media* found that sexualisation occurs on a continuum, from:

“the explicit targeting of children with images, attitudes and content that inappropriately and prematurely seek to impose a sexual identity on a child, through the presentation of one-dimensional and stereotypical images of children and young people, predominantly girls, in content, products and advertising directed at them, to what might be described as the 'background noise' of society at large where products, advertising and other materials made for and directed at adults are readily accessed by children and reinforce the sexualising messages they are receiving.”²

‘Sexualised behaviour’ is a term that has a number of applications – as used in relation to media and advertising and secondly, in a therapeutic or child protection context.

In the first application there is a focus on the impact of the use of sexualised images and representations of children in the public domain – in media and advertising – thus impacting what is viewed as ‘normative’ in relation to the representation of children.

The second use of the term ‘sexualised behaviour’ refers to the description of the impact of child sexual abuse (and other abuse) on a children’s behaviour thus leaving them vulnerable to both socially condoned norms that threaten the health development of children and young people, and further sexual abuse.

ACWA would like to highlight to the Joint Committee on Children and Young People this second use of the term ‘sexualised behaviour’ in relation to therapeutic and child protection responses and the particular vulnerability of child in Out-of-Home Care (OOHC) settings who have experienced abuse and neglect. This includes children and young people who have been removed from their families of origin and may also be living in kinship care, foster care or and a small proportion live in residential care facilities. As a result of their experiences, a proportion of these children and young people have experienced significant trauma that has compromised their developmental milestones, identity formation and ability to manage the challenges of establishing and maintaining relationships as well as intimate and sexual interactions. Also, the learned sexual behaviour of sexual abuse victims can put them at a great risk of re-abuse.³

² Commonwealth Parliament, Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communication and The Arts, *Inquiry into Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media*, 2008, accessed on 12 August 2013.

³ Briggs & Hawkins, 1997 as cited in Uliando, A. & Mellor, D. (2012), ‘Maltreatment of children in out-of-home

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

Where children and young people have been exposed to family or care environments where the abuse of power in intimate relationships was normalised, and where they themselves experienced sexual abuse and or other kinds of abuse, they will not have well-developed internalised notion of what is safe or risky behaviour – including sexual behaviour. This places them in a high category of vulnerability to other children. Indeed, the level of vulnerability to stimuli relating to sexual messaging or behaviour will depend on their experiences, current circumstances and the protective elements that they have around them. They may explicitly reject the assistance of parental figures in establishing safe boundaries.

High schools are a place where children and young people are able to learn about the social norms relating to intimate relationships and sexual behaviour. Schools provide safe structures in which there is both formal and informal learning in relation to these areas. However, some of the most vulnerable students from the OOHC population are not afforded a public school education, due to their exclusion.

The specific needs of this population require consideration in any analysis of the current environment in which children and young people are being targeted or experiencing exposure.

The social environment interacts with and can reinforce predatory sexual behaviour. Peer on peer abuse has an area of concern within the OOHC sector – as we know from anecdotal evidence that services are required to devise safety plans for children and young people and to manage and treat predatory sexual behaviour.⁴ There needs to be established mechanism for peer on peer sexual abuse to be monitored within an OOHC setting.

The impact of sexualised images of children in the media have been identified by the National Framework, as research into the sexualisation of children was one of the national priorities in the Action Plan 2012-15.⁵ Further information can be found in Appendix 1.

Nevertheless, there are a number of fundamental questions and potential research areas that continue to be critical. We need to understand what developmentally normal sexual behaviour is and what constitutes abuse of power in an intimate relationship. There is also more exploration needed of the development of internal self-protective responses.

care: A review of associated factors and outcomes', *Children and Youth Services Review*, Vol. 34, pp.2281.

⁴ South, S, Shlonsky, A, & Mildon, R. 2014, Scoping Review: Evaluations of out-of-home care practice elements that aim to prevent child sexual abuse, Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Sydney.

⁵ ACIL Allen Consulting, 2014, The National Framework: Scoping the Baseline Evaluation – Working Paper, Melbourne.

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

The role of parents in supervising and making purchasing decisions for children is important, especially for children under the age of 12 years who have little means or opportunity to purchase goods independently of their parents. The Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communication and The Arts stated that:

“Improving the ability of children and parents alike to assess, contextualise and discuss potentially sexualising imagery in the media is likely to lead to better decision making and the ability to counteract the commercial and profit imperatives that largely shape advertising and media content.”⁶

South, Shlonsky and Mildon (2014) recommended a broad social education about the impact of sexualisation in media and advertising.⁷ There is also a need for education about the range of environmental messages that relate to sexual identity: the damaging and addictive impact that pornography can have on behaviour and what constitutes safe and respectful sexual interaction and behaviour.

Another consideration is the role of caregivers in identifying and responding to the impact of trauma resulting from pornography, due to the potential risk posed by the accessibility of pornography to children and young people.

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

It is important to note that prevention should be the first focus.⁸ In addition to the public campaigns suggested above, developmentally appropriate education is needed within schools. This starts at preschool with education on feeling safe through to cyber and personal/sexual safety as an adolescent. There are considerations about different stages of development in childhood and the emotional and physical vulnerability of specific age groups. The Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communication and The Arts recommended state and territory governments introduce “comprehensive sexual health and relationships education” into schools, adopting a nationally consistent approach.⁹

Specifically targeted education and strategies are also needed for schools, and for children and young people who are traumatised, along with treatment services.

⁶ Commonwealth Parliament, Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communication and The Arts, *Inquiry into Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media*, 2008, accessed on 12 August 2013.

⁷ Ibid, p. 8.

⁸ South, S, Shlonsky, A, & Mildon, R. 2014, Scoping Review: Evaluations of out-of-home care practice elements that aim to prevent child sexual abuse, Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Sydney.

⁹ Commonwealth Parliament, Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communication and The Arts, *Inquiry into Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media*, 2008, accessed on 12 August 2013.

Identification and treatment for child offenders and assessment skills for caseworkers to identify children who put others children at risk is a further area. Treatment services for those children and young people who are sexual offenders needs to be specialist with robust training, supervision and support – New Street is one such model.¹⁰

CCWT, ACWA’s learning and development arm, provides training packages in child protection and we are able and willing to present verbally if more information is needed concerning strategies in education and training.

References

ACIL Allen Consulting, 2014, *The National Framework: Scoping the Baseline Evaluation – Working Paper*, Melbourne.

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Pratt R and Fernandes C, 2015, *How Pornography May Distort Risk Assessment of Children and Adolescents Who Sexually Harm*, *Children Australia* v. 40 no. 3 Sep 2015: 232-241.

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Uliando, A. & Mellor, D., 2012, ‘Maltreatment of children in out-of-home care: A review of associated factors and outcomes’, *Children and Youth Services Review*, Vol. 34, pp.2280-2286.

WA Parliament, Joint Standing Committee on the Commission for Children and Young People, *Sexualisation of Children: The Commissioner for Children and Young People’s 2013 report on the Sexualisation of Children*, 2014, accessed on 4 February 2016 at [http://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/parliament/commit.nsf/\(report+lookup+by+com+id\)/e7d4e8553f6256b548257d02001fa408/\\$file/sexualisation+report+-+june+2014+-+19+june.pdf](http://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/parliament/commit.nsf/(report+lookup+by+com+id)/e7d4e8553f6256b548257d02001fa408/$file/sexualisation+report+-+june+2014+-+19+june.pdf)

¹⁰ Note the following research in this area: Pratt R and Fernandes C, *Distorting risk assessment of children and adolescents who sexually harm*, *Children Australia* v. 40 no. 3 Sep 2015: 232-241.

Contact

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Appendix 1.

SEXUALISATION OF CHILDREN WORKING GROUP

TERMS OF REFERENCE

Preamble

Under the *Second Three Year Action Plan 2012-2015* (Second Action Plan) of the *National Framework to Protect Australia's Children 2009-2020*

Membership

The SOCWG will be chaired by Helen Bedford, Branch Manager Children's Policy Branch, FaHCSIA.

The SOCWG comprises of individuals and representatives of organisations with an interest in the issue of the sexualisation of children including representatives of members of the Coalition of Organisations Committed to the Safety and Wellbeing of Australia's Children and government representatives from FaHCSIA's Children's Policy Branch and Women's Safety and Family Violence Branch.

Members include:

- Wendy Foote, Association of Children's Welfare Agencies NSW (ACWA)
- Sian Trigwell, Parkerville Children and Youth Care
- Bev Orr, Australian Foster Care Association (AFCA)
- Elizabeth Handsley, Australian Council on Children and the Media (ACMA)
- Gemma McKibbin, PhD Student, University of Melbourne School of Social Work
- Megan Leahy, Women's Safety and Family Violence Branch, FaHCSIA
- Angela Hope, Children's Policy Branch, FaHCSIA

State and Territory government responses

States and territories across Australia have had varying levels of engagement on this issue. The list below is far from exhaustive but is designed to illustrate some examples of developments in this area of policy.

Western Australia: In 2012, the Western Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People released a literature review on the sexualisation of children, which provided a summary of the findings of all the major government reports into this issue¹¹, and also developed a discussion paper.¹²

¹¹ Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Literature Review: Sexualisation of Children*: Western Australian Government, March 2012

¹² Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Sexualisation of Children: Issues Paper 9* Western Australian Government, March 2012

Following the release of these resources, WA Premier Colin Barnett asked the commissioner, Michelle Scott, to deliver a report on the sexualisation of children, which would include strategies to address the issue. While the report was due in January 2013, its release was delayed as Parliament was prorogued due to the State election in March 2013. The new Standing Committee is now considering the Commissioner’s Report on the matter.

Victoria: The Victorian Government’s 2012-2015 Action Plan to Address Violence Against Women and their Children commits to: “promote positive media portrayal of women and girls, and work with other governments across Australia and the media to promote positive media representations of women and girls and consider how to limit the sexualisation of women and girls in the media and popular culture.”¹³ The action plan also makes the link between a culture of sexualisation of women and girls and acceptance of violence against women.

The Victorian Government conducted the *Inquiry into Sexting* in 2012.¹⁴ While the Inquiry was largely focused on the legal ramifications of sexting by children, some of the report’s recommendations could provide policy learnings for the sexualisation of children. Recommendations included: that the Victorian Government fund periodical qualitative and quantitative research into sexting practices by children in Victoria, and develop and implement holistic education programs for internet and communications technology awareness in all Victorian schools.

Queensland: Queensland’s Commissioner for Children and Young People and the Child Guardian have published a fact sheet/tip sheet on the sexualisation of children on their website, with content taken from their WA counterpart.

In April 2013 an inquiry was referred to Health and Community Services Committee on Sexually Explicit Outdoor Advertising. The Terms of Reference state that the Committee will inquire into and report on the current regulation of outdoor advertising in Queensland and report whether reform, including legislative reform, is needed to protect children from being exposed to sexually explicit and inappropriate outdoor advertising. As part of the inquiry the Committee will also ‘consider the sexualisation of children and other adverse impacts on children through sexually explicit outdoor advertising’. The committee is due to report to the Legislative Assembly by 31 January 2014.¹⁵

Community Sector

Collective Shout

Collective Shout is a grassroots campaign movement co-founded by Melinda Tankard Reist, an anti-porn activist and author. Collective Shout mobilise individuals and groups against the objectification of women and sexualisation of girls in media, advertising and popular

¹³ Victorian Government, *Action Plan to Address Violence Against Women and their Children 2012-2015* p10

¹⁴ Law Reform Commission, *Inquiry into Sexting, Parliamentary Paper*

¹⁵ Queensland Parliament Health and Community Services Committee Inquiry into Sexually Explicit Outdoor Advertising accessed on 27 Sep 2013 at <http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/work-of-committees/committees/HSCS/inquiries/current-inquiries/outdooradv>

culture. They run regular public awareness campaigns designed to direct public concern, “into a series of hard-hitting and targeted campaigns to bring about the change needed”¹⁶. They have had some high-profile success stories.

In 2011 Collective Shout helped drive the campaign which forced Kmart to withdraw an underwear line for girls which carried slogans such as "call me" and " I love rich boys". They were also influential in the campaign against US child beauty pageant star Eden Wood’s 2011 visit to Melbourne.

Recent campaigns have run against the ‘Bonds is for Boobs’ marketing campaign and the opening of Hooters in Townsville and currently a petition is being run to prevent the broadcast of the Lingerie Football League¹⁷ .

Australian Council on Children and the Media

The Australian Council on Children and the Media (ACCM) is a not-for-profit community organisation that promotes a safe and healthy media environment for children. ACCM provides information and advice to families, government and the industry about the role that media experiences play in child health, safety and wellbeing.

The ACCM advocates for children to government and industry about the impact of the media. They also develop parent awareness and education programs on topics such as the impact of media violence, food advertising, sexualised images of children in the media, internet and mobile phone use and safety, and many others.¹⁸

Kids Free 2B Kids

Founded in February 2007 by Melbourne mother of two, Julie Gale, with support from other parents Kids Free 2B Kids is a not-for-profit organization working in alliance with ACCM. Kids Free 2B Kids runs a website which aims to tell concerned members of the public about existing research and current regulations, how to make a complaint and what they can do to 'make their voice count'.¹⁹

Raising Children Network

The Raising Children Network (RCN) is a non-profit organisation consisting of a number of member organisations, including the Parenting Research Centre, Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, the Centre for Community Child Health and the Royal Children’s Hospital who work in partnership to provide information that can help parents with the day-to-day decisions of raising children.

The RCN website provides practical information and tools for parents and carers about children at all developmental stages. This includes such resources as:

- Child friendly movie reviews;

¹⁶ <http://collectiveshout.org/about/> accessed on 12 August 2013

¹⁷ <http://collectiveshout.org/2013/11/sign-the-petition-channel-7-dont-broadcast-sexist-lingerie-football-league/> accessed on 12 August 2013

¹⁸ <http://childrenandmedia.org.au/> accessed on 23 April 2013

¹⁹ <http://www.kf2bk.com/home.htm> accessed on 19 August 2013

- Detailed information about sexting including how to disable picture messaging and encouraging children to make sensible choices; and
- Extensive information about how to foster responsible online behaviour.

In their factsheet on media influence RCN state that, while the media undoubtedly plays a role in shaping behaviour, teenagers, “don’t just take on board everything the media – or anybody else – tells them. They can be savvy consumers of media messages.”²⁰ They argue that media literacy will allow children and teenagers to handle media pressure more effectively.

Bravehearts

Bravehearts has been working specifically in the area of the prevention and early intervention of child sexual assault since 1997. Founded by Hetty Johnston, Bravehearts is the first and largest registered charity specifically and holistically dedicated to addressing this issue in Australia. Bravehearts exists to protect Australian children against sexual harm through ‘The 3 Piers to Prevention; Educate, Empower, Protect’. The organisation provides therapeutic, support and case management for children, young people and adults affected by child sexual exploitation and is active in the prevention of the sexual exploitation of children through education, training and lobbying. Bravehearts is involved in a number of networks and working groups, including the Federal Government’s Consultative Working Group on Cyber-safety, The Coalition of Organisations Committed to the Safety and Wellbeing of Australia’s Children and the Queensland University of Technology, Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation, Child Protection Research Group.

Bravehearts’ education program is focussed on developing resiliency and protective factors in children and young people and teaching positive relationships to minimise the risk of sexual exploitation, with the training program aiming to increase awareness of the issue of child sexual exploitation across community sectors. Bravehearts is an active voice in lobbying to reduce the sexual exploitation of children and has actively advocated against the sexualisation of children in a number of campaigns, including bill board advertising and the use of child models in photography and art (the debate around Bill Henson’s photography).

The Foundation

The *Foundation to Prevent Violence against Women and their Children* (the Foundation) is a new national organisation launched in July 2013 by the Australian and Victorian Governments. The role of the Foundation is to drive cultural and attitudinal change to prevent violence against women and their children from the ground up through community engagement and advocacy.

The Foundation will, at a national level, bring together the vital work being done to prevent violence against women and their children. It aims to strengthen engagement on these issues across the broader Australian community, provide opportunities for community leadership as well as support future work in primary prevention.

²⁰ http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/media_influences_teenagers.html accessed on 12 November 2013