

**Submission
No 38**

SEXUALISATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Organisation: Youth Action and Policy Association NSW
Name: Ms Jacqui McKenzie
Position: Policy and Advocacy Manager
Date Received: 18/03/2016



March 2016

SUBMISSION

**INQUIRY INTO THE SEXUALISATION OF CHILDREN
AND YOUNG PEOPLE**





Prepared by Isabella Delahunty and Kate Harris

Contact person: Jacqui McKenzie, Policy and Advocacy Manager

Youth Action and Policy Association NSW

Suite 403, 64-76 Kippax St, Surry Hills, NSW 2010

Phone: (02) 8218 9815

Fax: (02) 9281 5588

Website: youthaction.org.au

About Youth Action

Youth Action is the peak organisation representing young people and youth services in NSW. Our work helps build the capacity of young people, youth workers and youth services, and we advocate for positive change on issues affecting these groups.

It is the role of Youth Action to:

1. Respond to social and political agendas relating to young people and the youth service sector.
2. Provide proactive leadership and advocacy to shape the agenda on issues affecting young people and youth services.
3. Collaborate on issues that affect young people and youth workers.
4. Promote a positive profile in the media and the community of young people and youth services.
5. Build capacity for young people to speak out and take action on issues that affect them.
6. Enhance the capacity of the youth services sector to provide high quality services.
7. Ensure Youth Action's organisational development, efficiency, effectiveness and good governance.

Policy Paper: The Sexualisation of Children and Young People

Youth Action & Policy Association (NSW)

youthaction.org.au



Table of Contents

Recommendations	4
Introduction	7
Exposure	12
Impacts	19
Measures	25

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: That the NSW government define 'sexualisation' for the NSW context in order to guide policy and practice.

Recommendation 2: Human rights, such as the right to information, access to sexual health services and to freedom of expression, must be a non-negotiable component when responding to the needs of young people.

Recommendation 3: That a NSWs laws are reviewed and amended to allow for a more appropriate range of responses for young people, especially in instances of mutually consensual sexting that is age-appropriate.

Recommendation 4: Consult with young people to develop relevant and effective information about sexting, including information about the legal ramifications. Emphasis should be placed on respectful relationships, ethics and consent, rather than an approach that simply prohibits young people sexting. This could be included in current sex education programs and/or syllabus.

Recommendation 5: Review respectful relationships syllabus in NSW with particular focus on sexual education. Undertake a review of evidenced based programs and adapt for a NSW context.

Recommendation 6: Legal and policy responses to cyber-bullying and revenge porn should be strengthened, including powers for NSW Police to issues 'take down' notices, a range of diversionary options for young people who engage, as well as a suite of options for redress.

Recommendation 7: Secondary ramifications of the sexualisation of young people are included in the scope of the inquiry. This should be included the development of a broader research agenda that is required to address the emerging and reoccurring gaps in knowledge regarding young people and sexualisation.

Recommendation 8: Raise awareness amongst young people of post-secondary school

age, issuing a time limited campaign, informed by young people, across social networking platforms.

Recommendation 9: Increase the level of funding to youth services to equip them to support young people outside of the mainstream schooling system to ensure the health and wellbeing of young people across gender equality, sexuality and sexual bullying.

Recommendation 10: State funding for parenting skills courses be increased and include training on how to manage young people's emerging sexuality, how to ensure they are accessing age-appropriate media and how to create an open discussion with them about the information and values they are taking from the content they consume.

Recommendation 11: Develop and fund a 5-year research agenda into the sexualisation of children and young people in NSW.

Recommendation 12: The NSW government advocates and provides leadership on a formation of a new national system of media-wide regulation that has as a core part of its remit the protection of children and young people in Australia. This should be an industry and government partnership to by-pass current issues related to the 'self-regulation' of the media, but allows the industry to play a role in the development of regulations. This system or body must include an advocate for young people but also a mechanism for young people themselves to inform and participate in its work.

Recommendation 13: That the NSW government work with Internet service providers to block access to pro-anorexia ('pro-ana') and pro-bulimia ('pro-mia') websites.

Recommendation 14: Government, industry and young people collaborate to form a central organisation that has oversight of an online site to support young people and parents in their concerns of sexualisation. This body would be government funded, independent with a mandate to respond to core concerns raised, inform policy development and a broader research agenda.

Recommendation 15: That as part of the inquiry, or prior to the final report being handed down to Government, the Committee commission work that supports the inclusion of

Policy Paper: The Sexualisation of Children and Young People

Youth Action & Policy Association (NSW)

youthaction.org.au



young peoples experiences into the core agenda of the inquiry.

Recommendation 16: That the inquiry ensures that the participation of children and young people remains a principle throughout. This includes the right of children and young people to be informed about the decision affecting them, to have their opinion heard, but also that their opinions are given due weight and impact in any decision.

Introduction

The ability to develop a healthy sexuality is an essential component of an individual's mental and physical wellbeing. Young people should have the freedom to experience their individual sexual development at their own pace and in a way that is clearly led by independent and informed thinking.

The sexualisation of young people within the media, as well as their exposure to sexualised images aimed at adult audiences, has been an ongoing issue of public debate in Australia, the US, and the UK throughout the past decade. The Australia Institute's 2006 *Corporate Paedophilia* report, for example, roundly condemned what the authors considered to be the growing phenomenon of sexualisation, and explored several examples of what they deemed to be the inappropriately sexual depiction of children in mainstream Australian media.¹ The following year, an American Psychological Association task force responded to expressions of public concern regarding the sexualisation of girls.² In the UK, a commissioned review of the sexualisation of young people focused on the possible effects of sexualised media on violence against women and girls.³ Alternative perspectives have opposed seemingly blanket condemnation of sexualisation and have called for more rigorous, evidence-based academic research into the issue.⁴

¹ E Rush & A La Nauze, 'Corporate paedophilia: sexualisation of children in Australia', *The Australia Institute*, Discussion Paper No. 90, 2006.

² American Psychological Association (APA), 'Report of the APA task force on the sexualisation of girls', 2007, accessed via <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-full.pdf>

³ L Papadopoulos, 'Sexualisation of young people review', Home Office, UK, 2010, Accessed via: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/sexualisation-of-young-people.pdf>

⁴ C Lumby & K Albury, 'Too much? Too young? The sexualisation of children debate in Australia', *Media International Australia*, No. 135, May 2010, pp. 141-152; A McKee, 'Sexualisation of children: what the research shows', submission to the National Classification Scheme Review, 2011, Accessed via: https://www.alrc.gov.au/sites/default/files/pdfs/ci_721_a_mckee.pdf; C Smith & F Attwood, 'Lamenting sexualisation: research, rhetoric, and the story of young people's 'sexualisation' in the UK Home Office review', *Sex Education*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2011, pp. 327-337.

Policy Paper: The Sexualisation of Children and Young People

Youth Action & Policy Association (NSW)

youthaction.org.au

Sexualisation is contested, and the debate has uncovered a wide range of perspectives, ideas, and avenues of research on a number of possible impacts of sexualisation on young people. As the peak organisation for young people and youth services in NSW, Youth Action is pleased to submit to this inquiry, and congratulate the NSW Government for its focus on the health and wellbeing of young people, including their sexual health. In submitting to the inquiry, Youth Action has responded to the following terms of reference:

- 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;
- iii. The impact on children and young people of growing up in a sexualised culture;
- 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;
- v. Measures to assist parents in fulfilling their responsibility to protect and educate children;
- vi. Measures to educate and assist children and young people navigating the contemporary cultural environment; and
- vii. Possible measures that the Children's Advocate can take to assist children and young people to navigate the cultural environment successfully

Defining 'Sexualisation'

Throughout the debate surrounding the issue, there has been no single accepted definition of the term 'sexualisation'. In this submission, Youth Action refers to a number of definitions of 'sexualisation', primarily where sexualisation is the imposition of adult sexuality onto young people 'before they are capable of dealing with it, mentally, emotionally, or physically'.⁵ There are a number of factors outlined in the definition of

⁵ L Papadopoulos, op.cit. p. 6.

sexualisation established by the American Psychological Association (APA). Sexualisation is said to occur when one or more of the following conditions is present:

1. A person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behaviour, to the exclusion of other characteristics.
2. A person is held to a physical standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy.
3. A person is sexually objectified – that is – made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making.
4. Sexuality is inappropriately imposed on a person.⁶

Given the range of interpretations of the term 'sexualisation', it is difficult to quantify the extent of the phenomenon in a NSW context.

It is important to distinguish clearly between young people's healthy sexual development and the process of sexualisation, which may disrupt or negatively influence this development. Sexualisation can be an issue for people of any age, however as stated by the APA, 'when children [and young people] are imbued with adult sexuality, it is often imposed upon them rather than chosen by them'.⁷ The report also emphasised that 'self-motivated sexual exploration ... is not sexualisation ... nor is age-appropriate exposure to information about sexuality'.⁸ In this way, a young person's independent exploration of their own sexuality is clearly distinct from the imposition of sexual ideals or ideas upon them.

Recommendation 1: That the NSW government define sexualisation for the NSW context in order to guide policy and practice.

Healthy Sexual Development

⁶ APA op.cit., p. 1.

⁷ ibid.

⁸ ibid.

While sexualisation refers to the inappropriate imposition and intrusion of adult sexuality, the appropriate and healthy development of young people and their sexuality must be considered.

Adolescence, the bridge between childhood and adulthood, is a period of enormous physical, psychological, cognitive, emotional, spiritual and social development.⁹ This distinct phase of life includes young people's development of healthy and positive sexual identities. Healthy sexuality is understood as 'a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality', and may include many different forms of behaviour.¹⁰ The recognition of this diverse behaviour contributes to people's sense of sexual health and wellbeing.

Sexual development begins well before adolescence in the development of gender awareness, exploration and gendered roles but young people between the ages of 12 and 25 are at a particularly important stage in the development of their sexual identities.

Alan McKee et al. provide a useful framework for understanding what constitutes healthy sexual development in young people.¹¹ The framework is made up of fifteen key domains including; an understanding of consent and ethical conduct, agency (or the idea that young people are in control of their own sexual identity), communication (which includes age-appropriate sex education), and competence in *mediated sexuality*, or the 'skills in accessing, understanding, critiquing and creating mediated representations of sexuality in verbal, visual and performance media'.¹² Conversely, unhealthy sexual development could involve unwanted sexual activity, a young person's lack of understanding of their right to control

⁹ NSW Department of Health, 'NSW Youth Health Policy 2011-2016: Healthy bodies, healthy minds, vibrant futures', 2010, p. 18, accessed via:

http://www0.health.nsw.gov.au/policies/pd/2010/pdf/PD2010_073.pdf

¹⁰ World Health Organization (WHO), 'Sexual health, human rights and the law', 2015, p. 1

¹¹ A McKee et al, 'Healthy sexual development: a multidisciplinary framework for research', *International Journal of Sexual Health*, 2010, pp. 14-19.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 18.

their own bodies and sexuality, a lack of useful, age-appropriate sex education, and a young person's inability to understand representations of sexuality.

It is important to note that sexual development and education does not stop upon completion of physical development, or after a person's first sexual encounter. Rather, such development is lifelong: 'Adults continue to learn about their sexuality throughout their lives, improving their knowledge of, and attitudes toward, their sex lives'.¹³

Moreover, there are human rights considerations relating to young people and their sexual health and development. Such consideration extends to the right to information, to access sexual health services, and to freedom of expression.¹⁴ These rights also apply to young people under the age of 18. Although states have the obligation to protect young people from harm, this must be balanced with the need to provide young people with the information and education necessary for their development and evolving capacities, including their sexual identity and health.¹⁵

Recommendation 2: Human rights, such as the right to information, access to sexual health services and to freedom of expression, must be a non-negotiable component when responding to the needs of young people.

One aspect of the debate surrounding sexualisation is the concern that young people are reaching sexual milestones earlier than previous generations.¹⁶ The age of first sexual encounter has indeed dropped; one study showed that of those aged now in their fifties, approximately half of the men and less than half of the women had engaged in intercourse at the age of eighteen or earlier, and of those now in their twenties, approximately half had had sexual intercourse before the age of seventeen.¹⁷ However, the suggestion that an increase in sexualised media content may be the cause of the drop in average age of young

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁴ WHO, 'Defining sexual health', 2016, viewed 18th January 2016, accessed via: http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/sexual_health/sh_definitions/en/

¹⁵ WHO, 'Sexual health, human rights and the law', pp. 19-20.

¹⁶ *ibid.* p. 15.

¹⁷ Richters and Rissel 2005, cited in A Mckee et al, *op.cit.*, p. 18

people's first sexual encounter hasn't been well established. It has been demonstrated in several cases that knowledge of sex and sexuality is more likely to lead to young people delaying sexual intercourse.¹⁸ Rates of teen pregnancy have dropped in the past 40 years, and the use of contraception at first sexual experience is now more common than it was previously.¹⁹

Exposure

Given the wide range of media now available to young people, there is growing concern that they may be exposed to problematic or dangerous content. Ease of access to media, including electronic, print, social media and marketing, is supported by the widespread use of personal mobile devices, which means that young people can consume media alone or with friends away from adult support or supervision.

Most young Australians are connecting online, and daily, representing 90% of 16 – 29 year olds.²⁰ In 2011, 90% of adolescents aged 15-17 had their own mobile phone,²¹ and that percentage is likely to have risen in 2016. The prevalence of mobile devices in young people's lives has undoubtedly changed the ways in which young people interact, socialise, and conduct friendships and relationships.

There is a distinctly social element to sexuality and the development of a healthy sexual identity. 'Sexual socialisation' is a term used to describe the understanding of 'how one's own desires and feelings interact with a broader social context'.²² Young people now have access to a variety of new media forms, including social media or social networking sites.

¹⁸ Goldman 2010 cited in A McKee et al, op.cit., p. 19

¹⁹ A McKee et al, op.cit., p. 19

²⁰ Nielson, *The Australian Internet & Technology Report – Edition 12*, The Nielson Company, 2010

²¹ S Walker, L Sanci & M Temple-Smith, 'Sexting and young people: experts' views', *Youth Studies Australia*, Vol. 30, No. 4, 2011, p. 8

²² C Lumby and K Albury, 'Too much? Too young? The sexualisation of children debate in Australia', *Media International Australia*, No. 135, May 2010, p. 147.

Such media has converged in online spaces, and can be accessed quickly and easily from personal mobile devices. In the digital age it has arguably become more difficult to filter out specific material that is aimed at adults, rather than young people.²³ In recent years, social media has become one of the main arenas for social interaction, and in many ways its platforms—including Facebook, Youtube, Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter—have become informal sources of sex education.

It is important to acknowledge that the many different forms of media, including social media, can be a vast resource for safe and informed socialisation, education, and expression for young people.²⁴ Given that young people are often reluctant to discuss sensitive questions or request sexual health advice from their parents, reliable and accurate media can be a useful tool for gaining knowledge about sex and sexuality. Media content—such as films and TV shows—can also be used as a catalyst for discussions of sex and sexuality and can help to shape young people’s identities in positive ways. Social media sites provide a platform where young people can discuss issues related to their sexual identity. Young people, who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex (LGBTQI) may find these platforms especially important, as their identities are not typically well represented in mainstream mass media. Arbitrary or unwarranted regulation of access to social networking sites could be detrimental to the well being of young people who benefit from connection to a wider community of peers and an improved sense of community and belonging.²⁵

However, while the information and diversity that young people now have access to can be a positive resource, there are some risks that can be harmful. The evidence base appears to be quite limited on some issues, so we often address impacts of exposure to certain

²³ *ibid.*, p. 145.

²⁴ Australian Communications & Media Authority (ACMA), ‘Click and connect: Young Australian’s use of online social media’, Qualitative Research Report, 2009, accessed via: http://www.acma.gov.au/webwr/aba/about/recruitment/click_and_connect-01_qualitative_report.pdf

²⁵ P Collin, K Rahilly, I Richardson, & A Third, ‘The Benefits of Social Networking Services: A literature review’, Cooperative Research Centre for Young People, Technology and Wellbeing, Melbourne, 2011

content as the 'likely' impact as in some cases little rigorous conclusions can be drawn. We discuss some of the complexity of issues relating to young peoples exposure to sexualised content below.

Sexting

The term 'sexting' refers to the sharing of nude or sexual images online or via mobile devices.²⁶ In Australia, a survey of 33,751 young people showed that 91.2% responded that 'they would not or have not sent nude or semi-nude pictures via new technologies'.²⁷ Another Australian study of 2,000 young people showed almost half reported 'having sent a sexual picture or video of themselves to another party' with another two-thirds of participants had received a sexual image.²⁸ Indeed, the topic of sexting is heavily viewed on the National Children's and Youth Law Centre's *Lawstuff* website.²⁹ The practice of consensual, peer-to-peer (or age-appropriate) sexting is one of the ways in which young people can explore and develop their sexual identity, and thus it can play a positive role in relationships between young people. However, there are two key concerns in relation to the practise of sexting among young people. First, sexting is illegal under federal law for people under the age of 18, and second, sexting involves the risk of cyber bullying and harassment, or 'revenge' posts.

Sexting and The Law

²⁶ National Children's and Youth Law Centre (NCYLC), 'Submission to the Senate Select Committee on Cyber-Safety', 2013

²⁷ Joint Select Committee on Cyber Safety, 'High-wire act: cyber safety and the young', Parliament of Australia, 2011, p. 138, accessed via http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_Committees?url=jscs/report.htm

²⁸ M Lee, T Crofts, A McGovern, & S Milivojevic, 'Sexting among young people: Perceptions and practices', *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, No. 508, November 2015, accessed via http://www.aic.gov.au/media_library/publications/tandi_pdf/tandi508.pdf

²⁹ National Children's and Youth Law Centre (NCYLC), 'New voices/new laws: school-age young people in New South Wales speak out about the criminal laws that apply to their online behaviour', law reform research report, *Legal Aid NSW*, November 2012.

Current federal legislation defines the exchange of sexual images between two consenting people under the age of 18 as child pornography. This means that asking for, taking, sending, or receiving such images are all illegal actions for those under the age of 18, regardless of whether the practise is occurring with mutual consent. As such, sexting potentially carries very high penalties for many young people, who risk occupying contradictory roles—as both criminals and vulnerable subjects³⁰—and who could be charged under the very legislation that has been designed to protect them.³¹ Additionally, inconsistencies between state and federal laws creates further confusion as to what is or is not considered illegal in a NSW context. For example, NSW law deems those under the age of 16 to be minors, therefore it is legal for those 16 years and older to sext in NSW but illegal under federal law, who use the age of 18 as the lower limit.

Recommendation 3: That a NSWs laws are reviewed and amended to allow for a more appropriate range of responses for young people, especially in instances of mutually consensual sexting that is age-appropriate.

Some argue that ‘the application of child pornography laws to sexting is excessive and inappropriate because it fails to recognise the developing sexual agency and ethics of young people’.³² Laws that deem those under the age of 18 to be unable to give consent clearly do not view these young people as having any kind of agency or autonomy with regard to their own sexuality. Albury and Crawford point out that this is at odds with teenagers aged 16-18 who see themselves as having full sexual agency, and who are over the age of consent in NSW. The authors draw attention to the importance of context surrounding the sharing of images, describing sexting in the context of flirtation, relationships or friendships as a ‘mediated form of self-representation’.³³ They argue that:

³⁰ K Albury & K Crawford, ‘Sexting, consent and young people’s ethics: Beyond *Megan’s Story*’, *Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2012, p. 466.

³¹ Levine 2009, as cited in K Albury & KCrawford, *ibid.*, p. 469.

³² K Albury & K Crawford, *op.cit.*, p. 464.

³³ *ibid.*

Young people should not be universally prohibited from producing images or texts that reflect their experiences of sexual experience or imagination; and that these self-representations should not be interpreted solely through the lens of adult anxieties around technology and sexuality. This does not negate or dilute the need for legislation and other interventions that address bullying, harassment, violence or exploitation, whether face-to-face or mediated.³⁴

While there is a range of education resources targeting sexting, some report that content remains unengaging and therefore ineffective.³⁵ When speaking to sex education more broadly, another consultation with over 1,000 young people across Australia in 2012 showed that young people were generally unsatisfied with sexual education in schools. It also highlighted their preferred information networks, which was primarily peer and community educators to school staff, such as health and physical education teachers.³⁶ A 2014 survey showed 'students most commonly consulted either their mother (36%) or a female friend (41%), used the school sexual health program (43%) or an internet website (44%) for information on sexual health' but also that education received was not very relevant.'³⁷

And what is more, 'less than half of students (45%) found their sexuality and relationship education to be 'very' or 'extremely' relevant.'³⁸

Recommendation 4: Consult with young people to develop relevant and effective information about sexting, including information about the legal ramifications. Emphasis should be placed on respectful relationships, ethics and consent, rather than an approach

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 461.

³⁵ Salvation Army, 'Sexting in Australia: The legal and social ramifications', submission to the Parliament of Victoria Law Reform Committee Sexting Inquiry, May 2012, accessed via http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/lawrefrom/isexting/subs/S07_-_Salvation_Army_Oasis_Hunter.pdf

³⁶ Australian Youth Affairs Coalition and Empowerment Against HIV/AIDS, 'Let's Talk About Sex: Young People's views on sex and sexual health information in Australia', June 2012, accessed via http://www.redaware.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/LetsTalkAboutSex_AYACYEAH_FinalReport.pdf

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ *ibid.*

that simply prohibits young people sexting. This could be included in current sex education programs and/or syllabus.

Recommendation 5: Review respectful relationships syllabus in NSW with particular focus on sexual education. Undertake a review of evidenced based programs and adapt for a NSW context.

Cyber bullying

'Cyber bullying' is a term that can be used to refer to a wide range of behaviours which occur online. The kinds of cyber bullying or harassment which can arise out of sexting include age-inappropriate sexting,³⁹ non-consensual sexting or sharing of a person's nude or sexual images. Mobile technology allows any kind of imagery to be shared quickly and easily in online spaces. It has been argued that it is predominantly images of young women that are being shared online or between peers without their consent.⁴⁰ Indeed, a survey carried out by the National Children's and Youth Law Centre found that girls were more likely than boys to report experiencing (or knowing someone who has experienced) most types of cyber bullying.⁴¹ Consequences of this kind of harassment can include emotional distress and shame for the victims, as well as permanent damage to their digital footprint, and of course, potential legal repercussions if either party are under the age of 18. In these cases, the victim loses power and control over his or her image. There are numerous laws that cover cyber bullying behaviour, and it is a crime under Commonwealth law to use a mobile phone or Internet service in a menacing, harassing, or offensive way.⁴² There remain huge gaps and legal inconsistencies in the form of protection and address, as most recently highlighted by a NSW parliamentary committee.⁴³

³⁹ NCYL, op.cit., p. 12.

⁴⁰ S Walker, L Sancu & M Temple-Smith, op.cit., p. 10.

⁴¹ NCYLC, op.cit., p. 29.

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 22

⁴³ Standing Committee on Law and Justice, 'Remedies for the serious invasion of privacy in New South Wales', Legislative Council, Sydney, NSW, March 2015, accessed via <http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parliament/committee.nsf/0/0F02A41F813CF811CA257F6A007F7BB2>

Recommendation 6: Legal and policy responses to cyber-bullying and revenge porn should be strengthened, including powers for NSW Police to issues ‘take down’ notices, a range of diversionary options for young people who engage, as well as a suite of options for redress.

Pornography

Young people are active consumers of media⁴⁴—increasingly online media—and they have their own developing sexual identities. It is natural to assume that young people may be curious about sexual media content and seek it out as a source of entertainment, education, information or pleasure. Equipped with the right skills and education, young people will have the best chance of being able to consume sexual media content in a critical way. A number of concerns have been raised about the availability and nature of online pornography and the ways in which it may impact young people who are exposed to it, particularly adolescents under the age of 18. Pornography is defined as ‘sexually explicit media that are primarily intended to sexually arouse the audience’, and there are estimates that an increasing number of young people are accessing pornography, whether deliberately or inadvertently.⁴⁵ Indeed, it is commonly heard during public discussion of pornography that it is not a question of *if* a young person will view pornography, but *when*. Research has found that porn users come from all age groups, but that younger people tend to consume it more than older people. Young people access pornography for similar reasons to adults, seeking it out for entertainment or pleasure, and deliberate use of pornography is gendered for adults⁴⁶ as well as for young people:

Males are more likely than females to use pornography, to do so repeatedly, to use it for sexual excitement and masturbation, to initiate its use (rather than be introduced to it by an intimate partner), to view it alone and in same-sex groups, and to view more types of images.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Buckingham & Bragg 2003, cited in M Flood, ‘The harms of pornography exposure among children and young people’, *Child Abuse Review*, Vol. 18, 2009, p. 388.

⁴⁵ M Flood, *op.cit.*, pp. 384-5.

⁴⁶ C Lumby, ‘The porn report: the good news and the bad news’, *The Sydney Papers*, Winter 2011, p. 10

⁴⁷ M Flood, *op.cit.*, p. 386.

Flood identifies a number of *possible* negative impacts on young people who are exposed to pornography, however research remains inconclusive and vague. While there are a number of factors that may affect an individual's experience with pornography, such as age, gender, cultural background and the type of content viewed, some of the impacts are discussed further below.

What hasn't been as readily identified is whether young people are accessing porn as an alternative to aforementioned irrelevant sex education, as has found to be the case in other countries such as the United Kingdom.⁴⁸ Pornography is not a viable alternative to age-appropriate and culturally relevant sex education. Given that the effects of exposure to pornography are likely to be mediated by the viewer's own interpretation and evaluation of the content,⁴⁹ consumption of pornography by young people is likely to be even more problematic if young people do not receive or engage in sex education so that they can critique the media they consume or constructively deal with exposure.

Impacts

There is a growing concern among academics and researchers that the sexualising imagery is more pervasive and is impacting young people in damaging ways.⁵⁰ Although, as mentioned previously, evidence seems to be unclear, researchers are continuing to draw links between exposure and impact. A number of possible negative complex and often interrelated outcomes of growing up in a sexualised culture is therefore discussed below.

Harmful to the development of young people's healthy sexual identity

A healthy sexuality is an essential component of a person's mental and physical wellbeing. Young people should have the freedom to experience their individual sexual development at their own pace and in a way that is clearly led by independent and informed thinking.

⁴⁸ A Young-Powell, 'Students turn to porn for sex education', *The Guardian*, 29 January 2015, accessed via <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/jan/29/students-turn-to-porn-for-sex-education>

⁴⁹ M Flood, op.cit., p. 388.

⁵⁰ L Papadopoulos, op.cit., p. 23.

The influence of the media can be beneficial to a young person in contemporary society, providing a space for them to connect and engage with the knowledge and experience of their peers and with informative sexual advice or education. However, the pressure often placed upon young individuals to adhere to strict body ideals promoted by sexualising images ultimately empowers the media, rather than the individual, when it comes to making choices about young people's bodies. This loss of agency represents a threat to a young person's healthy development.

Pornography

As introduced above, a number of young people are accessing porn. Porn is thought to have negative impacts on young people more broadly, although because of the ethical considerations, research has been restricted in rigorous methods of evaluation. Flood points out some of the harms that are often associated with porn including:

- Emotional or psychological distress due to unexpected or unwanted exposure to pornography. This may occur accidentally while a young person is browsing online, or if it is shown to them by another person. This is particularly relevant to young adolescents as they may be in a stage of their sexual development when they are unaware of, inexperienced in, or uninterested in sexual activity.⁵¹
- The acceptance or adoption of non-mainstream sexual practises. Without casting judgement over these sexual practises, the fact that young people may be pressured into certain sexual acts before they are ready, or that they may simply not want to do, is problematic.⁵²
- The reinforcement of narrow gender stereotypes, and sexist attitudes or behaviours. Pornography often depicts what Flood refers to as a 'decontextualised portrayal of sexual behaviour, a relentless focus on female bodies, and sexist and callous depictions of women'.⁵³ Frequent viewing of such

⁵¹ M flood, op.cit., pp. 388-9

⁵² ibid., p. 390

⁵³ ibid., pp. 391-2

- content may result in the normalisation or legitimisation of these stereotypes among young people.
- The normalisation of sexual violence. Flood argues that ‘there is consistent and reliable evidence that exposure to pornography is related to male sexual aggression against women’, and that this is exacerbated by frequent use of pornography.⁵⁴ A 2010 content analysis of popular pornographic films found that of the 304 scenes analysed, 88.2% contained physical aggression and 48.7% contained verbal aggression.⁵⁵

Body image dissatisfaction

Mass media, across its multiple platforms, is sending out a powerful message to young people about what they should value in themselves and in others. It is placing unrealistic body standards upon young people, putting them under increasing pressure to emulate polarising gender stereotypes from a younger and younger age.⁵⁶ Women are encouraged to aspire to a limited beauty ideal, currently an emphasises on slimness, while men are taught to value a various body types. Research indicates that there is a significant correlation between pressure from the media, the internalisation of this ‘thin ideal’ and body dissatisfaction.⁵⁷ Internalisation is the process by which an individual recognises social norms and expectations and uses them as guiding principles that inform their behaviour and decisions.⁵⁸ These self-imposed values that idolise ideal body types can have a damaging effect on a young person’s sense of self worth and the way that they perceive their bodies. Young women in particular are internalising media and advertising messages

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p. 392

⁵⁵ AJ Bridges et al, ‘Aggression and sexual behavior in best-selling pornography videos: a content analysis update’, *Violence Against Women*, Vol. 16, No. 10, 2010, pp. 1065-1085

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p. 5

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 30

⁵⁸ L Vandenbosch & S Eggermont, ‘Understanding sexual objectification: A comprehensive approach toward media exposure and girls’ internalization of beauty ideals, self-objectification, and body surveillance’, *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 62, No.5, 2012, pp. 869-87

and this is manifested in self-objectification and body surveillance,⁵⁹ which can result with individuals feeling that their physical appearance is failing to meet the unrealistic standards dictated by the media and advertising industry. Feelings of inadequacy and body shame are manifestations of lower body confidence and can lead to a variety of potential mental and physical health problems.

Secondary Impacts

Research links exposure to sexualised female ideals not only with a low body satisfaction but also with many potential secondary physical and psychological ramifications. A 2009 submission made by a group of experts and researchers to the Advertising Standards Authority found that individuals with a negative body image are more likely to experience low self-esteem, negative mood, depressive symptoms or anxiety.⁶⁰

Most prominently, connections have been drawn between an individual's exposure to narrow representations of female beauty (such as the 'thin ideal') and disordered eating attitudes and symptoms.⁶¹ In Australia, eating disorders are estimated to affect approximately 9% of the population, and research demonstrates that young people are the most vulnerable.⁶² Although there is not necessarily a direct causal connection between the exposure to sexualising images and eating disorders, evidence suggests that there is a clear link between exposure to these idealised media images and body image dissatisfaction and a connection between body-image dissatisfaction and eating disorders. We therefore consider it wise to include such serious secondary ramifications as some of

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 871

⁶⁰ 'The Impact of Media Images on Body Image and Behaviours. A summary of the Scientific Evidence', signed by 45 leading academics, doctors and clinical psychologists from the USA, England, Australia, Brazil, Spain and Ireland, 2009, accessed via: www.libdems.org.uk/siteFiles/resources/PDF/The%20Impact%20of%20Media%20Images%20on%20Body%20Image%20and%20Behaviours.pdf.

⁶¹ APA, *op.cit.*, p. 24

⁶² The National Eating Disorders Collaboration (NEDC), 'Factsheet: Eating Disorders in Australia', The Australian Department of Health, 2015

the possible negative impacts that the sexualisation of young people can have upon this demographic.

Recommendation 7: Secondary ramifications of the sexualisation of young people are included in the scope of the inquiry. This should be included in the development of a broader research agenda that is required to address the emerging and reoccurring gaps in knowledge regarding young people and sexualisation.

Reinforcement of gender inequality

It is also critical that we consider the influence that the sexualisation of young people by the media has upon the way that young people view the world and each other. The media works to perpetuate gender stereotypes by bolstering restrictive and limited attitudes towards both male and female sexuality. Young women are hyper-sexualised by their treatment in the media as sexual objects rather than independent beings. Young men, too, are hyper-masculinised and encouraged to be sexually dominant. The hyper-sexualisation of femininity and masculinity perpetuate and reinforce each other⁶³ and ultimately lead to a pressurised environment that can have a negative impact upon young people's attitudes and behaviours.⁶⁴ Societal norms and barriers, enforced by the media, can critically shape a young person's sexual identity and the way in which they conceive of their own sexual desires and rights:⁶⁵

Teenage girls' sexual desire is important and life sustaining; that girls desire provides crucial information about the relational world in which they live; that the societal obstacles to girls' and women's ability to feel and act on their own desire should come under scrutiny rather than be feared; (and) that the girls and women are entitled to have sexual subjectivity, rather than simply being objects.⁶⁶

⁶³ L Papadopoulos, op.cit., p. 10.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 20.

⁶⁵ D Tolman, *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 19.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

But nor does sexual ignorance protect young people from predation and abuse.⁶⁷ Objectification, and widespread acceptance of gendered expectations and roles further embeds gender inequality. In this way, attitudes to gender equality, gender roles and relationships can have a significant influence on the formation of attitudes that support sexualised violence among young people.

Contributing factor to violence against women and girls

Attitudes towards gender equality, which can be heavily shaped by sexualising media content and imagery, have a significant influence on the way that individuals perceive violence against women.

Young women in Australia are particularly at risk of violence. In the 2012 Personal Safety Survey, which gauged experiences of violence, 13% of young women in Australia aged 18-24 years surveyed reported that they had experienced violence in the 12 months prior to the survey.⁶⁸ This rate was higher than that for any other age group of women.

The emergence of new forms of media, as well as the increasing presence of existing forms of media, has had a significant impact on young people's attitudes towards gender, the sexualisation of women and girls and gender stereotypes. Research demonstrates that 'repeated exposure to gender-stereotypical ideas and images contributes to sexist attitudes and beliefs and stereotyped perceptions of, and behaviour toward, men and women.'⁶⁹ Media portraying the sexualisation or objectification of women and girls not only reflects sexist attitudes but it has been found to contribute to an environment in which violence against women and girls is acceptable.⁷⁰ Online pornography, for example, is 'increasingly dominated by themes of aggression, power and control, blurring the lines between

⁶⁷ A Lumby & K Albury, op.cit., p. 149

⁶⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), *Personal Safety Survey*. accessed via: www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4906.0

⁶⁹ L Papadopoulos, op.cit., p. 11. These findings were originally published in 1987. (J Kilbourne & M Lazarus. *'Still killing us softly: advertising's image of women'* (film). Media Education Foundation. 1987).

⁷⁰ ibid., These findings were originally published in 1999 (L Kalof, 1999. 'The effects of gender and music video imagery on sexual attitudes.' *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 139, 378)

Policy Paper: The Sexualisation of Children and Young People

Youth Action & Policy Association (NSW)

youthaction.org.au

consent, pleasure and violence.⁷¹ In a similar way, television, music and online content that depict women in sexualised ways can teach gender-stereotyping attitudes and a societal tolerance of sexual violence.⁷²

Measures

Given the complexity of sexualisation of young people it is worth considering a range of measures to support children and young people, and to assist them in navigating the contemporary cultural environment.

Youth Action commends the focus from the Committee that spans children, young people, significant adults, as well as government and business's role in the wellbeing of young people, as this is everyone's business. We support a focus on equipping young people with the skills and knowledge to navigate content and education that supports their healthy sexual development, but that also looks to regulate stakeholders responsible for the production and dissemination of harmful content, rather than young people themselves. Moreover, we support a NSW government continues to develop policy and leadership in implementation, monitoring and evaluation of practices that harm or sexualise young people.

We also note that widespread public discourse on the subject of the sexualisation of young people seems to hold an assumption that the sexuality of young people is something that is at once present, and therefore a source of danger, and at the same time absent and passive.⁷³ At the core of this narrow duality is an underlying perception of sexuality as a corrupting force rather than as a source of pleasure. From this ideology, young people are reduced to a binary of innocent/sexualised, a simplified categorisation that excludes the

⁷¹ G Dines, 'Childified women: how the mainstream porn industry sells child pornography to men', *The Sexualization of Childhood*, ed. S Olfman, S, Praeger Press, Santa Barbara, 2008

⁷² M Flood & B Pease, 'The Factors Influencing Community Attitudes in Relation to Violence Against Women: A Critical Review of the Literature', VicHealth, 2007, p. 44

⁷³ RD Egan & G Hawkes, 'Girls, sexuality and the strange carnalities of advertisements', *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 57, 2008, p. 305

‘possibility of volitional sexual expression’.⁷⁴ In failing to award young people their rights, these assumptions ultimately continue to disempower. Instead, young people should be supported in their developing capacity as ‘autonomous sexual citizens and collaborative social agents’⁷⁵ in policy-making. We therefore recommend the following measures to equip young people with the skills and information to ensure they can navigate the contemporary cultural environment with confidence.

We below provide discussion and recommendations across the terms of reference iv, v, vi, and vii, under the headings of ‘Education’ for both young people and parents, ‘Research’, and ‘Regulation’.

Education

Secondary School

The education of young people is an essential part of helping them to develop a healthy sexual identity. It is critical that young people understand their right to independent agency. Young people should learn that they are in control of their own sexuality and should be encouraged to develop healthy self-regard as sexual subjects.⁷⁶ Young people should not be discouraged from certain practices such as sexting or viewing media, but again, should be encouraged to think critically and make informed choices for themselves.

Youth Action has noted some recommendations (see recommendations 4 and 5) previously in this submission with regard to education. We support an expanded and comprehensive sex education curriculum that includes media literacy as a core component. This should be created in collaboration with young people, providing them with a language and analytical framework to help them think critically about the media and the nature of our consumer culture. Sex education would also focus on preparing young people to create healthy,

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p. 309.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p. 319.

⁷⁶ A McKee et al, *op.cit.*, p.149

emotionally fulfilling and respectful relationships.⁷⁷ Such programs would be appropriately targeted to different age groups and could take the form of curriculum work or special programs and activities. As well as sex-education, Youth Action also recommends that young people receive education on issues such as body image, gender equality, consent and relationships and gender stereotypes. Further, resources such as online forums, tools and information should be established for young people to use and explore in their own time.

Post Secondary School

There appears to be a significant gap in the education accessible to the 18-25 year old age group. These individuals may be school leavers, members of the workforce, university students or graduates. Young Australians are prolific users of social media. Social networking is the number one online activity for 16 to 29 year olds, with 83% reporting they use social networking sites on a regular basis.⁷⁸ These young people need easy access to information about sex, gender, consent and relationships and should be made aware of the youth services and support available to them.

Given that such a large proportion of this demographic are highly involved in social media, an awareness raising campaign using key social networking platforms could improve educational access for young people regarding, for example, media literacy and sexualisation. One campaign could potentially involve a professional to whom young people can address questions using a #hashtag. This would make access to simple and accurate information highly appealing. Since this demographic are not necessarily enrolled in formal education, it is even more important to ensure that online forums or websites are established and act as a source that provides informative content. A key example of this is *The Representation Project*, a US organisation that has an advisory council and youth summit, as well as online resources including a curriculum, quizzes, conversation starters and other resources.

⁷⁷ L Papadopoulos, op.cit., p. 10

⁷⁸ Nielsen, *Internet & Technology Report*. Nielsen, Macquarie Park, 2010

The NSW government would also invest more heavily in youth workers to equip them with the training to work with young people outside of mainstream education around the issues of gender equality, sexuality and sexual bullying. The youth services sector is a highly valuable tool for young people to seek help in the form of information or counselling. And it is therefore essential that they remain financially supported by the government.

Recommendation 8: Raise awareness amongst young people of post-secondary school age, issuing a time limited campaign, informed by young people, across social networking platforms.

Recommendation 9: Increase the level of funding to youth services to equip them to support young people outside of the mainstream schooling system to ensure the health and wellbeing of young people across gender equality, sexuality and sexual bullying.

Parents [and other influential adults]

Parents play a crucial role in shaping their child's attitude towards sexuality and gender. Youth Action notes that although the Terms of Reference only refer to parents, care-givers, guardians, grandparents and other influential adults have a role to play that is as significant as traditional or biological parental role. Parents, guardians, and other significant adults are capable of helping young people in direct ways, by assisting them in interpreting and contextualising sexualising images and content. However, as the APA Taskforce's Report found, influential adults also can be responsible for conveying societal messages that contribute to the sexualisation of young people onto their children.⁷⁹ Young people are also increasingly growing up in a world that is instant, and online, in a way that is foreign to some adults.⁸⁰

Because of the influential position they hold in the lives of young people, Youth Action recommend that significant adults receive education about the impact of sexualisation

⁷⁹ APA, op.cit., p. 2

⁸⁰ Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Child Rights Report 2015*, 2015, p. 61, accessed via https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/AHRC_ChildrensRights_Report_2015_0.pdf

upon young people as well as the role of the media and advertising in contributing to unrealistic body standards and expectations.

Regular open communication between parents and young people will help to make young people feel more comfortable approaching their parents, or even teachers, with problems or questions about their changing bodies or emerging sexuality.⁸¹ Parents should also encourage the healthy development of their child's self-esteem based on their abilities and character rather than on their appearance.

Recommendation 10: State funding for parenting skills courses be increased and include training on how to manage young people's emerging sexuality, how to ensure they are accessing age-appropriate media and how to create an open discussion with them about the information and values they are taking from the content they consume.⁸²

Research

In preparing our submission for this inquiry, it is clear that limited empirical research has been undertaken to investigate the level to which young people are exposed to and sexualised by the media, as well as the severity of the impact this sexualisation may have on their mental and physical health. While there are the various *likely* impacts, it is difficult to recommend interventions or prevention activities. Youth Action endorses the development of a research agenda that encompasses the broad and supposed impact of the sexualisation of young people.

This research must focus on young people's own personal experiences with media, and would ideally provide a more comprehensive understanding of how they interpret, engage with and relate to the contemporary media landscape. It should represent the diversity of young people in NSW, including a range of different ages, and those from various social and cultural backgrounds. Sound and sensitive research would allow policymakers to better develop evidence, innovative measures and successfully implement measures to

⁸¹ K Chrisman & D Couchenour, *Healthy Sexual Development: A Guide For Early Childhood Educators and Families*, National Association for the Education of Young Children, Washington, DC, 2002, p. 6

⁸² A Lumby & K Albury, *op.cit.*, p. 151.

ameliorate the negative impacts of sexualisation. The Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP) could undertake such a project.

Recommendation 11: Develop and fund a 5-year research agenda into the sexualisation of children and young people in NSW.

Regulation

Youth Action supports a streamlined and cohesive regulation of media, appropriate to our increasingly complex media landscape. The media industry plays a large role in the promotion of sexual imagery and content and in encouraging young people to aspire to unrealistic body ideals. Young people are often the target of techniques to create a certain mentality and are 'immersed in branded environments frequently without knowing that they are being exposed to sophisticated marketing campaigns'.⁸³ Some go so far as to claim that children and young peoples culture are inseparable from media use.⁸⁴ In such an environment, it is easy to question whether regulatory mechanisms have kept pace with the experiences of young people. While in some cases young people are certainly more skilled than adults in navigating this new environment, in other circumstances and mainly due to the complexity of the environment, and their developing capacity, they are not. While we can educate young people, and support parents, there must also be an onus of responsibility placed on those who produce and disseminate content.

While some regulation exist, such as the use of 'parental consent' to access some content, or media codes of conduct that pertain to television advertising, for example, are likely inadequate or irrelevant to how young people are accessing content today. As such, self-regulation of the media doesn't appear to be working, and systems in place are increasingly failing to serve young people.

⁸³ SCalvert, 'Children as Consumers: Advertising and Marketing', *The Future of Children*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2008, p. 212, accessed via http://futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/docs/18_01_09.pdf

⁸⁴ The Royal Australian & New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP), 'Submission No 37 to Australian Human Rights Commission, National Children's Commissioner's examination into children affected by family and domestic violence', 17 June 2015, p. 5

In the context of the submission Youth Action has particular concerns about access (accidental and deliberate) to explicit and potentially harmful content, as well as pro-anorexia (pro-ana) and pro-bulimia (pro-mia) websites that advocate the perception of eating disorders as positive lifestyle choices rather than serious psychological disorders.⁸⁵

We do, however, also stress that it is important that a young person's right to age-appropriate sexual expression and education not be undermined by the over-regulation of media content.

Recommendation 12: The NSW government advocates and provides leadership on a formation of a new national system of media-wide regulation that has as a core part of its remit the protection of children and young people in Australia. This should be an industry and government partnership to by-pass current issues related to the 'self-regulation' of the media, but allows the industry to play a role in the development of regulations. This system or body must include an advocate for young people but also a mechanism for young people themselves to inform and participate its work.

Recommendation 13: That the NSW government work with Internet service providers to block access to pro-anorexia ('pro-ana') and pro-bulimia ('pro-mia') websites.

Media Watchdog

Youth Action suggests the formation of a government-funded independent organisation that oversees the publication or broadcasting of media content. The organisation's website could provide a streamlined avenue for consumer concerns or complaints relating to this issue, with an onus on regulatory authorities to take action should it be needed.⁸⁶ Any complaints system must be youth and child friendly, and should therefore be done in consultation with children, young people and advocates for children and young people.

The authority, via the website, could perform the functions of:

⁸⁵ Royal College of Psychiatrists, 'Briefing on Pro Ana Websites', 2009, accessed via: www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/RCPsych%20final%20briefing%20on%20Pro-Ana%20websites%20Feb09.pdf.

⁸⁶ As per measures raised in C Lumby and K Albury, op.cit.

- An online forum for parents, facilitating the sharing of concerns and requiring the authority to investigate and take responsibility for core concerns raised.
- An online forum for young people, with similar responsibilities as above.
- Dissemination of tools and information to young people, parents and other stakeholders.
- Feedback to government and policy makers from insights gained.

Recommendation 14: Government, industry and young people collaborate to form a central organisation that has oversight of an online site to support young people and parents in their concerns of sexualisation. This body would be government funded, independent with a mandate to respond to core concerns raised, inform policy development and a broader research agenda.

More decisive action on the part of the government

Both the Federal and State Government have the responsibility to provide solutions to issues related to the media and young people. Government should develop policy and leadership in implementation, monitoring and evaluation of practices that harm or sexualise young people. The government should work in collaboration with schools, youth services, broadcasting agencies and authorities, young people and the media to take steps to reduce the negative impact sexualising imagery and content may have on young people.

Government can take a leadership role through committing funding as well as implementing recommendations from the inquiry.

We also strongly recommend that the government place the voices of young people at the centre of policy debates that address the current issue of sexualisation. This reaffirms their role as collaborators in policy-making and would also ensure that the opinions and rights of young people are not being marginalised.

Recommendation 15: That as part of the inquiry, or prior to the final report being handed down to Government, the Committee commission work that supports the inclusion of



young peoples experiences into the core agenda of the inquiry.

Recommendation 16: That the inquiry ensures that the participation of children and young people remains a principle throughout. This includes the right of children and young people to be informed about the decision affecting them, to have their opinion heard, but also that their opinions are given due weight and impact in any decision.