



## Literature review: The sexualisation of children

### Background

The wellbeing of children and young people is the primary concern of the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA ('the Commissioner'). During the Commissioner's Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, several submissions were received regarding the 'negative impact of media, including violence and the sexualisation of children, on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people'.<sup>1</sup> This literature review examines the evidence on which claims to connections between contemporary media and sexualisation of children and young people have been based and the nature of the debate around sexualisation of children.

In Australia, the public debate on sexualisation of children was precipitated by two papers by Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze and published by the Australia Institute in 2006. The first and most frequently cited of these papers, *Corporate Paedophilia: Sexualisation of children in the media*, claimed that sexualised images of children were becoming increasingly common in advertising and that nothing was being done to combat this disturbing 'cultural trend'.<sup>2</sup> The second paper, *Letting Children be Children: Stopping the sexualisation of children in Australia*, examined existing regulatory frameworks and offered a 'range of policy measures that could reduce the risk of harm to children'.<sup>3</sup> These included changes to existing codes of practice and the restructuring of the current regulatory environment to bring all media regulation together under the auspices of a single organisation.<sup>4</sup> While these works have been subject to criticism<sup>5</sup> they did achieve their stated aim to 'stimulate public debate about the sexualisation of children in Australia'.<sup>6</sup>

The debate gained further traction in Australia in May 2008 when prominent photographic artist Bill Henson opened an exhibition of a new collection of works which included images of a naked 12 year-old girl and other nude adolescents.<sup>7</sup> It surfaced again in July 2011 with the holding of the Universal Royalty child beauty pageant in Melbourne and the media surrounding the publication of images of a 10 year-old model wearing adult clothes and adopting 'provocative' poses in a popular French women's magazine. As a result of public and media attention to this issue, governments have begun to take the potential of harm to the welfare of children in the context of premature sexualisation more seriously.

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1 Commissioner for Children and Young People (WA), Report of the Inquiry into the Mental Health and Wellbeing of Children and Young People in Western Australia (2011) 118.

2 La Nauze A & Rush E, *Corporate Paedophilia: Sexualisation of children in the media* (The Australia Institute, 2006).

3 La Nauze A & Rush E, *Letting Children be Children: Stopping the sexualisation of children in Australia* (The Australia Institute, 2006).

4 Ibid 37–38.

5 See, eg, Egan RD & Hawkes G, 'Girls, Sexuality and the Strange Carnalities of Advertisements: Deconstructing the Discourse of Corporate Paedophilia' (2008) 23(3) *Australian Feminist Studies* 307; Faulkner J, 'The Innocence Fetish: The Commodification and Sexualisation of Children in the Media and Popular Culture' (2010) 135 *Media International Australia* 106; Commonwealth Parliament, Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communication and the Arts, *Inquiry into Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media* (2008) [1.50]; Lumby C & Albury K, 'Too Much? Too Young? The sexualisation of children debate in Australia' (2010) 135 *Media International Australia* 141.

6 La Nauze A & Rush E, *Corporate Paedophilia: Sexualisation of children in the media* (The Australia Institute, 2006) ix.

7 For a discussion of the 'Henson Affair' in the context of sexualisation of children see Taylor C, 'Art and Moralism' (2009) 84(3) *Philosophy* 341.

## Recent inquiries and reviews

Since the rise of this debate in 2006 there have been several inquiries and reviews that have focused on exploring the concerns of parents expressed in public forums, evaluating claims that advertising practices and contemporary media lead to the premature sexualisation of children and proposing strategies to prevent or reduce such sexualisation. Most of these inquiries or reviews have been coordinated or sponsored by government and have attempted to pull together disparate strains of independent research focussing on different questions, covering different disciplines and using different research methodologies of varying critical value. The methodology and findings of the major inquiries are discussed below, categorised by jurisdiction. Though this literature review has focussed on Australia and the United Kingdom, it is useful to begin with the work of the American Psychological Association Task Force as it has become an authoritative early source for the debate on sexualisation of children.

### United States of America

#### American Psychological Association (APA), Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2007, republished 2010) ('the APA Report')<sup>8</sup>

The APA Task Force was formed in response to expressions of public concern that the sexualisation of girls through beauty pageants, imagery, products and clothing was becoming an 'increasing problem that was harmful to girls'.<sup>9</sup>

**Aim of the inquiry/research:** To examine and summarise psychological literature on the subject.

**Definition of sexualisation:** The APA Report defines sexualisation as existing where one of four conditions is present. It argues that 'sexualisation occurs when:

- a person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behaviour, to the exclusion of other characteristics
- a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy
- a person is sexually objectified (made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making) and/or
- sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person.<sup>10</sup>

The fourth condition is especially relevant to children and the context of this literature review. An example given by the APA of the 'imposition' of adult sexuality upon a child is a five year-old girl wearing a short t-shirt with an adult message on it such as 'flirt'.<sup>11</sup>

**Methodology:** A review of psychological literature was undertaken.

**Consultations undertaken with children:** None.

**Findings:** The studies examined in this report suggest that American culture delivers abundant messages about the sexualisation and objectification of adult women and that this

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8 This research was originally published in 2007 but was republished in 2010 with some minor updating of some references. Citations in this section refer to the 2010 edition, see: <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-full.pdf>

9 American Psychological Association, *Report of the APA Taskforce on the Sexualization of Girls* (2007, republished 2010), see: <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-full.pdf> 1

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

is the environment in which girls develop, however, research focussed on girls is required.<sup>12</sup> There is evidence that negative consequences (such as body dissatisfaction, depression and lower self-esteem) may flow from exposure to sexualising and objectifying media.<sup>13</sup>

**Recommendations:** The APA recommended that psychologists conduct further research into whether the incidence of sexualisation is increasing and the impact of sexual imagery on girls (as opposed to adult women). Other recommendations included the development of strategies and multimedia educational resources to raise awareness in schools and in the community.

## Australia

### Commonwealth Parliament, Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communication and the Arts, *Inquiry into Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media* (2008)

This inquiry was prompted by public concern following the publication of two papers by the Australia Institute (discussed earlier in this review). The matter was referred to the Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communication and the Arts (the Committee) following a motion by the Australian Democrats calling upon the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) to include the issue in its review of media industry codes of practice. It was noted that the ACMA did not have statutory functions broad enough to consider all relevant material.

**Aim of the inquiry/research:** The Committee's terms of reference were to:

- examine the sources and beneficiaries of premature sexualisation of children in the media
- review the evidence on the short- and long-term effects of viewing or buying sexualising and objectifying images and products and their influence on cognitive functioning, physical and mental health, sexuality, attitudes and beliefs
- examine strategies to prevent and/or reduce the sexualisation of children in the media and the effectiveness of different approaches in ameliorating its effects, including the role of school-based sexuality and reproductive health education and change in media and advertising regulation such as the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice and the Commercial Radio Codes of Practice.

**Definition of sexualisation:** The Committee noted the variety of definitions of sexualisation. It described the APA definition as broad,<sup>14</sup> but did not present or argue an alternative definition. Instead, the Committee stated that it viewed sexualisation as:

*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*

12 Ibid 18. It is noted that the majority of studies reviewed by the APA report relate to adults rather than children and young people and focus on issues such as body image and self-esteem rather than sexualisation.

13 Ibid 34.

14 Commonwealth Parliament, Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communication and the Arts, *Inquiry into Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media* (2008) [1.25]

*adults are readily accessed by children and reinforce the sexualising messages they are receiving.*<sup>15</sup>

**Methodology:** The inquiry was advertised and a call for submissions was made through national newspapers. A number of organisations and individuals were directly contacted to contribute to the inquiry, including by giving evidence to the committee. In total, 152 submissions were received from 113 individuals and 52 groups/organisations. In addition, 900 standard form letters were submitted via a prominent child lobby group website.

**Consultations undertaken with children:** None.

**Findings:** The Committee noted that children are a legitimate commercial market but it acknowledged concern about some products and advertising aimed at children. It also observed that children are 'more visibly sexualised in terms of the media to which they are exposed'.<sup>16</sup> However, despite the greater exposure of children to such media content in its many forms (including internet content) the Committee stated that 'it would be a mistake to equate these influences with actual harm'.<sup>17</sup> The Committee observed there was 'a lack of definitive evidence concerning the media and the effect of premature sexualisation'<sup>18</sup> and noted that no research had been adduced that specifically concerned the sexualising impact of the media on children.<sup>19</sup>

The key message from the report was that parents have a pivotal role to play in how children engage with sexualised material and that 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 Committee 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.*<sup>20</sup>

Better complaints processes were seen to be one way that media could be made aware of and more responsive to prevailing community standards about what parents believe is appropriate media and advertising content for children.

**Recommendations:** The Committee made 13 recommendations including that:

- a major longitudinal study into the effects of premature and inappropriate sexualisation of children be commissioned
- the Children's Television Standards be amended to increase the required time that children's content be broadcast from half an hour per day to encourage children to watch
- broadcasters classify music videos with regard to sexualised imagery
- broadcasters consider establishing dedicated children's channels
- publishers provide 'reader advice' on magazine covers indicating the presence of material that may be inappropriate for children

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15 Ibid [1.28].

16 Ibid [2.20].

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid [3.6].

19 Ibid [3.17].

20 Ibid [2.19].

- state and territory governments introduce 'comprehensive sexual health and relationships education' into schools, adopting a nationally consistent approach
- the Advertising Standards Bureau (ASB):
  - establish a 'complaints clearinghouse'
  - produce a consolidated list of complaints concerning advertising impact on children every six months
  - pre-vet advertisements by agencies that have 'regularly produced' material the subject of complaints
  - develop a formal process for community consultation
  - apply standards to outdoor advertising.

The Committee further recommended that steps taken by the media industry to address premature sexualisation of children<sup>21</sup> and the effectiveness of the 2008 National Advertisers' Code for Advertising and Marketing Communications to Children<sup>22</sup> be reviewed by the Senate in 18 months of the release of the report.

**Response to recommendations:** The Australian Government responded to the report in July 2009, noting all recommendations.<sup>23</sup> Support was shown for changes to the Children's Television Standards with the ACMA requiring that licensees of television stations broadcast children's programs in minimum blocks of one hour for a minimum of two days per week. The government also noted that funding had been made available to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) to establish a dedicated digital children's channel (ABC 3). This channel, aimed at children aged six to 15 years, was announced in September 2007 (ie prior to the Committee's report) and launched in December 2009. The classification of music videos was not considered necessary as it was claimed that statistics showed there was a very low level of community concern. The reader advice system proposed for magazines was considered by government to be impractical. While the government noted the recommendations addressed to the ASB, it recognised that it was an independent organisation and declined to make further comment.

On 22 January 2010 the Committee determined that it would not conduct a review of steps taken by industry bodies to address sexualisation of children and declined to readopt that recommendation.<sup>24</sup> However, the Senate Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs reiterated this recommendation in 2011 in its Review of the National Classification Scheme.<sup>25</sup> This report is discussed briefly below.

### Commonwealth Parliament, Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee, *Review of the National Classification Scheme: Achieving the right balance* (June 2011)<sup>26</sup>

In November 2010 the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee (the Committee) commenced a review of the National Classification Scheme. As part of this inquiry the Committee considered 'the effectiveness of the National Classification Scheme in preventing the sexualisation of children and the objectification of women in all media,

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21 Ibid, recommendation 1.

22 Ibid, recommendation 7.

23 See: [http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/eca\\_ctte/sexualisation\\_of\\_children/gov\\_response/gov\\_response.pdf](http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/eca_ctte/sexualisation_of_children/gov_response/gov_response.pdf)

24 Telephone discussion with Diane Warhurst, Administrative Officer, Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communication and the Arts (12 August 2011).

25 Commonwealth Parliament, Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee, *Review of the National Classification Scheme: Achieving the right balance* (June 2011) recommendation 3 see: [http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/legcon\\_ctte/classification\\_board/report/index.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/legcon_ctte/classification_board/report/index.htm)

26 Ibid.

including advertising'.<sup>27</sup> This issue was considered in Chapter 11 of the report, which is briefly summarised here.

**Definition of sexualisation:** No definition of sexualisation of children was noted or discussed.

**Methodology:** The inquiry was advertised and the Committee received evidence and submissions from interested parties.

**Consultations undertaken with children:** None.

**Findings:** The Committee found that the National Classification Scheme does not adequately prevent the sexualisation of children.<sup>28</sup>

**Recommendations:** The primary recommendation relevant to the sexualisation of children was that a further Senate inquiry should be established to investigate the progress made by industry bodies and others in addressing the issue of sexualisation of children in the contemporary media and implementation of the recommendations made in the 2008 report of the Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communication and the Arts.<sup>29</sup> This is a reiteration of recommendation one of the 2008 report. The Committee also repeated recommendation eight of that report – the establishment of a 'complaints clearinghouse'.

## United Kingdom

Department for Education, *Letting Children be Children: Report of an Independent Review of the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood (2011) ('the Bailey Review')*<sup>30</sup>

Leading up to the 2010 election in the United Kingdom (UK), the coalition parties committed to protect children from 'excessive commercialisation and premature sexualisation'. This subsequently became a policy of the coalition government. The Bailey Review was commissioned to fulfil this commitment and builds upon the work of several independent reviews also commissioned by the UK government covering specific topics of sexualisation, child internet safety and commercialisation of childhood.

**Definition of sexualisation:** A definition of sexualisation is not provided and the scope of what is constituted by the term sexualisation (as used throughout the review) is not discussed.

**Methodology:** The review took the independent reviews mentioned above as the research basis for its examination of concerns in each area. It sought submissions from parents, lobby groups, businesses and charities. An online call for parent contributions resulted in responses from almost 1,000 parents. A further 1,025 parents of 15 to 16 year-olds took part in a 'face-to-face nationally representative omnibus survey' and 70 parents took part in interviews and focus groups.

**Consultations undertaken with children:** The Office for the Children's Commissioner in England, through its youth-led advisory group 'Amplify'<sup>31</sup>, coordinated a survey in which 552

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27 Ibid, term of reference (k).

28 Ibid [12.11].

29 Ibid, recommendation 3.

30 See: <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/CM%208078>

31 Eighty percent of those who responded to this survey were aged between 12 and 16 years with a 60:40 female to male weighting



children and young people<sup>32</sup> took part. The survey was distributed in paper and online formats and focussed on children's experiences of advertising and marketing (ie commercialisation). It did not cover the area of potential sexualisation. The aim of the survey was 'to gain a better understanding of the impact of commercialisation and how this links with age, employment and education, pocket money and allowances, common purchases, affluence and location.'<sup>33</sup> The results of the survey are published in a separate report, but key points taken from the survey were that children and young people experienced peer pressure to buy certain products; that celebrity involvement had little influence on their decisions to buy; that children and young people had a high awareness of commercialisation; and that they felt they were better equipped to deal with commercialisation than their parents, who they saw as being under similar pressures<sup>34</sup>.

**Findings:** The review found four areas of concern to parents and the community relevant to sexualisation: that contemporary sexualised society was 'the wallpaper of children's lives'; that products and clothing for children were becoming sexualised and gender-stereotyped; that children were under pressure as consumers; and that parents' voices were not being sufficiently heard.

**Recommendations:** Recommendations included ideas to make public spaces more 'family friendly' (eg placement of sexualised advertising aimed at adults away from schools); introducing age rating for music videos; developing a retailer code of practice for children's products and clothing; and raising parental awareness of marketing techniques and complaints processes. The Bailey Review also recommended that the Advertising Standards Authority conduct research with parents and children on a regular basis to gauge community views and that a single website be created for regulators and complaints.

### Papadopoulos L, Sexualisation of Young People Review (UK: Home Office, 2010)

This review, undertaken by psychologist Linda Papadopoulos was commissioned by the Home Office to contribute to the formulation of policy initiatives to combat the problem of violence against women. This is one of three independent reviews that underpinned the findings of the Bailey Review, discussed above. The Papadopoulos Review examines 'how sexualised images and messages may be affecting the development of children and young people and influencing cultural norms, and examines the evidence for a link between sexualisation and violence'.<sup>35</sup>

**Definition of sexualisation:** Sexualisation is defined variously as 'the imposition of adult sexuality on to children and young people before they are capable of dealing with it, mentally, emotionally or physically'<sup>36</sup> and 'the use of sexual attributes as a measure of a person's value and worth'.<sup>33</sup>

**Methodology:** The review is based primarily on a literature review of relevant articles from the disciplines of psychology, sociology, education, politics and media studies. Submissions to the review were made by 'stakeholders', the majority of whom were media industry representatives, academics and people working in the area of child abuse.

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32 For details of this consultation process see: [http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/latest\\_news/content\\_76](http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/latest_news/content_76)

33 Ibid

34 Office of the Children's Commission (UK) and Amplify, *Children and Young People and the Commercial World* (June 2011). See: [www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content\\_493](http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content_493)

35 Papadopoulos L, *Sexualisation of Young People Review* (UK: Home Office, 2010) see: <http://www.generationnext.com.au/pdf/sexualisation-young-people.pdf> 5.

36 Ibid 6.

33 Ibid 23. The report claims to take the APA definition of sexualisation (see above) as its benchmark (25). As discussed above, this definition has been criticised for being very wide and the studies used to support the definition have been criticised for being solely adult-focussed.

**Consultations undertaken with children:** While the foreword to the report notes that young people were 'spoken to' in the course of the review, the details of such consultations are not provided and there is no mention of consultations with children or young people in the review's methodology.

**Findings:** The review did not make clear findings, however, the author's position is effectively summarised in the following statement:

*The world is saturated by more images today than at any other time in our modern history. Behind each of these images lies a message about expectations, values and ideals. Women are revered – and rewarded – for their physical attributes and both girls and boys are under pressure to emulate polarised gender stereotypes from a younger and younger age. The evidence collected in this report suggests these developments are having a profound impact, particularly on girls and young women.*<sup>34</sup>

**Recommendations:** The recommendations of the review included training and guidance for schools and teachers on gender inequality and 'sexual bullying'; the development of a new program for primary school-aged children about physical development which references the influence of media on body image; a schools campaign to promote positive role models; a working group to monitor gender inequality in media; establishment of a media award that promotes 'diverse, aspirational and non-sexualised portrayals of young people'; an online government portal to 'allow the public to voice their concerns regarding irresponsible marketing which sexualises children with an onus on regulatory authorities to take action'; that information on body image and eating disorders be included in government parenting materials; regulations on broadcasters regarding music videos; and funding for further research to 'strengthen the current evidence base on sexualisation'.<sup>35</sup>

Scottish Parliament, Equal Opportunities Committee, *External Research on Sexualised Goods Aimed at Children*, SP Paper 374 (2010)<sup>36</sup>

From 2008 to 2010 research was commissioned by the Scottish Parliament's Equal Opportunities Committee about the prevalence of sexualised goods and products marketed to children in response to 'public concern that too many products for children carry inappropriate sexual connotations'.<sup>37</sup> The majority of research already done in the area had focused on sexualisation in media and advertising rather than the products, so this study makes an important contribution to the debate. The results of the research are intended to inform future policy making in Scotland.

**Definition of sexualisation:** The researchers commented that there was no obvious definition of what constituted sexualisation or what goods could be accepted as being 'sexualised'. The findings of the study supported this observation with none of the apparently 'sexualised' products presented to parents being unanimously accepted as such.

**Methodology:** The study consisted of a literature review; a survey of products marketed to children in 32 retail outlets; research activities and focus groups involving children (see below); and focus groups with a small sample of parents.

**Consultations undertaken with children:** A particular aim of the study was to assess the views of children about the potential sexual connotations of the products they consume. The researchers worked with fifty-seven 12 to 14 year-olds (39 girls and 18 boys) of mixed

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34 Ibid 5.

35 Ibid 14–16.

36 Scottish Parliament, Equal Opportunities Committee, *External Research on Sexualised Goods Aimed at Children*, SP Paper 374 (2010) <<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/s3/committees/equal/reports-10/eor10-02.htm#APP3>>. This HTML report is unpaginated.

37 Ibid.



socio-economic backgrounds. The participants were recruited from schools in different geographical areas of the country including an urban area and a small town close to a major city. Activities, which were undertaken as part of normal lessons in English and Media Studies, were devised to assess the children's views of issues of product sexualisation and commercialisation. Activities included:

- A product design simulation where children were asked to design and 'pitch' a product to a certain age group. They were asked to note any aspects of the product that parents might like or not like and anything that they considered in the design but changed because of the possible reaction from parents and children.
- A shopping scenario for a girl and boy both aged 10 years. Students were given a booklet containing images of a range of goods and asked to shop for the two 10 year-olds and provide reasons for their selections.
- A ranking activity where students reviewed the shopping booklet and identified what they thought were 'sexy or 'sexualised' products. Students were then asked to rank how strongly they agreed or disagreed with certain statements about such products.

In addition, focus group interviews with some of the children were conducted. Focus groups consisted of between four and six students (26 in total) and participants were chosen on the basis of friendship and gender patterns. It was considered that 'friends would be more willing to discuss sensitive topics with researchers'.<sup>38</sup>

**Findings:** Young people consulted for this study 'rejected the idea that they were passive victims of the marketing of sexualised goods'.<sup>39</sup> This claim was considered by the researchers to be supported by the young people's 'extensive knowledge of marketing techniques' demonstrated in the product design activity and in the focus groups. Young people also sought independence in decision-making about purchases.

The ranking activity described above showed that the young participants thought 'adults make too much fuss about sexy products' and that 'children and teenagers should have opportunities to make their own decisions' about whether they want to consume goods that may 'make them look sexy or older'.<sup>40</sup> However, the young participants also agreed that 'sexy clothes and makeup put children and teenagers at risk' because they make them appear older.<sup>41</sup> The perceived risks of appearing older ranged from 'paedophilia to general risks about reputation and misjudgements'.<sup>42</sup> Both the children and parents consulted agreed that the risks and concerns related to sexualisation applied more to girls than to boys.<sup>43</sup>

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38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Scottish Parliament, Equal Opportunities Committee, *External Research on Sexualised Goods Aimed at Children, Diamond Ranking Activity*: Aggregate Results, <[http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/s3/committees/equal/reports-10/aggreagte\\_results.pdf](http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/s3/committees/equal/reports-10/aggreagte_results.pdf)>.

41 Ibid.

42 Scottish Parliament, Equal Opportunities Committee, *External Research on Sexualised Goods Aimed at Children*, SP Paper 374 (2010).

43 Ibid.

## Discussion

### What is sexualisation?

As will be clear from the above review of relevant recent reports, the term 'sexualisation' has no accepted standard definition. Of the inquiries and reports discussed in this paper only one – The American Psychological Association *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls* – has attempted to clearly delineate a working definition of the term sexualisation.<sup>44</sup> However, that definition has been criticised for being 'very broad and indiscriminating'<sup>45</sup> and it has been argued that such definition could capture almost any physical depiction of a person.<sup>46</sup>

### Sexualisation of children

Generally the term 'sexualisation' in the context of children is understood to mean that the child is depicted or treated as a sexual object or that sexuality is being inappropriately imposed on the child through media and marketing directed at them that encourages them to act in adult sexual ways. However, in government-commissioned reports in Australia and the United Kingdom sexualisation has been broadly interpreted to include media and marketing directed at older teenagers and adults and general social culture such that sexualisation has become the 'background noise'<sup>47</sup> or 'wallpaper'<sup>48</sup> of children's lives. This reflects the nature of the debate in these two countries, which has drawn other concerns of parents (such as the effects of violence in media, child sexual abuse and perceived dangers of digital media)<sup>49</sup> into the debate on sexualisation, suggesting that children are subject to a continual onslaught of material and messages that are inappropriate, harmful and unable to be controlled by parents.

What constitutes a child or 'childhood' for the purpose of the sexualisation debate is not always defined in the literature. Clearly there are different stages of development in childhood and considerations about the emotional and physical vulnerability of specific age groups and the reality of adolescents, for example, exploring their own emerging sexuality may legitimately impact upon what is considered inappropriate material and what policy responses are required to protect the wellbeing of children. The Australian Senate *Inquiry into Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media* noted that many submissions to its inquiry 'generalised across the whole period of childhood from pre-school to adolescence'.<sup>50</sup>

### What constitutes 'inappropriate' sexualisation?

It is widely recognised that people's views differ as to whether or not an image or a product or an advertising campaign is considered to be inappropriately sexualised.<sup>51</sup> The Scottish Parliament research noted that there was no consensus among parents about any of the potentially sexualised products presented to them for discussion or whether girls emulating certain 'sexy' dance moves or wearing make-up was sexualisation or innocuous fun.<sup>52</sup> As

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44 See definition above in discussion of this report.

45 Scottish Parliament, Equal Opportunities Committee, *External Research on Sexualised Goods Aimed at Children*, SP Paper 374 (2010) [1.6].

46 Ibid.

47 Commonwealth Parliament, Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communication and the Arts, *Inquiry into Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media* (2008).

48 Department for Education UK, *Letting Children be Children: Report of an Independent Review of the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood* (2011) ('the Bailey Review').

49 A useful review of research in the area of adolescents and the media is found in chapters 8 and 9 of a recent New Zealand report: Chief Science Advisor (NZ), *Improving the Transition: Reducing social and psychological morbidity during adolescence* (May 2011).

50 Commonwealth Parliament, Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communication and the Arts, *Inquiry into Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media* (2008) [1.46].

51 Ibid [1.30]; Scottish Parliament, Equal Opportunities Committee, *External Research on Sexualised Goods Aimed at Children*, SP Paper 374 (2010) [3.1];

52 Scottish Parliament, *ibid* [3.1]–[3.2].

noted above, the age of children (eg pre-school aged, primary school aged or in the middle years or in adolescence) can also legitimately impact upon what is considered appropriate in terms of representations of children and young people in media aimed at them.

The Australian Senate *Inquiry into Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media* refers to the concept of 'prevailing community standards' when addressing what may or may not constitute inappropriate sexualisation of children in the context of media. This is a concept that underpins regulatory schemes to control or judge media content in Australia,<sup>53</sup> but it is necessarily fluid and dependent upon adjudicating bodies being reliably and regularly informed about what prevailing community standards are.

### How does sexualisation occur?

The debate about sexualisation of children has primarily focussed on media aimed at children (and depicting children), including advertising, television programming, music videos and children's magazines. However, media aimed at adults but accessible to children (eg through the internet and outdoor advertising) has also featured widely in the debate about sexualisation of children. Most inquiries also refer to products aimed at children but featuring adult characteristics (eg make-up, handbags, padded bras and g-string underwear for 10 to 13 year-olds etc): the work of the Scottish Parliament focussed solely on this aspect of sexualisation of children. Other possible sources of sexualisation, such as peer pressure and parental influence, are not as extensively explored.

### Who does sexualisation affect?

The impact of sexualisation on girls is the primary focus of the debate in respect of sexualisation of children, while the impact of sexualisation on adult women is the focus of most of the available research. However, the Papadopoulos Review claims that sexualisation in the media has a corresponding effect on boys to emulate macho and strong 'hyper-masculinised' images.<sup>54</sup>

### Is there any evidence of the impacts of sexualisation on children and young people?

The reports reviewed in this paper variously claim (or discuss claims) that sexualisation of children may:

- impede children's development of a healthy body image<sup>55</sup>
- affect children's self-esteem<sup>56</sup>
- affect aspects of children's cognitive and emotional development<sup>57</sup>
- impact upon children's mental and physical health and wellbeing (including by the potential development of eating disorders, depression and 'appearance anxiety')<sup>58</sup>
- affect how children conceptualise femininity and sexuality, and gender and sexual roles<sup>59</sup>

53 See, eg, Broadcasting Services Act 1992 (Cth) s 3(ha); *AANA Code for Advertising and Marketing Communications to Children* 2008 s 2.4.

54 Papadopoulos L, *Sexualisation of Young People Review* (UK: Home Office, 2010) 10.

55 La Nauze A & Rush E, *Corporate Paedophilia: Sexualisation of children in the media* (The Australia Institute, 2006) 2; Papadopoulos L, *Sexualisation of Young People Review* (UK: Home Office, 2010) 10.

56 La Nauze A & Rush E, *ibid* 2; American Psychological Association, *Report of the APA Taskforce on the Sexualization of Girls* (2007, republished 2010) 20, 24.

57 American Psychological Association, *ibid* 20.

58 *Ibid* 22–24; Papadopoulos L, *Sexualisation of Young People Review* (UK: Home Office, 2010) 10.

59 American Psychological Association, *Ibid* 26; Papadopoulos, *ibid*.

- contribute to or provoke sexual harassment (or 'sexualised violence') in schools and workplaces<sup>60</sup>
- affect girls' educational achievements and lower their aspirations.<sup>61</sup>

It is also claimed that sexualisation of children and young people may affect adults by:

- contributing to body dissatisfaction and idealisation of youth in adult women<sup>62</sup>
- encouraging sexism and sexist attitudes<sup>63</sup>
- encouraging adult sexual predation on children.<sup>64</sup>

While these may all be possible impacts of sexualised imagery of children and related marketing practices addressed to children, to date there appears to be little substantive or empirical evidence to support these claims. The lack of evidence to support a cause and effect relationship between sexualised images of children (for example) and certain behaviours or effects on wellbeing of children was recognised by the Australian Senate Standing Committee Report (2008)<sup>65</sup> and the Scottish Parliament's research but appears to be assumed in some other reports.<sup>66</sup> Despite these assumptions, almost all reports have called for support for more research into the area of sexualisation of children. This call is supported by professional bodies such as the Australian Medical Association.<sup>67</sup>

Although there is no evidence of relationship to sexualised culture, it is interesting to note that Mission Australia's national surveys of young Australians have, since at least 2007, found that body image is a concern for young people with around 30 per cent of respondents in all age groups (11 to 14 years, 15 to 19 years and 20 to 24 years) noting it as a 'major personal concern'. The 2010 survey commented that:

*Young people's level of concern about this issue remains quite high, particularly among the young adult group who may have missed out on strategies more recently developed and implemented in schools to help young people develop a healthy body image. Initiatives such as those that promote young people's media literacy and self-esteem were identified by young people as being important, with a stronger focus on young adults appearing warranted. Continued efforts to urge the media, fashion and advertising industries to help promote positive body messages are also recommended.*<sup>68</sup>

### Where is the child's voice in the sexualisation debate?

Children and young people clearly have an important perspective in this debate and an interest in the solutions that may be applied by policymakers; however, of the inquiries discussed above, only two (conducted in the United Kingdom) made any real effort to obtain the views of children and young people about how they perceive and make sense of apparently sexualised media representations or products. In many cases the voices of parents and lobbyists appear to dominate the debate. The danger with such a limited

60 American Psychological Association, *ibid* 32–33; Papadopoulos *ibid* 68.

61 American Psychological Association, *ibid* 32.

62 *Ibid* 28–29.

63 *Ibid* 30.

64 *Ibid* 34; La Nauze A & Rush E, *Corporate Paedophilia: Sexualisation of children in the media* (The Australia Institute, 2006) 2.

65 Commonwealth Parliament, Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communication and the Arts, *Inquiry into Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media* (2008) [1.14].

66 For example, Papadopoulos L, *Sexualisation of Young People Review* (UK: Home Office, 2010) makes unsupported connections between concepts such as exposure to sexualised imagery by children and eating disorders or depression on the basis of research that only links depression (in adult women) to body image.

67 See Australian Medical Association, 'Body Image and Health' (undated): <http://ama.com.au/node/4584>

68 Mission Australia, *National Survey of Young Australians* (2010) 5.

approach is that unfounded assumptions based on anecdotal evidence from a solely adult perspective may gain unwarranted currency. For example, the Australian Senate *Inquiry into Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media* commented that many submissions to the inquiry appeared to assume that 'because an adult is angered, offended or embarrassed by a billboard advertising a lap dancing club or "male sexual dysfunction services", then the child interprets the material in the same way and is harmed by it'.<sup>69</sup> Other studies have also noted that cultural assumptions among adults underpin popular reactions to what is perceived as the sexualisation of childhood:

*Rarely is sexualised behaviour amongst girls understood as the harmless mimicking of behaviours associated with adults decontextualised from adult meanings. We seem happy for little girls to play with kitchen sets, shopping trolleys and other apparently benign symbols of normalised adult womanhood. However we seem to draw the line on play when it strays into behaviours that, to adults, represent sexuality.*<sup>70</sup>

As noted earlier, the difference between young children who may have no conception of adult sexuality and young people who may be exploring their emerging sexuality as part of the natural process of growing up is not always delineated in the debate on sexualisation. While young people exploring their sexuality act in a broader social context, they are not always driven by sinister forces. Their actions may be self-motivated and independent and therefore not 'sexualised' in the sense of being objectified or imposed upon. It has been argued that this message has been lost in the Australian debate and that assumptions are made that 'independent action and decision-making are either irrelevant for young people or only valid if they occur without any reference to the broader social context of media and popular culture'.<sup>71</sup>

Where studies have engaged in a meaningful way with children and young people (most aged between eight and 16 years), they have found that they are reasonably adept at navigating the media and filtering out age-inappropriate messages. In fact, in the study commissioned by the Scottish Parliament, parents conceded that their children may be more media savvy than them.<sup>72</sup> This was confirmed from the perspective of children and young people in the research undertaken by the Office of the Children's Commissioner in England, which found that children and young people had a high awareness of commercialisation in all forms of media (including the internet) and felt that they were better equipped to deal with it than their parents who they saw as being under similar pressure from peers and advertising.<sup>73</sup>

In respect of how children interpret sexual material in media, an earlier UK study of 800 children aged nine to 17 years found that 'children are not the incompetent or naïve consumers they are frequently assumed to be ... children's response to sexual imagery in advertising or music videos displayed a well-developed understanding of how such images are constructed and manipulated'.<sup>74</sup> The same study found that:

*Younger children's partial knowledge means that they often ignore or misinterpret many references to sexual matters, particularly where they are in the form of comic innuendo or 'suggestion' (as in the case of music videos)... To this extent, the media*

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69 Commonwealth Parliament, Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communication and the Arts, *Inquiry into Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media* (2008) [1.38].

70 Thompson K, 'Because Looks can be Deceiving: Media alarm and the sexualisation of childhood – do we know what we mean?' (201) 19(4) *Journal of Gender Studies* 395, 397 (emphasis added).

71 Lumby C & Albury K, 'Too Much? Too Young? The sexualisation of children debate in Australia' (2010) 135 *Media International Australia* 141, 147.

72 Scottish Parliament, Equal Opportunities Committee, *External Research on Sexualised Goods Aimed at Children*, SP Paper 374 (2010).

73 Office of the Children's Commission (UK) and Amplify, *Children, Young People and the Commercial World* (June 2011) 33.

74 Buckingham D & Bragg S, *Young People, Sex and the Media* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004) 238 as cited in Grieshaber S, 'Sexualisation of Children in Contemporary Australian Media' (Queensland: School of Early Childhood, Queensland University of Technology, 2010) 17.

*have only a limited power to impose sexual meanings: in order to be meaningful in the first place, they must fit into a framework of existing knowledge.*<sup>75</sup>

This reinforces the point raised earlier; that young children may mimic the behaviours of adults (such as adopting adult poses in photographs, experimenting with make-up or imitating 'sexy' dance moves) without understanding them as being sexual. While this behaviour is innocent and probably unlikely to be harmful to the child's development, submissions to some reports indicate that it is a cause for parental concern in respect of how other adults might perceive their child.<sup>76</sup>

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75 Buckingham D & Bragg S, *Young People, Sex and the Media* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004) 240 as cited in Lumby C & Albury K, 'Too Much? Too Young? The sexualisation of children debate in Australia' (2010) 135 *Media International Australia* 141, 148.

76 See eg, Department for Education UK, *Letting Children be Children: Report of an Independent Review of the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood* (2011) ('the Bailey Review') 43.



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