

# Overexposed

Parliamentarians from across the political spectrum say more must be done to protect the innocence of our children.

**STORY:** JEREMY KENNETT  
AND ANNELISE YOUNG

**F**or a nation already battling an obesity bulge among our young, a recent statistic has set another alarm bell ringing. The children's hospital in the Sydney suburb of Westmead has reported a 270 per cent increase in the number of children being admitted for eating disorders over the past decade.

While the causes may be many and varied, there is a common and underlying theme to this paediatric dilemma: children and young people in Australia are feeling increasing pressure when it comes to their body image, and many are not coping with the strain.

Australian Medical Association president Dr Steve Hambleton says having a good body image is a crucial building block for kids to be healthy and happy.

But he says children's ability to feel good about themselves is being undermined by the increasing sexualisation of our society, where a person's value is becoming more and more reliant on their physical attractiveness and sexual appeal.



ISTOCK

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*“The media practice of presenting unrealistic images encourages our vulnerable young to strive for what is not natural.”*

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Dr Hambleton's concerns are being echoed in parliaments across Australia, as MPs of all political persuasions speak out about the damage being done to children and young people as a result of exposure to overtly sexual products and images.

Leading a debate on this issue in the House of Representatives, federal MP Amanda Rishworth (Kingston, SA) said it is high time the community started to address the increasing commercialisation and sexualisation of children, and to work together to ensure children can grow and develop in a positive and healthy way.

“I often feel bad when I open up a magazine and see unrealistic images of women,” Ms Rishworth said. “However, the important point is this: unlike adults, children have not yet developed the cognitive ability to objectively analyse these kinds of images, and so they are particularly vulnerable to this kind of content.”

“While adults are able to determine whether something has been airbrushed or is unrealistic or a person has had their body altered, children are unable to do this.”

IMAGE PROBLEM:  
*Sexualised products being  
aimed at children*



Ms Rishworth called on parliament and the community to take note of a British report into sexualisation called *Letting children be children*, which found that children are not only growing up amongst a backdrop of increasingly sexualised advertising, but are also exposed to clothing, services and products which prematurely sexualise behaviour.

Based on in-depth surveys, interviews and focus groups with over 1,000 parents, the report found many believe their children are almost constantly exposed to sexualised imagery through all forms of media – referred to in the report as “the wallpaper of children’s lives”.

The report also found the pressure on children to grow up too quickly takes two different but related forms: the pressure to take part in a sexualised life before they are ready to do so; and the commercial pressure to consume the vast range of goods and services that are available to children and young people of all ages.

While the UK report indicated this pressure falls on all children, a number of parliamentarians in Australia are concerned the burden is especially heavy for young girls.

Deborah O’Neill (Robertson, NSW) said the contrasting ways young girls and young boys are presented in advertising is reinforcing negative perceptions.

“I was caught behind a bus and on the back of the bus was an image of a four-year-old girl in a very short dress, knee-high stockings and extreme amounts of make-up,” Ms O’Neill told parliament.

“This was something that really alarmed me. It was even more alarming when I contrasted the image of this young girl with the young boy who was her play partner in the picture. He looked very free, very comfortable, hardly made-up at all, in a regular pair of play shorts.”

According to Jane Prentice (Ryan, Qld), this focus on appearance and sexuality is pervasive in the marketing of products targeted at young girls, especially clothing and media.

“Sadly, the increasing prevalence of sexualised images and products can be noticed every day when simply walking around clothes shops, with sexualised underwear and swimwear aimed at young girls,” Mrs Prentice said.

“One need only open a girls’ magazine to see ‘keep slim’ tips and dating advice for 10-year-old girls. We know that the risks of this increasing commercialisation include but are not limited to mental health effects, body image issues, eating disorders and low self-esteem, as this motion suggests.”

The *Letting children be children* report made a number of recommendations to help relieve this pressure in the UK, including restricting outdoor advertising, especially around schools, limiting children’s access to certain forms of media, and enforcing guidelines on age appropriate clothing for retailers.

Industry and government have been quick to respond to many of the recommendations. The UK government has created a centralised point for complaints about sexualisation, advertising authorities have issued tighter guidelines on outdoor advertising and new customers of internet service providers are now required to actively choose whether or not to install parental controls on their devices.

However in Australia movement on the issue has been slower. A 2008 Senate inquiry into sexualisation and a 2011 House of Representatives inquiry into outdoor advertising



“We seem to be moving as a society towards anything goes, anything is acceptable”

both made recommendations for tighter controls and further review, mainly related to the advertising industry.

While some changes have been implemented, such as allowing independent reviews of advertising complaints and a revised advertising code specifically prohibiting the use of sexual imagery of children, critics from both inside and outside of federal parliament claim very little has actually changed.

“The [sexualisation] report was published in June 2008,” Mrs Prentice said. “The government did not bother to respond until more than a year later, in July 2009.”



“When they finally decided to read this report on an issue that is very important to the future of Australian families, what action did they take? Essentially, they did nothing. They admitted that there is a problem. They noted the recommendations.”

Sophie Mirabella (Indi, Vic) said the more recent *Reclaiming public space* report on outdoor advertising has also failed to spark substantial action to protect children and young people.

“It is time we did something real,” Mrs Mirabella said. “It is time we said to the Advertising Standards Board, ‘Don’t mock us.’”

“Self-regulation does not work; we know that. If you have ignored the welfare of children just to make a quick, easy buck through advertising, perhaps it is time to tighten regulation on advertising.

“Perhaps it is time to discuss a statutory body with real powers, including issuing serious fines to offenders, because if all you get is a slap with a wet lettuce then you are going to continue taking the easy way out.”

Dr Hambleton agrees, saying the failure of self-regulation to protect children from sexualised advertising means other measures must be looked at. He has called for a fresh inquiry into the sexualisation of children, backed by a firm regulatory response to rein in the excesses of the industry and let children have a childhood.

“There is strong evidence that premature sexualisation is likely to be detrimental to child health and development, particularly in the areas of body image and sexual health,” Dr Hambleton said.

“We urge the government to start a new inquiry with the view to introducing tougher measures, including legislation, to protect the health and development of our children by shielding them from sexualised and other inappropriate advertising.”

#### LITTLE WOMEN:

*More pressure on children to grow up too quickly*



However the Advertising Standards Bureau, which manages the regulation of advertising and the Advertising Standards Board, said there is no need for another inquiry into advertising regulation. ASB chief executive Fiona Jolly said self-regulation has been a success since its inception in 1998, and has been strongly supported by findings of previous inquiries into the issue.

“Two parliamentary inquiries have now recommended that advertising self-regulation remain,” Ms Jolly said.

“Since its inception, the Advertising Standards Bureau has made many changes to systems and processes of our own initiative and in response to community concerns. Our solutions for making the system more transparent and accountable have been carefully implemented to ensure any changes will be of benefit.”

The use of explicit imagery in advertising is not the only source of concern when it comes to the sexualisation of young people. The widespread practice of digitally altering photographs of models and celebrities has also been condemned for leading young people to develop impossible ideals of how they should look.

WATCHING OVER THEM:  
*More legislation may be  
 needed to protect children*

American Medical Association board member Dr Barbara McAneny, cited in a speech to the Senate by Senator Helen Polley (Tas), said advertisers commonly alter photographs to enhance the appearance of models' bodies, and such alterations can contribute to unrealistic expectations of appropriate body image – especially among impressionable children and adolescents.

“A large body of literature links exposure to media-propagated images of unrealistic body image to eating disorders and other child and adolescent health problems,” Dr McAneny said.

Concerned about this issue, a national committee of women parliamentarians has decided to campaign for measures to address the harm caused by the digital enhancement of images. Chaired by Western Australian MP Lisa Baker and including women parliamentarians from across Australia, the committee is pushing to ensure their concerns get national attention.

Speaking in the Victorian parliament, deputy chair of the committee Christine Fyffe urged lawmakers to introduce requirements for digitally enhanced images to be marked as such.

“The media practice of presenting unrealistic images encourages our vulnerable young to strive for what is not natural,” Ms Fyffe said.

“Israel has recently introduced legislation requiring that any digitally altered image of the human body produced in Israel that is published in print or electronically will now have to carry a statement that the image has been altered. Australia must follow Israel's lead.”

This call for a direct legislative response to the causes of sexualisation is gaining support across Australia's parliaments.

In the House of Representatives, Jane Prentice said she would welcome ongoing monitoring of regulation and if necessary further legislation to protect children.

Senator Helen Polley said the most important thing is to increase community awareness of the issue, but agrees

## WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS SPEAK OUT

Issues such as the sexualisation of young people and the digital enhancement of images are of concern to a national committee of women parliamentarians, chaired by Western Australian MP Lisa Baker and involving representatives from all of Australia's parliaments (federal, state and territory). The national committee has developed an action agenda called w.comm which provides a platform for communication and engagement, and advocates on a range of issues in parliaments across Australia. You can connect with these issues at [www.wcomm.org](http://www.wcomm.org) or join the conversation on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/w.commAus](https://www.facebook.com/w.commAus) or follow the Twitter feed: @w.commAus

governments have to play a role in ensuring advertisers and the media live up to community expectations.

“I think we have got to have this real earnest discussion within the community and we need to have that dialogue to say what is acceptable,” Senator Polley said. “We seem to be moving as a society towards anything goes, anything is acceptable, that we don't want to impose rules and regulations on people.

“But I think we have to have some regulation there to protect the young. And if it's not being done by self-regulation then I think it's time for governments to step in.”

According to Amanda Rishworth, we all need to play a role or the problems of sexualisation will only get worse.

“I do not think that it is any one group's responsibility, and that has been the trouble – one group of people has not been responsible, because it is a complex issue,” Ms Rishworth said.

“Industry, government, parents and the community need to work together to ensure that as a society we deal effectively with this important issue so that future generations of Australian boys and girls can grow and develop in an environment that promotes positive and healthy messages.

“Unfortunately, I feel that we are going the other way.” •

## POINT OF VIEW

Two participants in a young women's forum at Parliament House in Canberra (the w.comm forum) give their perspectives on sexualisation of children and young people.

## The issue runs deeper

BY ALEXIA FULLER

If you are under 25, I am fairly certain you will have seen the television show *Toddlers and tiaras* or the YouTube clip with five-year-old child beauty queen Alana Thompson strutting around in next to nothing. This program is regularly watched by many of my friends.



This says a lot about where society has reached, that a program about tiny children acting four or five times their age can be so popular. The idea that sexualised images of young children are seemingly acceptable to our community is a worrying thought.

I write as a young person who has witnessed some of my peers give into the pressure to conform to an idealised body image reinforced by our mainstream media.

I feel the all-pervasive sexual images in the media affect every individual to varying degrees. Many of us are now so used to the overt sexual references that it almost goes over our heads without any consideration. For others, elements of the media, such as digitally enhanced images, can cause serious body image problems.

We all have days when we don't look our best. However, for some young people the issue runs deeper. Serious issues arise when young people avoid doing things, such as eating or exercise, because they are worried what people will think of how they look.

I am not saying overtly sexual images in the media are the sole demon causing hurt and pain to all. Nevertheless, it can't do you any favours when what is constantly publicised in the media are images of girls with pristine skin and svelte body shapes.

For me though the most serious thing is when children younger than 10 start to worry about the way they look.

I have a friend who watches a six-year-old girl until her parents come home. Recently the little girl stopped eating the peanut butter sandwiches my friend gives her because there were too many carbs in bread. Where does a six-year-old get that kind of information?

We have a responsibility to put pressure on governments to regulate the industry so as to prevent the publicising of overly sexual images to children. We need young people to feel safe and happy in their own skin.

## Put down the airbrush

BY ASH QAMA

When I was younger I used to love reading magazines. Every month I used to buy *Dolly* and *Girlfriend* and gawk at the colourful pages with my friends. I would like to think that I didn't pay any attention to the ads, but given the sheer number of them within these magazines, I know I did. There always seemed to be beautiful thin models parading in their bikinis or magnificent dresses having more fun than me with whatever product they were promoting, looking happy and sure of themselves, seemingly all the things I was not.



Of course, the models in these ads were not the cause of my insecurity. I don't want to vilify beautiful women or men for their looks. My insecurity was amplified however by these kind of advertisements targeted at a youth demographic by marketers. Being a young person can be difficult enough trying to figure out your own identity without being bombarded with targeted ads in a variety of mediums telling you that if you buy a product, your life or appearance can be better.

Looking back, I feel a bit silly being so impressionable. Until I stumbled onto Photoshop Disasters, a blog which ridicules badly photoshopped images, I didn't realise that so many photo shoots were airbrushed, not to mention manipulated badly – sometimes past the point of recognisable human anatomy.

France debated the idea of a law some time ago that would require digitally altered photos to be labelled with a warning. Would this help prevent young people from aspiring to achieve unrealistic beauty ideals? It might. It would be impossible to ban altering images altogether, so perhaps this is the closest we can get.

Some magazines such as *Seventeen* in the US have caved to pressure to publish photos of ethnically and physically diverse models with minimal airbrushing. I think this may be a better solution, though convincing the fashion and marketing industries to follow suit would be quite difficult.

However, if *Seventeen* receives positive support for this move and increases its profit in the process, it could become a viable option that would hopefully prevent many young people from feeling more insecure than they may already.