



Sexualisation of Children and its Impact on their Wellbeing

A guide for parents, members of the community, media, advertisers and retailers

The issue

Many parents and others in our community are concerned that children are directly marketed and exposed to 'sexualised' media and advertising in a way that is inappropriate to their age.¹ This is known as the 'sexualisation of children'.

Examples include

- **'adult style' clothing** marketed to young girls
- **sexual references on clothing** for both boys and girls
- **television and internet content** including **music videos**
- **billboard advertising** and **unrealistic images** in 'supermarket' and fashion **magazines**.

A key concern for parents is the impact of this type of marketing and media on children and young people's wellbeing, including its influence on their mental health and the way children and young people view their bodies – their body image.²

While many factors contribute to an unhealthy body image and mental health problems, early exposure to sexualised images increases the risks for the development of eating disorders and mental health disorders such as depression.³

Children and young people are entitled to live in safe, caring and nurturing environment and parents, families and communities have the primary responsibility for safeguarding and promoting their wellbeing.⁴

The sexualisation of children and young people is a whole-of-community issue that requires a multi-faceted response, from parents as well as industry bodies such as the media, advertisers, retailers and legislators.

Children and young people today are significant consumers of media and products, therefore it is important to educate them to critically evaluate the messages they receive through media and advertising.⁵ **Everybody has a role to play.**

What parents can do

Parents have the primary role in ensuring the healthy development of their children. However, they need the support from others in the community in carrying out this important role. We know from research that the following strategies can assist parents in developing positive and healthy children and young people:

- Value your child for who they are and what they do – not their appearance.⁶
- Be a role model – be healthy and positive about your own body.⁷
- Talk and listen to your children about their bodies and the normal changes that happen as they grow, particularly through puberty. Books can be helpful for this.⁸
- Encourage age-appropriate activities and behaviour. Let family and other parents know the types of toys, clothing and play activities you want for your child (or do not want) and enlist their support.
- Discuss with your children media and advertising and the messages being used to sell products or the stereotypes being portrayed. Discuss movies, magazines, music, advertising, television programs, clothes and other products. Ask questions, listen to their perspective and explain your own.
- Talk to other parents and members of the community about your concerns.

What industry bodies can do

Industry bodies have an important role to play in promoting a healthy body image for children and young people. This requires collaborating with parents, legislators, and children and young people themselves. As a minimum, industry bodies should adhere to the Voluntary Industry Code of Conduct on Body Image⁹, which provides guidance to the fashion, media and advertising industries to adopt more body-image friendly practices and was endorsed by the Australian Government in 2010.

What the media and advertisers in Australia can do

Research shows that the media can contribute to the development of body image problems and eating disorders in children and young people.¹⁰ Media and advertisers could contribute to a positive and healthy body image of children and young people in the following ways:

- Broadcasters could review and amend classifications of music videos, specifically with regard to sexualising imagery.¹¹
- Print media publishers could provide readers with classification advice on magazine covers (similar to advice given about television programs) to indicate the presence of material that may be inappropriate for children.¹²
- The Advertising Standards Board could apply stricter standards for billboards and outdoor advertising. This would better reflect community concern about the appropriateness of sexually-explicit material and the inability of parents to restrict their children's exposure to this material.¹³
- Industry bodies can help by ensuring their complaints processes are simple, accessible and user-friendly.¹⁴ Many parents feel disempowered because they do not know how to voice their concerns to the relevant authority, so community education about complaints processes is important. Simplicity is also important as even when parents know where to make a complaint, they can abandon the process very quickly if it is too difficult to navigate.

What retailers in Australia can do

Retailers could contribute to a positive and healthy body image of children and young people by:

- considering similar codes of conduct to those developed by the British Retailers Consortium, which includes voluntary good practice guidelines for children's clothing.¹⁵
- using child models for advertising campaigns with a variety of body shapes to more accurately represent the diversity of children and young people. The children should also be portrayed in realistic situations, like playing and laughing. These actions will help children and young people maintain their own positive body image and sense of age-appropriate activity.¹⁶

Make a complaint

Everybody in the community has a role in protecting children and young people and speaking up on their behalf if they are worried or concerned about their welfare.

If you see or hear something that is of concern, you can make a complaint about the specific media, advertising or retailer. These industries are largely self-regulated in Australia¹⁷ and there are different ways of complaining for different types of media and advertising.

Some complaints should first be made in writing directly to the organisation (eg the television or radio station, newspaper or magazine or the retail store) to provide them the opportunity to respond positively to the issue.

Television, radio and online content (not advertising)

If you are not happy with the result of your complaint to the television or radio station, or you have a complaint about online content, you can contact the Australian Communications and Media Authority - www.acma.gov.au

Classification of films, publications or computer games

The Classification Board is responsible for classifying films, some publications and computer games according to the National Classification Scheme.

Information about classifications and how to make a complaint about a classification decision can be found on the board's website in the Frequently Asked Questions section - www.classification.gov.au

Newspapers and magazines

The print media are self-regulated. The Australian Press Council takes complaints about material published in an Australian newspaper or magazine or associated website (however not advertising). Information on making a complaint is available from council's website - www.presscouncil.org.au

Advertising

Advertising is mostly self regulated. Concerns about advertising can be referred to the Advertising Standards Bureau. Information about the type of complaints they can take and how to lodge a complaint is available in the complaints section of the Bureau's website - www.adstandards.com.au. Complaints about advertising that appears in children's C-classified programs¹⁸ can be directed to the Australian Media and Communications Authority - www.acma.gov.au

Retailers

Complaint about a product can be made directly to the store. This can include complaints about individual products or the placement of products in a store (eg adult products located nearby products for children). Also, let the stores you shop in know when you like the choices they offer.

More information about making a complaint

Australian Council on Children and the Media - <http://www.childrenandmedia.org.au/>

Kids Free 2B Kids - <http://www.kf2bk.com/home.htm>

The WA Department for Communities has a resource for parents, Sexualisation of children and young people in the media, available at <http://www.communities.wa.gov.au/parents/parentingresources/Pages/Sexualisationofchildrenaandyoungpeopleinthedia.aspx>

Want to know more?

SA Health's 'Headroom' website has a range of health and wellbeing information for children, young people and their parents. The body image section of this site provides ideas for both boys and girls about how to reduce the impact of media on their body image. It is available <http://www.headroom.net.au/Content.aspx?p=81>

The Raising Children Network and the Centre for Adolescent Health (Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne) provide detailed information for parents about body image on the Raising Children Network website, available at http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/body_image.html/context/1070

The Australian Psychological Society has published information for parents of girls of all ages, *Helping girls develop a positive self image*, available at <http://www.psychology.org.au/community/public-interest/sexualisation/>

ReachOut.com has two articles for young people on body image. Both articles include information on ways to get a more positive body image and the impact of media and advertising.

- *Body image: love the skin you're in*, available at <http://au.reachout.com/find/articles/body-image-how-to-love-the-skin-youre-in>
- *Body image + blokes*, available at <http://au.reachout.com/find/articles/body-image-blokes>

The Australian Council on Children and the Media has published a fact sheet and a parent brochure.

- *Keep your children out of the firing line: body image problems, eating disorders and media messages*, available at http://www.childrenandmedia.org.au/pdf/fact_sheets/03_10_TT_body_image.pdf
- *Too much, Too soon: guiding your child through a sexualised world*, available at http://www.childrenandmedia.org.au/pdf/too_much_brochure.pdf

The Commissioner for Children and Young People and Child Guardian in Queensland publishes a fact sheet, *Children and young people in advertising*, available at <http://www.ccypcg.qld.gov.au/pdf/publications/brochures/children-and-the-media/Corporate-Fact-Sheet4.pdf>

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- ¹ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2012, *Sexualisation of children*, Issues paper 8.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Raising Children Network website, *Teenagers, body image and self esteem*, <http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/body_image.html/context/1070>
- ⁴ *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006*, s.1.4 (d), p. 2.
- ⁵ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2012, *Sexualisation of children*, Issues paper 8.
- ⁶ Raising Children Network website, *Teenagers, body image and self esteem*, <http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/body_image.html/context/1070>; Australian Psychological Association, *Sexualisation of girls*, <<http://www.psychology.org.au/community/public-interest/sexualisation/>>; Young Media Australia 2007, *Too sexy, Too soon: The sexualisation of children in the media*.
- ⁷ Raising Children Network, <http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/body_image.html>; Australian Psychological Association, <<http://www.psychology.org.au/community/public-interest/sexualisation/>>
- ⁸ Headroom, *Body image*, <<http://www.headroom.net.au/Content.aspx?p=81>>; Raising Children Network, <http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/body_image.html>; Australian Psychological Association, <<http://www.psychology.org.au/community/public-interest/sexualisation/>>
- ⁹ National Advisory Group on Body Image 2010, *Voluntary Industry Code of Conduct on Body Image*, Australian Government.
- ¹⁰ Young Media Australia 2006, *Keeping your children out of the firing line: body image problems, eating disorders and media messages*, Fact sheet 2.
- ¹¹ Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts 2008, *Sexualisation of children and young people in the media*, Commonwealth of Australia, p. v.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Ibid, p. vi.
- ¹⁴ Ibid, p. 59.
- ¹⁵ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2012, *Sexualisation of children*, Issues paper 8.
- ¹⁶ Commission for Children and Young People and the Child Guardian [date unknown], *Children and young people in advertising*, fact sheet 4.
- ¹⁷ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2012, *Sexualisation of children*, Issues paper 8.
- ¹⁸ C (children's) classified programs are designed specifically to meet children's needs and interests (ACMA, <http://www.acma.gov.au/WEB/STANDARD/pc=PC_410091>).