



Sexualisation of children

Parents and others concerned with the protection of children and young people are clearly worried about the potential harmful effects of sexualised media and advertising on their wellbeing. Because the consequences of sexualised media and advertising on children are not yet fully known, further research is essential.

What is sexualisation of children?

'Sexualisation of children' is typically understood to mean that children are depicted or treated as sexual objects or that sexuality is being inappropriately imposed on children through media, marketing or products directed at them that encourage them to act in adult sexual ways. Already steps are being taken to address 'sexualised' depiction of children in advertising and media. However, parents are increasingly voicing concerns in Australia and elsewhere that western culture generally has become inappropriately sexualised and that children are often exposed to media and marketing directed at older teenagers and adults. Thus, it has been said that sexualisation has become the 'background noise'¹ or 'wallpaper'² of children's lives and this may be potentially harmful to them.

Examples of age-inappropriate sexualisation:

- Products marketed to 10 to 13 year-olds featuring adult characteristics, such as padded bras and g-string underwear
- Clothing for young girls and boys featuring inappropriate messages, such as midriff t-shirts with sexualised slogans (eg, 'flirt' or 'hot' or 'spank me') or gender stereotyped slogans (eg, 'bimbo' or 'macho').
- Depictions of young girls in 'sexy' poses and of young boys with open shirts in 'macho' poses advertising products.

What we know about the impacts of sexualised media on children

In 2011 the Commissioner for Children and Young People commissioned a literature review to examine the evidence for the sexualisation of children and young people and its impact on their wellbeing.³

The literature review summarised a number of studies and inquiries undertaken in Australia and the United Kingdom, which variously claimed that sexualisation of children may:

- impede children's development of a healthy body image
- affect children's self-esteem

- affect aspects of children's cognitive and emotional development
- impact upon children's mental and physical health and wellbeing (including by the potential development of eating disorders, depression and 'appearance anxiety')
- affect how children conceptualise femininity and sexuality, and gender and sexual roles
- contribute to or provoke sexual harassment (or 'sexualised violence') in schools and workplaces
- affect educational achievements for girls and lower their aspirations.⁴

However, the literature review noted that while these may be the possible impacts of sexualised imagery of children and related marketing practices addressed to children, to date there is little substantive or empirical evidence to support these claims.

The importance of addressing inappropriate sexualisation

Although there is not yet any direct evidence that sexualised media and advertising is harmful to the wellbeing of children and young people, the potential risks to healthy childhood development should not be ignored.

There is sufficient quantitative and qualitative research to support the claim that children as young as seven experience body image dissatisfaction.⁵ In addition, illnesses such as depression and eating disorders have been 'directly associated with body image dissatisfaction'.⁶

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; 20 to 24 years) noting it as a 'major personal concern'.⁷ It is reasonable to suggest that the growing media representation of young girls as sexualised and the marketing of inappropriately sexualised products to young children would have a negative impact on children and young people's perception of their body.

Is it all bad news?

In recent years advances have been made in Australia to address growing concerns about sexualisation of children and young people in the media and advertising and exposure of children to age-inappropriate material. These include:

- The introduction of a dedicated commercial-free children's channel by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.
- Changes to the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) Code of Ethics to proscribe the sexual objectification of people, including children in all advertising media (including internet and outdoor advertising).⁸
- Explicit recognition and prohibition of sexualised advertising and marketing to children in the AANA Code for Advertising and Marketing Communications to Children 2008.⁹
- Strict rules for televised program content for children under 14 years and for advertising that is broadcast within child television viewing times.¹⁰
- More active consideration by governments of the concerns of parents in relation to the possible harmful effects of premature sexualisation of children caused by media and advertising (as evidenced by the various inquiries discussed in the literature review).¹¹

What more can be done to reduce the potential risk of harm to children?

Greater consideration of the 'best interests of the child' principle

Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that 'the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration' in all actions concerning children.¹² Specifically, the Convention requires that signatories 'encourage the development of appropriate guidelines for the protection of the child from information and material injurious to his or her wellbeing'.¹³ The best interests principle requires that the interests of all children are considered, not just those within the target market of advertisers. For example, although certain advertising may be directed to young people aged 14 and over, the interests of children in younger age groups that may be exposed to that advertising also need to be considered. Industry standards, codes and enabling legislation could be strengthened by making specific reference to the 'best interests of the child' principle to ensure that interpretation of relevant codes is properly informed by consideration of the interests and welfare of children.

Establish retailer codes of conduct

Retailers in Australia have been slower than the broadcasting and advertising peak bodies to consider depictions of children in the media. In the United Kingdom, the British Retailer Consortium has developed voluntary good practice guidelines for children's wear.¹⁴ The guidelines include that bras for 'tweens' should not be black in colour or contain any enhancement such as padding and that marketing should show children in 'natural poses in a childlike environment'.¹⁵ The guidelines also make clear that images on clothing marketed to children must be age appropriate and that sexually suggestive, derogative or demeaning slogans must not be featured. The production of similar guidelines could be considered by retailer associations in Australia.

Empowering parents

Many parents are concerned that their children are being exposed to images and messages that are inappropriate or harmful and which are not easily subject to parental control. These concerns extend beyond exposure to sexualised imagery to the effects on children of violence in media and to the perceived dangers of digital media (including social networking websites). Because the advertising, marketing and retailing industries are largely self-regulated in Australia, there is a need for parents to be made more aware of complaints processes when they see advertisements or television programs that portray children and young people in a negative or indecent manner. The Commissioner for Children and Young People has produced a guide for parents, members of the community, media, advertisers and retailers to assist them to navigate issues relating to the sexualisation of children and its impact on their wellbeing. The Commissioner for Children and Young People and Child Guardian in Queensland has also published a fact sheet for parents related to children and young people in advertising.¹⁶ Parents need access to information to help them teach their children to develop a healthy body image.

Listening to children and young people

The literature review conducted for the Commissioner for Children and Young People observed that very few studies had made a 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.¹⁷ Participation is an important right of citizenship that applies equally to children as to adults and is protected by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.¹⁸ Children and young people clearly have an important perspective in the debate around sexualisation and an interest in the

solutions that may be applied by policymakers. There is a need for researchers, regulators and policy makers to meaningfully engage with children and young people to discuss their perspectives and concerns and to contribute to relevant policies. The Commissioner for Children and Young People's Participation Guidelines can assist organisations to involve children and young people in their research and policy-making processes.¹⁹

Educating children and young people

Accepting that children and young people are consumers of media and products, it is important to ensure that they are equipped to consciously and critically evaluate the messages they receive through media and advertising. School-based media literacy programs that teach child consumers critical media evaluation skills have been successful in the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States.²⁰ Children participating in the Mission Australia National Survey of Youth 2010 saw media literacy programs as important tools in raising children and young people's self-esteem and informing views about body image.²¹ They also have the support of the Australian Psychological Society, which has argued that they 'decrease the likelihood that sexualised scripts will be encoded, and ... empower young people to become active rather than passive consumers of media'.²² A United Kingdom study of 800 children aged nine to 17 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'.²³ Ensuring that children and young people receive appropriate education to improve their media literacy will assist them to consciously evaluate sexualised and gender-stereotyped messages and to develop a healthy body image.

Further research

Almost all of the government inquiries and studies discussed in the literature review recognised the need for further empirical research to evaluate the potential harmful impacts of sexualised media, advertising and products on children and young people.²⁴ The Commissioner for Children and Young People supports further research in this area.

For more information on this topic, see:

Commissioner's website

www.cryp.wa.gov.au > priority projects > priority areas > Sexualisation of Children

Department for Communities (WA) - Sexualisation of Children and Young People in the Media

<http://www.communities.wa.gov.au> > parentingwa > parentingresources > Sexualisation of children and young people in the media

Queensland Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian Fact Sheet 4 - Children and Young People in Advertising

<http://www.crypcg.qld.gov.au> > advocacy and publications > brochures, factsheets and information > children and the media factsheets > Corporate Fact Sheet 4

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

<http://www.aph.gov.au> > senate > committees > list of committees > environment and communications > completed enquiries > completed enquiries (previous committees) > Inquiry into Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media

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- ¹ Commonwealth Parliament, Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communication and the Arts, *Inquiry into Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media* (2008).
- ² Department for Education UK, *Letting Children be Children: Report of an Independent Review of the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood* (2011) ('the Bailey Review').
- ³ Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Sexualisation of Children Literature Review* (December 2011).
- ⁴ See 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, 68; American Psychological Association, *Report of the APA Taskforce on the Sexualization of Girls* (2007, republished 2010) 20, 24, 26, 32–33.
- ⁵ Birbeck D & Drummond M, 'Interviewing and Listening to the Voices of Very Young Children on Body Image and Perceptions of Self' (2005) 176(6) *Early Childhood Development and Care* 579, 580.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Mission Australia, National Survey of Young Australians (2010) 5.
- ⁸ AANA, *Code of Ethics* (2012) http://www.aana.com.au/documents/AANACodeofEthics_1Jan2012.pdf
- ⁹ AANA, *Australian National Advertisers' Code for Advertising and Marketing Communications to Children* http://www.aana.com.au/childrens_code.html
- ¹⁰ Australian Communications and Media Authority, *Children's Television Standards 2009* http://www.acma.gov.au/webwr/aba/contentreg/codes/television/documents/childrens_tv_standards_2009.pdf
- ¹¹ Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Sexualisation of Children Literature Review* (December 2011).
- ¹² United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Article 3.1.
- ¹³ Ibid, Article 17.
- ¹⁴ British Retailers Consortium, *Responsible Retailing: BRC Children's Wear Guidelines* (2011) <http://www.brc.org.uk/brc_show_document.asp?id=4236&moid=7404>.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (Qld), *Children and Young People in Advertising*, Fact Sheet 4 <http://www.cypcg.qld.gov.au/pdf/publications/brochures/children-and-the-media/Corporate-Fact-Sheet4.pdf>.
- ¹⁷ Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Sexualisation of Children Literature Review* (December 2011).
- ¹⁸ See Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Participation*, Issues Paper 2 (August 2009); United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Article 12.
- ¹⁹ Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Participation Guidelines* (October 2009) <http://www.cyp.wa.gov.au/files/Participation%20Guidelines.pdf>.
- ²⁰ See <<http://www.mediarelate.org>>. See also Grieshaber S, 'Sexualisation of Children in Contemporary Australian Media' (Queensland: School of Early Childhood, Queensland University of Technology, 2010) 13.
- ²¹ Mission Australia, National Survey of Young Australians (2010) 5.
- ²² Australian Psychological Society, Submission to the Australian Senate Inquiry into Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media (18 April 2008) http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/eca_ctte/sexualisation_of_children/submissions/sub115.pdf.
- ²³ 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.
- ²⁴ See eg, Commonwealth Parliament, Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communication and the Arts, *Inquiry into Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media* (2008) 25; American Psychological Association, *Report of the APA Taskforce on the Sexualization of Girls* (2007, republished 2010) 12; Department for Education UK, *Letting Children be Children: Report of an Independent Review of the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood* (2011) ('the Bailey Review'); Papadopoulos L, *Sexualisation of Young People Review* (UK: Home Office, 2010) 16.