

“The sexualization of children in the contemporary media”
Submission by the Australian Family Association of Western
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Concern is growing over what many see as the increasing role played by all forms of media in the premature sexualization of children.

There is increasing evidence of the harm done to children by premature sexualization

Children and young adults today are increasingly being bombarded with material that is of a sexual nature. Apart from the print and electronic media in its myriad forms, children receive messages from clothing and even toys that it's cool to be “hot” and “sexy” be it by way of sexual references, innuendo or downright explicit material.

As Emma Rauch and Andrea la Nauze point out in *Corporate paedophilia: Sexualization of children in Australia*, children themselves are now being presented in ways modelled on sexy adults. “ The pressure on children to adopt sexualized appearances and behaviour at an early age is greatly increased by the combination of the direct sexualization of children with the increasingly sexualized representations of teenagers and adults in advertising and popular culture”.

The importance of “body image” even amongst those in the 8-12 year range is a cause of great concern. A recent survey of young people put body image ahead of any other. Parents, teachers, psychologists and counsellors are becoming more and more convinced that the media has an important role to play in this regard.

Print media

Magazines are a significant part of this cultural trend. They promote a view of women as mere objects for men's gratification. Women are encouraged to reject traditional roles in favour of independence but told that they must strive to make themselves desirable and be always available for men. Young girls are encouraged to look “hot and sexy” and to strive for the “ideal” body. as per some of the celebrities featured in these magazines. This has led to an increase in cases of bulimia and anorexia among girls as young as 8. Some research shows that the

emphasis on sex in these magazines and the message that “everyone is doing it”, can influence readers to have sex at an earlier age.

A disturbing trend in the past few years is the appearance of magazines for young girls - some as young as five. These include *Barbie Magazine*, 5-12 years, *Total Girl*, 8-11 and *Disney Girl*, 6-13. These magazines regularly feature articles on celebrities, pop stars, models etc. They present an ultra glamorised view of their lifestyles with an emphasis on body image and clothes. Their lifestyles are presented as something desirable and exciting. The message being given to children is that this is what they should be striving for. This is how they should look and live.

It would appear that the content of these magazines is not regulated in any way and that the editors are not required to adhere to a code of any kind. In addition many unsuitable magazines are displayed at eye level in newsagents and petrol stations easily accessible to children.

Newspapers, like magazines, regularly feature articles on celebrities, pop stars, models etc.

Some of the popular music groups featured in both newspapers and magazine articles, particularly those geared to children and teenagers, live far from exemplary lives and should not be promoted as role models. The lyrics of some songs are not suitable for a family paper.

K-zone, the weekly school kids oriented section of the West Australian Newspaper, frequently features the lyrics of popular songs. Last week a song entitled tattoo was featured: " Oh Oh Oh no matter what you say about love I keep coming back for more keep my hand in the fire sooner or later I'll get what I'm asking for." Children and young people need and deserve alternative role models if they are to become stable, responsible adults.

Radio and Television

Radio is a medium easily accessible to children and therefore the material aired is required to be suitable for a general audience. This is often not the case. Many songs contain lyrics which are sexually explicit and totally unsuitable for a general audience. Sexual references, suggestive talk and sexual banter in general, are common place on many radio stations. Several of the advertisements, for example for impotence etc, are totally unsuitable.

Many of the televisions programs aired during family viewing time contain sexual references and encourage premature sexual experimentation. This has become more serious since the adult viewing time was moved forward from 9.30 p.m. to 8.30pm. Even popular “ family” programs such as Home and Away now contain sexual references and promote a view of sex as something like eating and drinking – an urge that MUST be satisfied at all costs. Crass language is also commonplace.

The problem of trailers advertising adult material during prime time viewing also needs to be seriously looked at.

Channel 10's Video hits at 10.00am on Saturdays features scantily clad singers performing sexually suggestive songs and actions. The overall "raunchy" image is not suitable for Saturday morning viewing.

Movies: It seems that the goalposts are being continually moved when it comes to movies with material classified as PG (parental guidance). It is increasingly difficult for parents to take their older children to see a film and not be offended by crass language and sexual innuendo. There is also the problem of trailers for movies with a higher rating being featured.

The West Australian recently gave a favourable review to a movie featuring a scene where it is clearly implied that a 13 year old girl and her friends are performing fellatio on a young man, minutes after they are seen making fairy bread. The film, "*Hey Hey it's Esther Blueberger*", apparently was given rave reviews by the 1000 people, many of them schoolchildren and their parents, who saw it at the recent Berlin Film Festival.

Rated M in Australia, this is just one example of a movie making light of and actually encouraging and endorsing the premature sexualization of children. Sex is discussed ad nauseam and 13-year-old girls discuss losing their virginity. It also contains foul language and girls swig from a whisky bottle to get courage before performing oral sex on a boy. The film is being promoted as a funny and charming look at Australian adolescence geared to children 9-12.

On the issue of X rated films and R+18 computer and video games. : The government is being pressured by the Adult Entertainment Industry to permit the sale of X rated movies and there are calls for an R+18 classification for computer and video games. We recently had the case, as reported in the West Australian of 2nd April, of an 11 -year-old aboriginal girl who was sexually abused by a 42-year-old father of three after he became aroused as a result of watching a pornographic movie. It is very likely that children in some of these communities are themselves viewing this material. There is mounting evidence of the harmful effects of watching such material both physical and psychological. This would be particularly so for our young, vulnerable young people and children. It is indeed a sad state of affairs when children are being robbed of their childhood because adults must have the right to access whatever turns them on. Those in the entertainment industry who are pushing for a more "liberal" classification system must take some responsibility for recent events such as this.

Internet

Michael Carr-Gregg, a prominent Australian psychologist warned recently that girls only just into puberty are copying sexual acts they see in Internet

pornography, believing they must be normal. Dr Carr-Gregg said large numbers of teenage girls, girls just out of puberty, had engaged in behaviour such as group sex or anal sex, which they wouldn't have done without seeing it online.

Parents groups in the UK have criticised a new Internet craze in which young girls give virtual characters plastic surgery and feed them diet pills. (Article from the West Australian March 26th attached)

Anorexia facebook websites which give the impression that anorexia is normal are also causing concern and threatening young women's health and well being.

Sexualized Toys

Parents have also expressed concern about the appropriateness of some of the popular dolls being marketed.

One of the latest Barbie dolls "Bling, Bling, Bikini Barbie" comes with bikini, stilettos, thick make up, optional "Bling, Bling Spa" and a Pina Colada accessory. "Sweet Love" Bratz wears fishnet stockings with the words "Baby Girl" on her midriff top. Another Bratz has detachable "Attitude Arms" which can be clipped on to her hips. "Talking Bratz" asks girls in a seductive voice if they have their own bedroom. "Head Bobs and Spins Bratz" lies on a bed in her undies under a spinning disco light as her head wobbles.

The latest dolls "Lollipop Girls"; are described as "long, lean, young, sassy and impossibly beautiful". Their marketing material boasts they combine "youthful innocence with grown-up confidence and attitude." At their recent Australian launch, little girls were treated to mock cocktails.

Admittedly there are many factors in our popular culture that contribute to the premature sexualization of our children. It is however worth considering whether dolls promoting a "Paris Hilton type" lifestyle are not part of the problem.

We have standards set for the safety of toys which are strictly adhered to. But no regulations when it comes to the marketing of toys which encourage the sexualization of children.

Children's fashion and advertising catalogues

Fashions for girls include bralettes and G strings with unsuitable captions such as "eye candy" and "wink wink". The adult fashions featured and the almost "defiant" poses struck by some of the very young children appearing in the catalogues published by some of our leading retailers, are also a significant part of the culture of the premature sexualization of our children.

Conclusion:

There is increasing evidence of a link between the premature sexualization of children and serious mental health problems like eating disorders and depression. Binge drinking by teenage girls has also become a serious issue. Research also

shows that premature sexualization can lead to future problems in forming stable, committed, relationships.

The premature sexualization of Children can seriously limit their freedom to explore other facets of their lives.

- The media must accept that, as an influential part of popular culture, it is responsible for some of the messages being disseminated with regard to the premature sexualization of our children.
- The corporate sector must take steps to ensure that in marketing to children, they are not contributing to their premature sexualization
- Demands by the adult entertainment industry and computer game industry for material with more adult content to be more readily available must be rejected in the interest of our young people and children.
- An urgent whole-of-government and community approach is required for any action to be effective. Current research on the detrimental effects of premature sexualization must be carefully considered.
- The current classification system must be strengthened and have as its priority the protection of the most vulnerable members of our community
- The complaints procedure is seen as ineffective and needs to be overhauled.



Parents clicked off by net Bimbo game

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Parents' groups have criticised a new internet craze in which young girls give virtual characters plastic surgery and feed them diet pills.

The Miss Bimbo game has seen girls aged as young as nine given an online alter ego, which they look after.

They compete against other players in beauty contests to earn money so they can dress their characters in lingerie and take them to nightclubs. The aim of the game is to become "the coolest, richest and most famous bimbo in the whole world". Players keep the girls at their target weight using diet pills.

They are given missions, including securing plastic surgery to give their "bimbo" bigger breasts and finding a billionaire boyfriend to bankroll her, while keeping a constant check on her hunger, thirst, happiness and other statistics.

The game, which was launched a

month ago, already has nearly 200,000 British players, most of whom are girls aged between nine and 16. When they run out of virtual cash, contestants can send text messages costing £1.50 (\$3.25) each to top up their accounts.

The sister website in France, which has attracted 1.2 million players in a year, has been condemned by dieticians and parents.

The game's creators claim it is "harmless fun" and builds on the success of Barbie, the Bratz dolls and Tamagotchis, the virtual pets invented in Japan.

But parents' groups fear it will fuel teenagers' desire for plastic surgery and spur eating disorders.

Bill Hibberd, spokesman for parents' rights group Parentkind, said: "It is one thing if a child recognises it as a silly and stupid game. But the danger is that a nine-year-old fails to appreciate the irony and sees the bimbo as a cool role model.

"Then the game becomes a haz-

ard and a menace. Children will do what they have always done with Barbie dolls and the like, modifying them with new hairstyles and clothing. But the technology has changed and so have the fashions and trends.

"Children's innocence should be protected as far as possible. It depends on the background and mindset of the child but the danger is that after playing the game some will then aspire to have breast operations and take diet pills.

"Many parents have no idea what their children are looking at on the internet and there are financial dangers for parents too if they do not know what their children are texting when they pick up mobile phones."

The game's creator, Nicolas Jacquart, 23, from Tooting, south London, said: "The game is structured in such a way that it simply mirrors real life in a tongue-in-cheek way. It is harmless fun."