

## PREMATURE SEXUALISATION OF CHILDREN – Position Statement

Women's Forum Australia (Women's Forum) is deeply concerned that the pressure on children to adopt sexualised appearance and behaviour at an early age has increased dramatically over recent years. There is a saturation of sexualised representations of adults, teenagers and even children in advertising and popular culture.

*“Premature sexualisation can be defined as the imposition of adult sexual themes and images at a developmentally inappropriate stage and in a way which may compromise child psychological development.”<sup>i</sup>*

Children are interested in their own bodies, experience sexual feelings and have emergent models of sexuality.<sup>ii</sup> Childhood sexuality is part of a natural developmental process. However, there are clear distinctions between adult and child sexuality. Excessive sexual arousal of children or involvement of children in adult-type sexual imagery and adult sexual behaviour can result in developmental problems, confusion and disturbing anxieties.<sup>iii</sup> Condoning this activity or ignoring it is an unacceptable abrogation of responsibility.

*Children and teenagers do not have the same capacity as adults to make informed decisions and exercise appropriate judgment.*

Between the ages of six to ten, children learn to think in images and are unable to properly interpret certain situations.<sup>iv</sup> Researchers have found children who thought TV was realistic were more influenced by it, and were swayed towards being more permissive towards sex.<sup>v</sup>

Several new studies have also shown the adolescent brain, once thought to be mature by age 14, is in fact undergoing a rebuild at this age and judgement is subsequently affected. It is at this time that teenagers are most vulnerable to

media messaging. To navigate this period successfully, teenagers need outside help, and caring involvement from responsible adults well into the late teens.<sup>vi</sup>

*“Premature sexualisation impedes cognitive development, limits children's freedom and is linked with serious mental health problems.”<sup>vii</sup>*

Research has shown sexualised images imposed on children and teenagers through the media and popular culture are associated with a range of health issues. These include: eating disorders; increased anxiety, low self-esteem and body-image concerns; and damage to the development of healthy sexual self-image.<sup>viii</sup>

According to the American Psychological Association, premature sexualisation of girls also places them in increased danger of becoming victims of prostitution, violence, and unwanted forms of pornography.<sup>ix</sup> This is deeply concerning. Women's Forum considers this situation warrants immediate action at government and community levels.

*“Restrictions on advertising to children and scrutiny of the sorts of representations children are exposed to are not censorship, but a process of child protection that takes account of the developmental vulnerabilities of children and their unique developmental pathways.”<sup>x</sup>*

The Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts conducted an inquiry in early 2008 into the *Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media Environment*.<sup>xi</sup> Amongst parents, community groups, non-government organisations and expert bodies, there was resounding agreement that ‘the sexualisation of Australian children is excessive, harmful and must be addressed.’<sup>xii</sup>

Women's Forum believes immediate precautionary action needs to be taken to ensure the safe and healthy development of our future generations. In particular, Women's Forum advocates the following:

- Revisiting the Senate inquiry to take more decisive and appropriate measures to address the concerns of parents, community groups, non-government organizations and expert bodies.
- Strengthening the current Advertising Standards Bureau self-regulatory systems by:
  - Taking a more proactive approach by monitoring advertising to detect possible violations of the standards.
  - Pre-vetting advertisements where an advertiser or agency has regularly produced advertising material that has been the subject of complaints.
  - Educating board members and senior executives of media organisations about the risks associated with premature sexualisation.
  - Introducing a disincentive for sexualised advertising such as denying advertising space to offenders.
  - A mass media campaign to boost community knowledge of the existence of the ASB and the complaints handling system.
- Developing and implementing sexual health programs in schools that focus on building and maintaining healthy relationships, having realistic expectations of relationships, and the importance of having respect for oneself and others.
- Developing and implementing education strategies to equip children with critical analysis and media literacy skills from the first year of schooling.

Women's Forum also encourages parents to help prevent the premature sexualisation of their own children by:

- Seeking out literature and information websites that assist in making appropriate, child-friendly decisions.<sup>xiii</sup>
- Ensuring, as parents, they are well-informed about the issues associated with premature sexualisation of children and the pitfalls of media advertising and popular culture.
- Talking about the issues in a calm manner with their children in a safe and non-threatening environment.
- Monitoring their children's use of the internet, television and other forms of media and taking action to limit or prevent access to inappropriate programs, websites etc.
- Notifying the Advertising Standards Bureau if they consider certain advertisements targeted at children contain inappropriate sexual material.
- Providing a positive role model for their children.

*There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children*  
- Nelson Mandela

<sup>i</sup> Newman L, 'The psychological and developmental impact of sexualisation on children, in. Melinda Tankard Reist (2009), *Getting Real: Challenging the Sexualisation of Girls*, Australia: Spinifex Press, p. 76.

<sup>ii</sup> Newman (2009), p. 78

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>iv</sup> Princi, R (2009), Too sexy, too early! *Children and the Sexualised Media: Risks, Reviews and Regulation Conference*, 04/08/09.

<sup>v</sup> Taylor LD (2005), 'Effects of visual and verbal sexual television content and perceived realism on attitudes and beliefs,' *The Journal of Sex Research*, May 42(2): 130-137.

<sup>vi</sup> Princi (2009)

<sup>vii</sup> American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls (2007), *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls*, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid*, p. 31

<sup>x</sup> Newman, L (2009), p. 84

<sup>xi</sup> Handsley, E SCECA (2008) *Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media. Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts*, The Senate. June [online: [http://www.aph.gov.au/SENATE/committee/eca\\_ctte/sexualisation\\_of\\_children/index.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/SENATE/committee/eca_ctte/sexualisation_of_children/index.htm)]

<sup>xii</sup> Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts (2008), *Sexualisation of children in the contemporary media*. Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra.

<sup>xiii</sup> Young Media Australia offers up-to-date information about media and children for parents and caregivers. <http://www.youngmedia.org.au/>