



**SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL HEALTH AND MEDICAL RESEARCH COUNCIL
ON PREVENTIVE HEALTHCARE AND STRENGTHENING AUSTRALIA'S SOCIAL AND
ECONOMIC FABRIC**

**THE AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL ON CHILDREN AND THE MEDIA (T/A YOUNG MEDIA
AUSTRALIA)**

Young Media Australia (YMA) thanks the NHMRC for the opportunity to comment on the proposed research programmes for *Preventive Health Care* and *Strengthening Australia's Social and Economic Fabric*.

Information about Young Media Australia can be found at the end of this document.

YMA is especially pleased to see a structure being created in which the social and economic impact of the media, one of our most powerful institutions, on the nation's health could be fully and systematically explored. We believe this is one of the most important issues facing our society today and well into the future.

Children as a group or a sub-group?

As our name indicates, we concern ourselves as an organisation primarily with the media and its impact on children. Therefore our comments will focus mainly on these matters.

However, we feel sure the NHMRC and others will take the view that issues to do with children's disempowerment in the face of influential institutions are echoed in other contexts, including those relating to adults who are themselves disempowered in some way (for example by physical or mental disability, or by low education levels). If this is true, much of what we have to say will be of relevance in a broader field.

On the other hand, it is well recognised that from a medical point of view children are a particularly important target group for preventive health measures. For example, it is well established that obese children are at increased risk of becoming obese adults.

Therefore measures aimed at children not only confront immediate equity issues, but can be particularly effective at reducing the risk of health problems later in life.

No doubt it was this thinking that informed the previous establishment of the priority goal A Health Start to Life. YMA applauds the NHMRC's foresight in making children's health a priority in this way, and we are mindful of the instruction to avoid overlap or duplication of research funded under that priority goal.

At the same time we see a risk that children's health issues, particularly those relating to broader social and economic structures, could 'fall between two stools' – that, is they might be considered too much a part of 'Healthy Start to Life' to be addressed under these initiatives, and too much related to social and economic fabric to be addressed under 'Healthy Start to Life'. We trust that, armed with a sufficient understanding of the risk, the NHMRC will be able to devise policies and protocols that enable the fullest

attention to be given to children's health. In our submission, it is preferable to run the risk of some overlap than to run the risk of children's interests being overlooked.

While it might seem natural for an organisation like us to support separate, dedicated treatment of children's issues – and therefore the quarantining of child-related research into A Healthy Start to Life – we are coming increasingly to the view that the differences between children and adults when it comes to the media and health are differences of degree, not of kind. Therefore we would equally support an approach to research that saw children as a sub-set of disadvantaged humans along with people with disabilities, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, relatively uneducated people, and so on.

As an example of the phenomena that lead to this view, we can cite the ageing of the population. If we accept that the rapid projected increase in the aged population will put unprecedented pressure on our health care systems, it is natural to expect that tomorrow's aged people, more than any generation before, will need to turn to their sons and daughters for support. They will therefore benefit even more than previous generations from positive relationships with their sons and daughters, and such benefits might well extend to health outcomes.

Yet the media create and amplify some of the key battlegrounds in parent-child relationships, notably through the promotion of 'pester power', or the harnessing of children's desires to place pressure on parents to spend money. The development of ever more effective ways of fostering pester power is a growth industry within the media. Whole conferences are devoted to it. (see Kid Power 2003, 2002 etc)

The more effective it becomes, the greater the stress on today's parents of young children, the greater the challenges to their relationships with their children and the less the likelihood that those children will feel inclined to take up the slack in caring for their parents in old age, when the traditional sources of support fail. In parallel with pester power, the media and related industries have a habit of encouraging exaggerated views about the differences between one generation and another, thereby further exacerbating tensions well beyond the time of financial dependence of children on parents. In both the short term and the long term, today's parents of young children have a health-related interest in understanding the media's strategies, and in learning counter-strategies. These challenges are particularly acute when one focuses on parents suffering some kind of social or economic disadvantage.

This example is but one illustration of the broader phenomenon YMA has noted, namely the foisting of responsibility onto parents to deal with the effects of the media on their children. More and more, our business becomes a matter of supporting parents in their role as 'media mediators'. As far as we know, we are the only organisation that provides this support, which we do via our website, helpline and film review service. If nothing else, we should like to see the NHMRC taking up the challenge of providing research that can support this vital function.

Areas for research

Freedom of expression and the burden of proof

Before making some comments about four key potential areas for research, we should like to make one comment that applies to all of them.

We have found, in our years of involvement with these issues, that there are powerful forces in society that wish to deny any link between media use and the kinds of psychological and physical injury to which we refer. Naturally, some of these forces represent vested interests (for example, the media themselves). Others represent the ideal of freedom of expression.

Particularly in an environment where the tone for debate is so often set in the United States, it is not surprising to see freedom of expression treated as some kind of trump card – that is, something that can trump values otherwise seen as important, such as children’s health (or even public health more generally), and foreclose further debate on how they might be better protected.

Under US law (the First Amendment), this ‘trump card’ translates into an assumption that the media cause no harm, and the placing of a heavy burden on those who suggest the media do cause harm, to prove as much, sometimes to an impossible standard of certainty. Much the same epistemological structure is often found to shape more general debates, so for example in Australia we have a policy structure on classification based on the notion that harm to children from various kinds of media is not yet demonstrably proven. This is in spite of the fact that the legislation states as one of the purposes of classification the avoidance of harm to children. The legislation assumes harm is possible, but the implementation requires it to be proven. Such is the power of the ‘no harm’ lobby.

YMA takes a different view. We too value freedom of expression, but we see it as a value to be weighed against other important values. When it comes to the healthy development of children, we think that the onus of proof should be on those who assert that the media *do not* influence human behaviour, especially that of children, and especially those forms of media that set out to influence behaviour, namely advertising and other forms of promotion.

The forces to which we have referred might be expected, in the current context, to deny the value of any proposed research into causal mechanisms. YMA trusts that the NHMRC will be alive to the dynamics we have just described, and suitably sceptical of claims from those with vested interests that research into causal effects of media is barking up the wrong tree.

In our view, it is essential to gain a better understanding of the cause and effect relationship between media and human behaviour, and the only way this can be achieved is with independently-funded research such as the NHMRC is perfectly placed to

support. It would be disastrous if the only research carried out were that supported by vested interests – yet this would be the likely outcome of the NHMRC failed to become involved.

YMA submits that the focus of research relating to the causal relationship between media and human behaviour should be on understanding that relationship, not on debunking its existence.

Based on our work with the community on issues surrounding children's media use, YMA can identify the following **four key areas for research** on children's health and media:

1. Overuse of media leading to various physical conditions such as poor posture, eye strain and obesity.

These are some of the more obvious, immediate, adverse health outcomes for children as media consumers. The link between TV consumption and obesity has already been demonstrated.(Coalition on Food Advertising to Children 2003)

However, there is a need for further research to demonstrate and explore the link between media consumption (for example TV watching, computer games, Internet chatting) and these adverse health outcomes. As the media, understood broadly to include internet-based fora and mobile phones, expand their pervasiveness and their centrality to our way of life, it must be expected that any adverse impacts will only be heightened. Research aimed at understanding and mediating those impacts must therefore be made a priority. This is all the more so considering that adults equally run the same risks if they over-use the media – a likelihood which seems, unfortunately, to be increasing.

2. Exposure to various forms of promotion for unhealthy foods contributing to an obeseogenic environment.

This issue hardly needs any introduction, as childhood obesity has been such a high-profile issue in the last 2 years or so. Unfortunately, governments around Australia appear to have taken the view that it is best tackled through increased physical activity. This strategy, in our view, is doomed to failure as it addresses only one part of the problem. It is not enough to work on the 'calories out' end, the demand for energy-dense, low-nutrient (EDLN) food must also be addressed if childhood obesity is to be effectively tackled.

It is not rocket science to say that a large contributor to demand for such food is its active promotion. Here we refer not only to television advertising but to the numerous other tricks that that junk-food purveyors have up their sleeves. For example, one 'family restaurant' sponsors children's sport, thereby giving them an entrée to schools where they can distribute 'buy one, get one free' vouchers.

The field of food promotion to children is rife with issues needing research. YMA suggests that many of these are suitable for NHMRC funding, for example:

- What sorts of claims are food companies entitled to make, and how do these claims shape children's views about food and its place in their lives?
- What difference could it make to children's demand for EDLN food if the promotion of such food to children were more heavily regulated?
- What forms of regulation, or other measures, would be most effective in reducing demand?
- What forms of parent education could best mediate the impact of food promotion to their children?
- What parallels are there between EDLN food and tobacco products? For example, could health warnings on EDLN food have a salutary effect on demand for its consumption?

It is often suggested that the obesogenic environment contains more significant elements than food promotion – for example, children are less likely to walk to school than a generation ago, because of perceived dangers along the way. We must ask, however, where those perceptions came from if not from the media? This is an example of how complex the relationship between the media and obesity is, and how deserving it therefore is of serious and sustained study.

3. Exposure to inappropriate material causing psychological damage in the form of increased tolerance for violence (desensitisation).

Violent material comes in numerous forms, from animated cat-and-mouse type shows on television, to war reportage on the 6.30 news, to interactive computer games where the player scores points for killing and maiming bystanders. It is in this field that one finds the most evidence of the 'denial' mentality described above. That is, people asserting an adverse impact are expected to prove that impact before regulation is considered justified. As already discussed, YMA takes the view that those asserting an *absence* of impact should bear the burden of proof.

In any event, YMA considers that adverse impacts in this field have been amply demonstrated, particularly in the field of computer games. (see Anderson C A et al 2003 "The Influence of media violence on youth" *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* Vol 4 (3) Dec 2003 p81-110), though one widely-reported study indicates that Australians are less worried about media violence than they used to be, (Australian Broadcasting Authority 2004) our experience indicates the contrary. (And in any event, we might expect a community that had been desensitised to violence to express less concern about it than it would otherwise have done!)

It is worth pausing to consider what a desensitised population implies: that people will be more likely to commit violent acts (thereby harming others) and more likely to tolerate and condone violence in others (thereby lessening the chance that those harmed, or at risk of harm, will receive timely help). Not only does this present an immediate health risk to the people concerned, it means that children will be brought up with greater tolerance of violence, and so on. Of course, the media are not the only factor contributing to a violence-tolerant society. However, the part they play needs to be better understood with a view to mediating it.

YMA submits that the NHMRC would do well to support research on the relationship between media and violence, and between media and tolerance of violence. Such research could raise hopes of improving outcomes both for potential perpetrators and for potential victims of violence.

4. Exposure to inappropriate material causing psychological damage in the form of exaggerated fears about the world around them.

YMA perceives a gap in Australian law and regulation when it comes to material that risks engendering a ‘mean and scary’ view of the world in children. Such a view can stunt children’s healthy psychological development by discouraging them from taking risks and from trusting people around them. In the shorter term, exposure to inappropriately scary material can cause sleeplessness, nightmares and bedwetting among young children.

Calls to our parent media helpline have spiked every time there has been an event that has led to the repeated exposure of graphic violent images on the news and current affairs (eg the Bali bombing, the Iraq War). [table?]

Yet the laws on film and video classification, and on television content, while they make much of matters such as sex, nudity, coarse language and ‘adult themes’, do not provide a sufficient means of addressing material which is simply scary (unless it falls into one of the other categories). This has meant, for example, that YMA has had no success in its complaints about the screening of horror movies at times when children make up a substantial portion of the audience. Such complaints are met with the response that the scariness is simply part of the ‘genre’ and an apparent expectation that young children who might otherwise be frightened out of their wits are able to reassure themselves by reminding themselves it is ‘only’ a horror movie. This is one of a number of examples we could cite where a system ostensibly designed to protect children fails to view a situation from a child’s perspective.

We believe that the same issue lay at the heart of the controversy last year over the film *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. While the Classification Board thought the film merited an M15+ rating, the review of the rating by the Classification Review Board lowered the rating to PG. This showed that the guidelines did not give a sufficiently strong basis for recognising the film’s dark and scary content, for example when the children’s trusted teacher turned into a very mean-looking werewolf. This footage, while not actually violent, was still the stuff of nightmares for young children.

This situation is all the more worrying when we consider that the single most dramatic event in recent history, arising out of children’s media exposure, was the result of a horror movie. The MA classified video *Scream* was shown to a group of 10 year old girls at a birthday party sleepover. One child was “trapped” in the video and required weeks of therapy to recover.

YMA submits there is a need for further research to explore the harmful effects of scary material, and to demonstrate the inadequacy of current laws and regulation to protect children against those effects.

Conclusion

Above we have set out just a few ideas on matters relating to children and health, in the media context, that we consider merit further research. Children and young people, by virtue of their lack of power and intellectual development, should form one of the groups whose interests are to be addressed under the rubric of social and economic fabric, and the media, by virtue of their pervasive and growing power, should be considered a part of the social and economic fabric to be improved through research under this programme. The areas of physical health in a context of increased media usage, media contribution to an obesogenic environment, desensitisation to violence and media contribution to heightening of fears are some that we would put forward as high priorities for investigation and the development of better understanding.

We should be most pleased to expand on any of these ideas in person if invited. Queries about the submission should be directed in the first instance to its principal author, our Vice-President, Associate Professor Elizabeth Handsley, on (08) 8201 5256.

ABOUT YOUNG MEDIA AUSTRALIA

Young Media Australia (YMA) is the trading name for the Australian Council on Children and the Media. It is a unique national community organisation whose members share a strong commitment to the promotion of the healthy development of Australian children. Their particular interest and expertise is in the role that media experiences play in that development.

YMA is Australia's only national advocacy organisation representing the interests of children and young people in relation to print, electronic and screen based media.

YMA is committed to promoting better choices, and providing stronger voices in children's media.

Mission statement

Our mission is to promote a quality media environment for Australian children and to raise community awareness of children's needs in relation to the media.

What YMA does

YMA:

- collects and reviews research and information related to children and the media
- provides information and advice on the impact of print, electronic and screen based media on children and young people

- advocates for the needs and interests of children in relation to the media
- conducts and acts as a catalyst for relevant research.

How YMA does it

YMA:

- Provides information to parents and caregivers via the Young Media Australia website www.youngmedia.org.au with over 60 topics relating to children and media use (including movie reviews). These topics are also available in hard copy format.
- Provides advice and information via a 24/7 national freecall Young Media Australia helpline 1800 700 357. Operators come from a strong child development and parenting perspective and can provide callers with research based information about the media.
- Represents community concerns about the impact of media on children and young adults to legislators, regulators and the media

YMA structure

- a national not-for-profit community organisation, structured as a company limited by guarantee
- registered for the GST, has tax deductible status and is a Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR)
- has a national Board representative of all Australian states and its corporate members
- has a comprehensive organisational membership which includes ECA (Early Childhood Australia (formerly AECA Australian Early Childhood Association), ACSSO (Australian Council of State Schools Organisations), AHISA (Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia), AEU (Australian Education Union), SAPPA (South Australian Primary Principals Association), Federation of NSW P&C (Parents & Citizens), Mothers' Union in Australia, Gowrie Child Centres

The national office of YMA is located in Adelaide.

YMA Corporate Management

The Board of YMA consists of one Honorary Director for each State and two Directors representative of corporate membership, that is ECA (Early Childhood Australia) and the AEU (Australian Education Union).

An Executive Committee of the Board, based in Adelaide, is responsible for the oversight of organisational functions. The Committee is supplemented by other members with special expertise who are based in SA.

Ms Barbara Biggins, OAM, is the Honorary Chief Executive Officer and advises the Executive Committee of the Board.