



Too sexy, Too soon: The sexualisation of children in the media

Over the last ten years, Young Media Australia (YMA) has been reviewing the research on the sexualisation of children through media portrayals, and attempting to raise public awareness of the importance of these issues. YMA has encouraged growing support from concerned parents and the broader community for action to be taken.

This topic covers:

- what the experts have to say about the sexualisation of children
- what the Government needs to do
- strategies for parents and caregivers
- how you can help

What the experts have to say about the sexualisation of children

Twelve children's health, welfare and media professionals

Letter to Editor, *The Age*, April 2007

- Terry Aulich, Executive Officer, Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO)
- Steve Biddulph
- Freda Briggs
- Patricia Edgar
- Bernadette McMenamin, Executive Director, Childwise
- Louise Newman, Director NSW Institute of Psychiatry
- Frank Oberklaid, Director Centre for Community Child Health
- Rita Princi, Child Psychologist
- Jane Roberts, President Young Media Australia
- Dorothy Scott, Director Australian Centre for Child Protection
- Joe Tucci, Chief Executive Officer, Australian Childhood Foundation

- Neil Wigg, President Paediatric & Child Health Div., RACP

“It is necessary for the advertisers and marketers and the general community to really understand that real harm can be done to children’s development through such media portrayals of the young. It’s not enough for the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) to respond only because of public pressure.

Children need to be protected from sexual exploitation by adults and should be able to develop their own understanding of sexuality in a safe way, and when they are emotionally ready for this. Marketing to, and media representations of children in age-inappropriate ways send a clear message to the community that this is acceptable, and can contribute to the increasing rates of child abuse. And there is much more to the story.

Perhaps *The Age* could convene a roundtable of children’s professionals and marketers where the facts of life could be explained?” (*The Age* April 11 2007)

Individual comments

Steve Biddulph, psychologist, author and YMA patron

About the ‘corporate paedophilia’ debate: “Sexuality is an empowering and beautiful force in adolescence, when the adolescent chooses and controls its eventual unfolding on their own terms. When it is separated out as a way to get love, for those who are not loved enough, then lives, tens of thousands of lives, are diminished, harmed and sometimes thrown away.... We need to take better care of our girls.” (*small screen* 230 April 2007—YMA’s monthly news publication)

Dr Karen Brooks, Senior Lecturer Communication & Cultural Studies, University of Sunshine Coast.

Sex is being used to grab the attention of not just adults but kids as well. If the multibillion dollar

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YOUNG MEDIA AUSTRALIA

Young Media Australia Helpline
Children and the Media: Let's Talk
1800 700 357
www.youngmedia.org.au

'tween' market is any indication, it's a sales pitch that's working". (<http://www.kf2bk.com/media/>)

**Dr Amanda Gordon, President
Australian Psychological Society.**

"I tell parents, 'don't buy sexy clothes for your children'. There's nothing smart about having a 4 yr old in a little bra. It's time for adults to take a stand, for parents to take a stand and say 'this is what we want for our children' - instead of children saying 'this is what I want for me'" (<http://www.kf2bk.com/media/>), and

"If the message is that you should be sexy and grown up, instead of being a kid - then kids aren't practicing and learning how to be whole human beings that will actually make them into great adults. They are instead only imitating adult behaviour, without understanding it - and that's very dangerous for their development." (<http://www.kf2bk.com/media/>)

**Dr Louise Newman, Director
New South Wales Institute of Psychiatry**

"There is a concern that we are sending very conflicting messages to people. On the one hand, we're telling people that children need to be protected - that paedophilia is regarded as one of the most heinous crimes - on the other hand we allow advertisers and marketers to present images and saturate our media with images that might be sexually arousing to some paedophiles in the community." (<http://www.kf2bk.com/media/>)

**Prof Dorothy Scott, Director
Australian Centre for Child Protection,
University of SA**

"Commercial forces turn children into consumers. This is bad enough when it compromises health by encouraging them to consume bad food, cigarettes and alcohol. But when commercial forces turn children into sexualised commodities, it corrodes the core of the developing child and makes them more vulnerable to exploitation." (Email from Prof Scott to YMA, December 2006)

**Dr Joe Tucci, Chief Executive Officer
Australian Childhood Foundation**

"Childhood is shrinking. We are exposing children to adult concepts that they can't manage, that are developmentally inappropriate, and I think we are going to pay the cost for this in a range of emotional and psychological costs down the track." (<http://www.kf2bk.com/media/>)

What the Government needs to do

Senator Helen Coonan said in the Senate this week that "parenting is a very tough job in today's

modern world. Parents want real assistance to help them keep their children safe, not a stunt. The Howard government is prepared to put our money [\$189m] where our mouth is and to step up to the plate to protect Australian families online". (Hansard Senate 15 August p43). The Prime Minister has written to Women's Forum Australia, supporting concern about sexualised images (*Sunday Age* 19 August 2007)

However, the government needs to take a similar stance to the real dangers of sexualising children that occur across a wide range of "old" media. Government funding of organisations such as YMA who are already working in this field would be appropriate and cost effective.

Strategies for parents and caregivers

In the meantime, parents can:

- tell your children from a very early age, and often, that they are loved for who they are, not for how they look
- as they get older, help them understand that beliefs that link 'beauty' with happiness and success are mistaken.
- with adolescents, explain that ads are designed to make you think that being sexy is the same as being successful, but this isn't true
- minimise children's exposure to commercial media and kids' magazines
- don't buy skimpy clothing or bras for young children
- write to department stores to complain, and applaud where good clothing choices are offered

How you can help

You can write to politicians, department stores, advertisers and television stations and tell them that enough is enough. Advertisers need to be convinced that there is a groundswell of community attitudes on this issue.

You can help by supporting the work of organisations who are making a difference in this area.

Kf2bK (Kids Free 2 Be Kids)

A group of Australians concerned about the increasing sexualisation of kids in the media, advertising, and clothing industries. It was founded in February 2007 by Melbourne mother of two, Julie Gale, with support from other parents.

<http://www.kf2bk.com/>

Young Media Australia

A unique national community organisation with a strong interest and expertise in the role that media experiences play in the development of Australian children.

<http://www.youngmedia.org.au>

Women's Forum Australia

An independent women's think-tank focusing on research, education and public policy to bring about positive changes for women.

<http://www.womensforumaustralia.com/>

Related topics

Keep your children out of the firing line: body image problems, eating disorders and media messages

Strategies for parents around advertising

Readings & research

Ewing, Selena (2007) *Faking it: the Female Image in Young Women's magazines* WFA: ACT

Rush, Emma & La Nauze, Andrea (2006) *Letting Children be Children: Stopping the sexualisation of children in Australia* The Australia Institute: ACT (TAI Discussion Paper 93, December 2006)

Rush, Emma & La Nauze, Andrea (2006) *Corporate Paedophilia: Sexualisation of Children in Australia* The Australia Institute: ACT (TAI Discussion Paper 90, October 2006)

Websites

Kf2bK (Kids Free 2 Be Kids)

<http://www.kf2bk.com/>

The Australia Institute <http://www.tai.org.au/>

Women's Forum Australia

<http://www.womensforumaustralia.com/>

Young Media Australia www.youngmedia.org.au



For more information about children and the media, call the **Young Media Australia Helpline** Up to date and reliable information for parents and caregivers about the impact of the media on children
1800 700 357
National freecall, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
or go to the Young Media Australia website
www.youngmedia.org.au

Ordering more fact sheets

Young Media Australia (YMA) has over sixty printed fact sheets about the impact of the media on children. To get a list of available YMA Fact Sheets, or to order your copies, call the

YMA Helpline 1800 700 357

You may also read YMA Fact Sheets or download them from the **YMA website www.youngmedia.org.au**