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# **Letting Children Be Children**

## **Stopping the sexualisation of children in Australia**

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## Preface

This report on the regulation of the sexualisation of children in Australia is intended to be read in conjunction with the earlier Australia Institute Discussion Paper *Corporate Paedophilia: Sexualisation of children in Australia* (Discussion Paper number 90, October 2006).

Many people have contributed to this paper. Alex Walton and Louise Collett provided excellent research assistance. Andrew Macintosh and Christian Downie offered many helpful editorial suggestions. Clive Hamilton oversaw the entire project.

Valuable comments on a final draft of this paper were provided by Associate Professor Elizabeth Handsley, School of Law, Flinders University. Comments on an earlier draft were received from Dr Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli, School of Health and Social Development, Deakin University; Barbara Biggins, Honorary CEO, Young Media Australia; and Dr Rebecca Huntley, independent social researcher and author.

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## Summary

There is strong feeling around Australia that during childhood, and certainly during the pre-teen years, children should be free to develop at their own pace, in their own ways. Widespread public discussion followed the release of the Australia Institute's discussion paper number 90, *Corporate Paedophilia* (Rush and La Nauze 2006), and many Australians voiced their concern that children's freedom to develop at their own pace and in their own ways is under threat from heavily sexualised advertising and marketing. While parents do their best to protect their children, many feel that they are losing the battle.

Children are only likely to be able to develop freely if government assists parents by limiting sexualising pressure at its source – advertisers and marketers. Current regulation mechanisms are failing in this task.

### *Sources of premature sexualisation*

As discussed at length in *Corporate Paedophilia*, the most significant sources of premature sexualisation are girls' magazines and advertising material. Television programs, in particular music video programs, teen soap operas like *The O.C.* and reality television shows such as *Big Brother* also play a role.

Each month twenty per cent of six-year-old girls and almost half of ten- and eleven-year-old girls read at least one of the most popular girls' magazines – *Barbie Magazine*, *Total Girl* and *Disney Girl*. These magazines teach their young readers to dance in sexually provocative ways, to idolise highly sexualised young women such as Paris Hilton, Jessica Simpson and Lindsay Lohan, and to have crushes on adult male celebrities – all while they are still in primary school.

Children are unavoidably exposed to heavily sexualised outdoor advertising as well as to some television advertising. On average, children aged five to eleven watch approximately 20 hours of television or videos each week (ABS 2003, p. 32). Most outdoor and television advertising sexualises adults, but children pick up the message that being sexy is the way to be successful and feel good about oneself.

In some cases, advertising directly sexualises children. Examples include a Renault television commercial that showed a pre-pubescent boy admiring an adult woman's legs through the Renault's sunroof, and an Ingham's chicken nuggets television commercial that showed a young boy and girl kissing furtively on the couch, in the manner of older teenagers about to make out, when the supervising parent left the room.

### *Risks of premature sexualisation*

Premature sexualisation carries a range of risks for children.

The capacity of children to develop healthy body image and self-esteem is compromised by pressure to look like miniature adults. One particularly alarming manifestation of this

is an apparent trend for young people to be hospitalised for severe eating disorders at younger ages, in an ironic twist on the childhood obesity issue.

Children's general sexual and emotional development can be affected by exposure to advertising and marketing that is saturated with sexualised images and themes. To the degree that children focus on sexualising themselves rather than pursuing other more age-appropriate developmental activities, all aspects of their development may be affected.

The sexualisation of children also risks normalising and possibly encouraging paedophilic sexual desire for children.

*Better regulation is needed*

At a minimum, existing codes of practice for advertising, television programming and children's magazines could be amended to allow for recognition of the fact that sexualising children, whether directly or indirectly, leads to a range of risks for children (Rush and La Nauze 2006).

However, as different media (print, radio, television) become less distinct due to technological advances, it will become increasingly desirable to bring all media regulation together in one statutory system. At this point a new opportunity to stop children's premature sexualisation will emerge. An all-encompassing office of media regulation could include a division with the primary responsibility of protecting children's interests in the contemporary media environment.

With oversight of all media modes, the children's division would be well aware of the wide range of sexualising material to which children are exposed on a daily basis. The case-by-case approach currently used by media regulators is inadequate. Children rarely suffer harm as a result of exposure to a single case of sexualising material. Rather, harm is caused by cumulative exposure to sexualising material from a range of sources.

Ideally, the children's division would be partly staffed by experts in areas relevant to the potential harms caused by the premature sexualisation of children, for example, child psychology, paediatrics, primary teaching, and criminology.

Children are now much more heavily targeted by advertisers and marketers than they were in the past, and at the same time media are becoming increasingly important in their lives. It is therefore desirable to give greater priority to the interests of children in the area of media regulation, and there are international precedents for this.

If Australia were to follow such precedents, it would allow parents more choice about the ways in which they introduce issues related to sex and sexuality to their children. At present, parents speak with dismay about trying to manage young children's misinterpretations of sexualised messages from advertising and the media. Advertisers and media producers are primarily concerned about markets, not about children's interests. Responsible government action is the best hope for supporting parents in their caring role.