

April 18, 2008



Committee Secretary  
Senate Standing Committee on Environment,  
Communications and the Arts  
Department of the Senate  
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**Putting a stop  
to child abuse.**

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Dear Sir/Madam,

This is a joint submission to the inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment from the Australian Childhood Foundation and Child Abuse Research Australia, Monash University (CARA).

The Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualisation of Children provides a comprehensive and up to date review of the research (2007) on the issue and should be considered by the Committee in its deliberation. We concur with their findings and believe that they are similarly relevant to the Australian context.

In addition, we would highlight the following points:

**1. There is ample evidence of sexualized messages being presented to Australian children.**

Over the past two years, the Foundation has identified and publicly commented on advertising campaigns which have positioned children and young people in a sexualized fashion and promoted products which are associated with sexualized content to children.

These have included

- the Lee Jeans ad picturing young women in provocative poses reported in the Age (16/9/06) and Herald Sun (10/9/06);
- the padded bras produced as part of the Bratz doll range for children as young as 6 years of age (Herald Sun, 9/9/06);
- the baby Bratz dolls who are dressed in lingerie and leather (Herald Sun 31/8/06);
- a violent video game which features a character wearing a student uniform wearing suspenders and carrying a teddy bear (Sunday Mail, 17/12/06);
- T-shirts aimed at young adolescents based on the Little Mister/Little Miss series of books which contained slogans such "Miss Floosy", "Mr Well Hung", "Miss Bitch", and "Mr Pimp" (Sunday Telegraph, 11/1/08).

The material serves to normalize adult sexual themes to children. It provides no educational value and is compounded by other imagery and messages to which children are exposed through music videos, television shows and material on the internet.

**2. There is also evidence of other harmful messages being presented to Australian children.**

There is evidence that other messages about violence and drinking are becoming part of children's culture. For example,

- the number of new violent video games granted a classification of MA15+ tripled to 59 in 2006 from 20 in the previous year (Herald Sun 3/11/06). These games, whilst supposed to be restricted to older adolescents, are played by children and younger teenagers.
- The Little Mister\Little Miss T-shirts also included slogans "Mr Drunk" and "Mr Asshole".

**3. Children and parents have expressed a concern that marketing towards children has become too aggressive.**

In a survey undertaken by the Australian Childhood Foundation, CARA and Quantum Market Research, 90% of a nationally representative sample of Australian parents believed that children are targeted too much by companies trying to market their products to them (Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard, 2005).

Similarly, in a national survey of 600 children and young people aged between 10-14 years of age, we found that the majority of respondents believed that they were being bombarded by advertising aimed directly at them. For example, 88% of children and young people feel companies try to sell them things that they don't need, 85% of the sample felt that there is a lot of pressure on them to buy products like games, music and clothes and 74% of the sample believed that there should be less advertising aimed at children (Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard, 2007).

**4. Our research has found that children themselves believe that the adult world is intruding into their lives, leaving some of them concerned and worried.**

With media and community attention profiling and debating a range of issues, children are engaging with broader community problems and as a result many are feeling uncertain, worried and threatened (Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard, 2006; 2007).

This research supports the claim that many children are influenced by the what they read, listen to and watch in the media and other forms of entertainment. This is as relevant to terrorism, the environment and crime as it is to sexualised messages for which they have little or no platform of understanding.

**5. It is our view that the preponderance of sexualized messages is contributing to an increase in the number of children who are engaging in problem sexual behaviour with other children.**

The Australian Childhood Foundation pioneered therapeutic programs for children as young as seven years old who engage in problem sexual behaviour with other children (Staiger, 2005; Staiger et al, 2005). Whilst the problem behaviour of a significant proportion of these children can be traced back to histories of abuse, neglect and disruption, it is our clinical experience that approximately 20% of this population of children have evolved this behaviour without prior experiences of trauma. In these circumstances, it is our view that a contributing factor to the genesis of problem sexual behaviour is the increasing volume of sexualized imagery and themes available in popular

culture and accessible to children. Without access to explanatory frameworks for understanding these themes, children can engage in behaviour which enables them to test often distorted beliefs about sexuality. In so doing, they harm other children and complicate their own developmental trajectories.

In considering these findings, we would make the following recommendations for addressing these problems for children.

- Recommendation 1. The Advertising to Children Code should include the requirement of advertising agencies to develop and articulate a child impact statement for all advertising that they produce whether or not it targets children directly. These statements should be made publicly available.
- Recommendation 2. The Association of National Advertisers fund an ongoing education program for its members run by a consortia of child health, media and welfare organizations to learn more about the impact of advertising on the development and well-being of children and young people.
- Recommendation 3. The Advertising Standards Bureau make it a priority to enhance the avenues through which the public can make complaints about advertising campaigns.
- Recommendation 4. The Australian Government prioritise the funding of education programs for primary school and secondary school students and their parents about media literacy as it relates to child development and wellbeing.
- Recommendation 5. The Australian Government prioritise the funding of a comprehensive sex education program for children, young people and parents through schools.
- Recommendation 6. The Australian Government prioritise the funding of a national research program to understand the impact of the media on the development and wellbeing of children and young people.

Yours faithfully,



Dr Joe Tucci  
CEO  
Australian Childhood Foundation



Professor Chris Goddard  
Director  
Child Abuse Research Australia  
Monash University

## Key References:

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