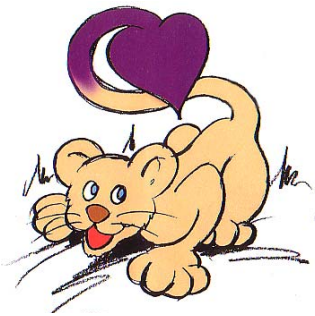


# POSITION PAPER



*"Protecting children against sexual assault"*

## The sexualisation of children in Australia

Bravehearts Inc.

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Protecting Children through Prevention and Therapy

2008

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## **Author's Note**

The following is a copy of Bravehearts' submission to the *Senate Inquiry into the Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media Environment*

The issue of the sexualisation of children has been of major concern to Bravehearts for some time. The proliferation of sexual images and sexual content in popular culture has dangerously expanded into children's merchandise and advertising.

This submission considers each of the three areas under the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry

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# Sources sexualisation of children in the media

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For a long time the adage “sex sells” has been common place in the marketing industry. While this is an accepted strategy in terms of targeting adults, there has been a disturbing trend that has seen this message move over to marketing to children. Over a number of years there has been an increased sexualisation of children in the media and an increased acceptance of this as the norm by those in the industry. There appears to be a desensitisation that has occurred, with those working in the media normalising the sexual imagery ever present in various aspects of our popular and media culture.

Marketers have recognised children and young people as a profitable market, estimated at more than \$10billion (Rush & La Nauze, 2006 “Letting Children be Children”). The “tween” market has emerged as a lucrative target for advertisers, where children’s need for social inclusion and their desire to identify with older children has been exploited to make money and sell products. This phenomenon of ‘age compression’ (the idea that children grow older younger) has led to campaigns centring on making children feel older and more sophisticated in order to capture the market.

The popular culture that is grooming children as sexualised beings permeates all aspects of the media:

- **Advertising:**

There are two major issues here: the use of young girls to model adult clothes and the sexualisation of young girls in advertising children’s products.

There has been an explosion of sexualisation of children in advertising with the fashion industry using younger and younger models to sell clothes to adult women. Just this month (April 2008) the Australian Fashion Week organisers backed down after complaints that 14 year old girl was to be the face of the event. They have since revised their industry policy to ensure that all models participating in the event must be at least 16 years of age. Employing children to model adult clothes and portraying these young girls as women is irresponsible.

In addition, as discussed in Rush and La Nauze’s (2006) “Corporate Paedophilia” report, the images of children marketing children’s wear, particularly young girls, are portraying children as adults. Children are being posed to emphasise their ‘maturity’ and sexuality: averted eyes, vulnerable facial expressions and body positioning.

- **Clothing and cosmetics:**

Children tend to want to be more mature and sophisticated and when they see their idols dressing in a certain way they want to mimic them. In response to this, clothing companies are marketing clearly adult clothing to children: bra and underwear sets, g-string underwear, provocative clothing and clothing with inappropriate, sexually suggestive slogans.

While makeup has been available for young girls for many years, there has been a shift in the marketing and presentation of these products. No longer seen as “fun” accessories, these items are being marketed to children to make them glamorous and sexy.

- **Toys:**

While there continues to be problems with gender stereotyping in toys marketed to boys and girls, the increasing sexual messages that are being communicated to young girls in the dolls marketed to them is adding a new dimension.

Barbie dolls, originally marketed at six to ten year olds are now appealing to three to six year olds and highly sexualised dolls such as the Bratz and MyScene dolls are at the forefront of a trend that promotes stereotyped and sexualised images. With fishnet stockings, tight fitting clothes, high heels, heavily made up faces and large pouty lips, these dolls are being marketed to the tweens.

While manufacturers of these dolls argue that they are merely “fashion-forward” or “cool” and that it is adults who are seeing the dolls as sexual, these dolls are clearly promoting a sexual image and sexual behaviour that is beyond the understanding of young children. They make the way the bodies look a focus of play and equate self-worth with physical appearance, a confusing message that makes it difficult for children to negotiate the transition to adulthood. It is worrisome when dolls designed specifically for four to eight year olds are associated with such objectified adult sexuality.

- **Magazines and popular culture:**

There is a general sexualisation of popular culture that has seen the embedding of sexual content in every aspect of our society. The exposure of children to these images and messages is clearly inappropriate and dangerous.

The content of music video and the lyrics to songs is increasingly sexual and increasingly available to young children. Music videos, television programs and movies marketed at the teen demographic are realistically being seen by younger children who wish to identify with their older peers.

With fashion and gossip magazines now targeted to girls as young as 5 years of age, there is an ever-increasing pressure for children to focus on topics that they are developmentally unable to understand. Magazines aimed at young children discuss who is “hot” (including adult male celebrities) and give information on relationships, make-up, dress codes, hairstyles and advice on the opposite sex.

Donahoo (2007, “Idolising Children”) found that by six years of age, a high percentage of young girls expressed the desire to be thinner, with media influences emerging as a significant predictor of this age groups dissatisfaction with their appearance and their low self-worth.

The beneficiaries of the premature sexualisation of children in the media are the product manufacturers. As discussed in “Letting Children be Children” (2006) the tween market is worth billions of dollars and advertisers are taking advantage of children’s desire to want to be older.

While marketers argue that children in today’s world are growing up in a different environment to that of their parents and that they are “savvier” at younger ages, it is completely irresponsible of marketers to promote children beginning to see being “sexy” as an important aspect of their lives. As discussed below, the risk of this is enormous to children both in the short and long term. Adult ideals should not be imposed on young children. Instead, marketing to children should reflect positive healthy lifestyles and show realistic images of what it is to be a child.

# Evidence on the short- and long-term effects

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The erosion of the boundaries between childhood and adulthood has been observed over the past years. The decreasing delineation is often discussed as children ‘today’ are seen as growing up too soon. While our children do not necessarily understand the sexual undertones of the clothes and images they desire and are focussed on just being cool or fashionable, older people around them do pick up on the sexual messages.

Children, and particularly girls, are under increasing pressure by advertisers and marketers to adopt a ‘sexy’ persona from very young ages. The impact of this sexualisation of childhood needs much greater study, however the potential effects have certainly been observed:

- **Psychological effects and body issues**

The issue of children learning about sex at a young age is not as much the issue as the messages our sexualised culture is teaching them. Children’s perceptions about what it means to be a boy or a girls and their gradual and appropriate developing sense of sexuality is being defined by the representations promoted through media.

The emphasis on appearance and being the “ideal” at a young age brings on the “agonies of adolescence” much earlier. The focus on physical appearance, being sexy and attracting attention for how they look is encouraging the notion that an individuals’ self-worth and value is defined by meeting the “sexualised ideal” presented to them. This leads to an association between media representations and the increasing presence of body issues and eating disorders being seen amongst our young.

As an impact from the focus on image and how they “should look” children are struggling to “be older”. Australian children are increasingly suffering from stress, anxiety, lower self-esteem, increased self-objectification, lower satisfaction with their lives and poorer relationships with others.

It has been observed that the developmental period known as “middle childhood” (about 6-11 yrs old) is critical to children developing a sense of self and self-esteem. Children of this age are beginning to understand their place in the world and are forming a sense of their own competence and the kinds of activities that are important. If children perceive “sexy” as important and their cognitive development around self becomes distorted and can impact long-term.

- **Violence, exploitation and vulnerability to sexual assault**

One of the major concerns of the sexualisation of children in the media is that it normalises the notion of children as sexual beings and in effect gives out the message that children are “interested in and ready for sex”. The obvious resulting risk is the increased vulnerability of children and young people to sexual assault or sexualised behaviours before they are able to understand the potential consequences.

Making children vulnerable to this type of attention is clearly not appropriate; however, if we continue to bombard our children with sexualised images and culture as the norm and as desirable, we can only expect our children will find themselves facing increased social pressures to exhibit sexualised images and behaviours themselves.

# Responding to the problem

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Advertisers argue that it is the responsibility of parents to set boundaries with their children and decide what products they buy, however this task is impossible with parents pitted against peer pressure and the millions of dollars of marketing targeted to their children. It is unrealistic to expect parents to stop the sexualisation of children by just saying no. As any parent knows it is not that simple. Peer friendships take on much greater importance in middle childhood and the pressure to conform is keenly felt by children. The sexualisation of children should be tackled at its source, the advertisers and marketers who are seeking to create ever-younger consumers for their products.

There needs to be an holistic approach to the problem of the sexualisation of children in the media and its effects:

- **Industry regulation:**

The industry is currently self-regulated with two relevant codes under the Australian Association of National Advertisers. Neither code directly focuses on the sexualisation of children. The AANA Advertiser Code of Ethics says advertisements should comply with Commonwealth law and should ensure “sensitivity to the relevant audience”. The AANA Code for Advertising to Children makes no reference to sex or sexualisation.

We note that on the 16<sup>th</sup> April 2008 the AANA has announced changes to the Code for Advertising to Children, specifically the inclusion of regulations “which rule out the sexualisation of children – classed as anyone aged 14 or under – in advertising which is published or broadcast in any form”. In addition the code will state that “advertising to children must not include sexual imagery that breaches community standards, or imply that children are sexual beings”.

We wish to stress that while this is an obvious step forward, it is worrying that the AANA has defined children as 14 and under. In relation to the issue of sex, State and Territory legislation defines the age of consent at 16 or 17. We would advocate that the AANA regulations around childhood sexualisation should be in line with these definitions. We simply should not be sexualising young people who are legally under the age of consent.

Clearly tighter regulation in regards to advertising to children and “tween” market and tougher restrictions on the content in magazines is urgently needed. However, relying on self-regulation won’t work. The market is driven by creating consumers and meeting consumer needs. There must be tighter and enforceable regulatory codes.

It is essential that a regulatory code clearly sets out the minimum industry standards for how children are portrayed and for the marketing of products to children. These standards should be developed along with community members and appropriately qualified childhood experts.

In addition we need to encourage advertising and media professionals to develop strategies that will help in their role in reducing the sexualisation of children.

One of the key things here is social responsibility – advertisers and other media need to be aware that the products they produce and images associated with them have an impact and it’s not always a good impact.

- **National regulatory oversight system:**

A national regulatory system to oversee media exposure and advertising to children and young teens needs to be established.

We would certainly advocate for a National Children's Commissioner, whose role would encompass oversight of marketing practices and media content.

- **The role of education:**

Educating children in decoding the messages from advertising and media generally is a vital step in empowering children as informed media and product consumers. "Media literacy" is a critical component of counteracting and minimising the impact of the messages and images popular culture and the media inundate children with.

There is a need for wide-spread education for children, parents and the community which includes information on the negative impact of media images of children and the effects of sexualising childhood.