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TITLE: Child sexualisation is no game

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PUBLICATION: OnLine Opinion

PUBLICATION DATE: 26/09/07

LINK: <http://www.tai.org.au/?q=node/9&pubid=982>

It's time to correct the single most common misunderstanding about the sexualisation of children.

Recently, Pamela Bone became the latest in a long line of commentators to suggest that those concerned about premature sexualisation are tilting at windmills. She wrote:

... little girls have been tottering around in their mothers' high heels, smearing on lipstick and naggng to have their ears pierced ever since these things were invented. Most don't know the meaning of the word sex. They are merely playing at being grown up. ("Sexploitation campaign masks forum's agenda", *The Canberra Times*, August 27, 2007)

This kind of creative "dressing up" play has nothing to do with the concerns articulated by the many people speaking out against the increasing sexualisation of children. They are worried about the major shift in marketing to children in the last decade and the impacts that shift may have on children's healthy development.

If you haven't had your own pre-teen children or grandchildren during that period, you may well have missed this very significant change.

Today's little girls aren't tottering around in mum's high heels. These days, nothing could be more daggy for a primary school girl than pretending to be her mum, or any other normal adult.

No, marketers are now feeding children fantasies based on celebrity culture (if that's not an oxymoron). That is why, apart from padded bras for eight-year-olds, there are platform heels, lip gloss, eye shadow, nail polish, and even artificial nails now being sold directly to girls aged five and up.

Modified, child-sized versions of women's fashion and celebrity magazines advertise many of these products and show how they can be used. Looking "hot" is what is cool for today's primary-schoolers - not "dressing up" to play at being adult, but seriously trying to look like a celebrity in their daily lives as often as possible.

If this sounds exaggerated, have a look for yourself in the magazines for little girls sold at supermarkets and newsagents (they're often sold in plastic wrapping, so you may have to buy one to get a good look).

The sexualisation of children stems from the fact that many of the same corporations that create and sell popular culture and fashions to teenage girls and adult women are now competing to capture girl-children's allegiance to their brands. In doing so, they aim to build both an immediate and a future market for their products. But premature sexualisation has risks for children.

The broadest risk is that a premature interest in "sexy" appearance and behaviour may distract children's attention from more traditional childhood activities that lay a stronger and more balanced foundation for their later development as teenagers and adults.

The second risk is related to body image. Studies show that girls as young as six and seven are now concerned about their physical appearance, particularly their weight, and that some are beginning to develop "disordered eating behaviours". This is not clearly related to childhood obesity. In one recent study of girls aged nine to 12, half wanted to be thinner but only 15 per cent were in any way overweight by medical criteria.

There is also some evidence that children are developing severe eating disorders - usually anorexia - at earlier ages. Eating disorders are difficult to treat, and can be fatal. Medical experts and psychologists are extremely concerned and this apparent trend is now being carefully monitored.

The third risk of premature sexualisation is that it may encourage sexual predation on children. Those who sexually abuse children remain wholly responsible for their abhorrent actions. But there is a risk that publicly displaying sexualised images of children undermines the existing social prohibition against seeing children as sexually interesting.

Experts who work attempting to rehabilitate convicted sexual offenders confirm this risk, and warn that it may apply not only in cases of child sexual abuse perpetrated by a stranger but also in cases where sexual abuse is perpetrated within the family. Professionals around Australia who work to prevent child sexual abuse and to care for child survivors of sexual abuse are also very concerned. In the light of what experts and professionals have to say, we are obliged to think hard about this.

If you're concerned about the sexualisation of children, you've got national leaders in child health, education, and welfare firmly behind you. In December 2006, a clear statement to this effect was made in an open letter to The Australian signed by a dozen representatives of relevant organisations including the Australian Psychological Society, the Royal Australasian College of Physicians (Paediatric and Child Health Division), the Australian Council of State Schools Organisations and the Australian Centre for Child Protection.

The letter called for government agencies to "urgently" examine what support can be given to parents and caregivers trying to prevent the premature sexualisation of children buffeted by marketing's recent onslaught. The letter also insisted that marketers "should bear the primary responsibility for the adverse outcomes of their practices".

More recently, a major report from the American Psychological Association Taskforce on the *Sexualization of Girls* confirmed the concerns of Australian experts. Just last month, the Senate voted for the Australian Media and Communications Authority to provide a report to the government by March 31, 2008 making recommendations on: "(i) strategies to prevent and/or reduce the sexualisation of children in the media, and (ii) the effectiveness of different approaches to reducing the amount of sexualisation that occurs and to ameliorating its effects".

So - at the risk of sounding repetitive - everyone please take note: premature sexualisation has nothing to do with children's creative "dress-up" play, nor any other aspect of their healthy development.