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Corporate Paedophilia

Sexualisation of children in Australia

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Summary

Images of sexualised children are becoming increasingly common in advertising and marketing material. Children who appear aged 12 years and under, particularly girls, are dressed, posed and made up in the same way as sexy adult models. ‘Corporate paedophilia’ is a metaphor used to describe advertising and marketing that sexualises children in these ways. The metaphor encapsulates the idea that such advertising and marketing is an abuse both of children and of public morality.

In the past, the sexualisation of children occurred indirectly, primarily through exposure of children to representations of teen and adult sexuality in advertising and popular culture. The very direct sexualisation of children, where children themselves are presented in ways modelled on sexy adults, is a new development. The pressure on children to adopt sexualised appearance and behaviour at an early age is greatly increased by the combination of the direct sexualisation of children with the increasingly sexualised representations of teenagers and adults in advertising and popular culture.

This paper documents and analyses the sexualisation of children aged 12 and under in relation to three types of cultural material: advertising (both print and television), girls’ magazines, and television programs (including music video-clips). Other sources of children’s premature sexualisation, such as toys and material on the Internet, are not considered here.

Sources of children’s sexualisation

A range of examples of sexualised children in advertisements are analysed in the paper as well as in an electronic appendix to the paper available on the Australia Institute website (www.tai.org.au). The essential point is that children are dressed in clothing and posed in ways designed to draw attention to adult sexual features that the children do not yet possess.

For example, in one advertisement a girl apparently aged about ten wears a chain pulled like a choker around her neck, with the ends dangling where her cleavage would be if she were older. Her hot pink tank top and black trousers hang slightly loosely from her child’s frame. Two belts hold the trousers up, with another chain hanging from a belt loop. An outsized ring on one of her fingers dominates one hand, and she wears pink lipstick and a pink velvet cap. She adopts the female full frontal pose which is familiar to us from images of adult women models – the head is tilted and turned to one side, the shoulders are tilted one way and the hips the other.

In a woman, the effect of the outfit and the pose would be to draw attention to the features that signal women’s sexual difference from men, in particular the breasts, waist and hips, as well as the lack of body hair. The lipstick would be widely considered ‘attractive’ on a woman, but the evolutionary basis for this is that it mimics the increased blood flow to the mucous membranes when humans are sexually aroused. That a pre-pubescent child is presented in this way to sell a product strikes many as

grotesque – and that the product is an *eau de toilette* directed at girls of primary school age only heightens the incongruity.

Girls' magazines that are essentially children's versions of teen and adult women's magazines have appeared on the market in Australia since 1996 and appear to mark a substantial shift in children's culture.

The three most popular girls' magazines in this genre are *Barbie Magazine* (targets readers aged 5 to 12 years), *Total Girl* (targets readers aged 8 to 11 years), and *Disney Girl* (targets readers aged 6 to 13 years). Like the teen and adult versions, these magazines contain a large amount of material related to beauty, fashion, celebrities or 'crushes'. Aimed at children of primary school age, such material encourages the premature sexualisation of the readers. A content analysis of a sample edition of each of these magazines demonstrates that in the case of the latter two, approximately half of the content is sexualising material, and in the case of *Barbie Magazine*, fully three-quarters of the content is sexualising material. Between them, the three magazines are widely read: data from the Roy Morgan Young Australians survey shows that in total, 34 per cent of girls aged 6 to 12 read one or more of these magazines. Readership peaks among 10 and 11 year old girls, 44 per cent of whom read one or more of these magazines.

The direct sexualisation of children, particularly girls, in advertisements and girls' magazines occurs in a context where children are also exposed to highly sexualised representations of adults and adult behaviour in television programs, particularly music video programs screened on Saturday mornings. Although these programs are classified G or PG, the classification code appears to allow highly sexually suggestive material, particularly in the 'program context' of music videos, provided it is not a depiction of actual sexual intercourse. Girls' magazines not only give a prominent place to music celebrities such as The Veronicas, Rihanna, and now, Paris Hilton, but girls are actively encouraged to mimic the videos. For example, in the September 2006 issue of *Total Girl*, girls of primary school age are instructed to 'roll your body back and forth' and 'sway your hips side to side' with stills of Rihanna, all flesh and tight black clothing, to prompt them.

When these three sources of children's sexualisation are considered together – as children actually experience them – it is apparent that young children today, particularly girls, face sexualising pressure unlike that faced by any of today's adults in their childhood. Such sexualising pressure has the potential to harm children in a variety of ways, and the paper draws on research from a range of disciplines to illustrate the risks to children of premature sexualisation.

The risks to children of premature sexualisation

Firstly, many studies have linked exposure to the ideal 'slim, toned' body type that is considered sexy for adults to the development of eating disorders in older children and teenagers. There is already some evidence that children in Australia are developing eating disorders at a younger age than previously. Even a 'mild' eating disorder can have significant effects on a child's physical health. The idea that increased emphasis on body image for children might be helpful in the context of significant increases in

childhood obesity is misguided, since negative motivations stemming from a sense of inadequacy can be very counterproductive. Positive motivations like self-acceptance are more effective in the promotion of healthy living.

Secondly, the sexualisation of children has psychological implications, although they have not yet been fully researched. Studies have shown that exposure to ‘appearance-focused media’ increases body dissatisfaction among children. Apart from contributing to the development of eating disorders, this may have further effects that are not yet fully understood. For example, it is widely recognised that body image concerns are a barrier to teenage girls’ participation in sporting activities. It is possible that as younger girls develop higher body dissatisfaction, this barrier may also affect their participation.

Psychologists have also noted that, given that precocious sexual behaviour is an attention-getting strategy used by some older children and young teenagers, the general sexualisation of children may escalate the level of sexual behaviour necessary to attract attention. It has also been observed that premature sexualisation can lead to other aspects of child development being neglected; if large amounts of time, money and mental energy are devoted to appearance this will distract from other developmental activities, be they physical, intellectual or artistic.

Two specifically sexual risks follow from the sexualisation of children, which reduces the sexual distinction between children and adults.

Firstly, children may be encouraged to initiate sexual behaviour at an earlier age, well before they have full knowledge of the potential consequences. Earlier sexual activity in teenagers is linked to a higher incidence of unwanted sex (particularly for teenage girls) and to increasing potential to contract sexually transmitted infections. Both unwanted sex and sexually transmitted infections can have serious long-term consequences.

Secondly, because sex is widely represented in advertising and marketing as something that fascinates and delights adults, the sexualisation of children could play a role in ‘grooming’ children for paedophiles – preparing children for sexual interaction with older teenagers or adults. This is of particular concern with respect to the girls’ magazines, which actively encourage girls of primary school age to have crushes on adult male celebrities. At the same time, the representation of children as miniature adults playing adult sexual roles sends a message to paedophiles that, contrary to laws and ethical norms, children are sexually available.

There has as yet been no sustained public debate about the sexualisation of children in Australia. This paper provides a framework for analysis of the issue in order to bring the phenomenon of corporate paedophilia and the risks it entails for children, to public attention. Although solutions are not straightforward, in the absence of any public debate the trend towards increasing sexualisation of children by advertisers and marketers appears likely to continue, with associated risks for children.

A forthcoming Australia Institute Discussion Paper will offer a range of policy measures that could reduce the risk of harm to children based on an assessment of the current regulatory frameworks covering the major sources of children’s sexualisation – advertising, girls’ magazines and television programs.

1. Introduction

1.1 Corporate paedophilia

Corporate paedophilia is a metaphor coined by Phillip Adams to describe the selling of products to children before they are able to understand advertising and thus before they are able to consent to the process of corporate-led consumption.¹ The metaphor draws a parallel between actual paedophilia, the use of children for the sexual pleasure of adults, and corporate use of children for the financial benefit of adults who own and manage corporations.

In this paper, the metaphor of corporate paedophilia is used more specifically to refer only to advertising and marketing that either seek to present children in sexually suggestive ways, or seek to sell products to children using overt forms of adult sexuality. It encapsulates the idea that such advertising and marketing is an abuse of children and contravenes public norms.

1.2 Sexualisation of children

In this paper, we discuss the increasing pressure on children, and in particular on girls, to adopt certain forms of adult sexuality. The topic is a complex one. A general outline of what is meant by the sexualisation of children is given below, as a prelude to further discussion in Section 2.

For the purposes of this paper, we define ‘children’ as people aged 12 years and younger. In Australia, this includes all primary school students and many students in their first year of secondary school. In contrast, young people aged 13 to 17 years are understood to be teenagers, while people 18 years and over are legally adults. Although divisions of this sort cannot be held rigidly in the real world, public concern about the sexualisation of children is particularly strong for children who are still at primary school.

Broadly defined, sexualisation is the act of giving someone or something a sexual character. Childhood development includes a distinct sexual dimension prior to puberty, so the acknowledgement that children have a sexual dimension is not in itself of concern. However, the sexualisation of children documented in this paper captures the slowly developing sexuality of children and moulds it into stereotypical forms of adult sexuality. When we use the term ‘sexualisation’, it is this capturing and moulding process to which we refer. It is essential to ask whose interests such sexualisation serves and at whose expense it occurs.

In the past, the sexualisation of children occurred indirectly, primarily through exposure to representations of teen and adult sexuality in advertising and popular culture. The very direct sexualisation of children, where children themselves are presented in images or directed to act in advertisements in ways modelled on adult sexual behaviour, is a

¹ Adams (1995). Over time, other commentators have also adopted the term (Quart 2003; Schor 2004).

new development. The pressure on children to adopt sexualised appearance and behaviour at an early age is greatly increased by the combination of the direct sexualisation of children with the increasingly sexualised representations of teenagers and adults in advertising and popular culture.

This paper focuses on sexualisation mainly as it relates to children's appearances, largely because this is the area in which the sexualisation of children is most advanced. In this context, it is important to remember that the sexualisation of children ultimately extends beyond their appearances to how they understand themselves and their lives, and hence how they behave. However, appearance can be expected to have a significant effect on these other areas. Most simply, where presenting a sexualised appearance looms large among children's concerns, then this is likely to distort or even replace their attention to other areas of their development – cognitive, physical, artistic and ethical.

1.3 Why is the sexualisation of children of concern?

The sexualisation of children is of concern because it has the potential to harm children in a variety of ways. Children's development of healthy body image and self-esteem is compromised by pressure to look like miniature adults, and one particularly alarming manifestation of this is an apparent trend for young people to be hospitalised for severe eating disorders at younger ages (see Appendix 1). Children's general sexual and emotional development is affected by exposure to advertising and marketing that is saturated with sexualised images and themes. Moreover, 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. Sexual representations of adults in advertising and marketing often occur together with the treatment of women as objects, the understanding of sex as either a commodity or an instrument, and the linkage of sex with violence. The messages children receive about desirable behaviour and values thus incorporate ethical effects that go well beyond simply how to dress. Finally, the sexualisation of children also risks normalising and possibly encouraging paedophilic sexual desire for children.

In addition to these potential harms to children, it is also argued that the sexualisation of children is morally reprehensible because one of the central concerns of morality is to ensure the treatment of human beings as ends in themselves, and never simply as means to other ends. Sexualising children to sell products is precisely treating some of the most vulnerable members of the community as a means to an end, and as such it is morally unacceptable.

1.4 Just another 'moral panic'?

Critics will dismiss the discussion in this paper as the kind of conservative moral panic that is to be expected in a changing society (Lumby quoted in Needham 2002). Some will claim that we are trying to deny that children are sexual beings. Others will question whether things are really changing, pointing out that a moral panic about the sexualisation of children will tend to produce 'more suspicious readings' of cultural material (Kleinhans 2004, p. 19). Still others will draw attention to the fact that children and childhood have been understood quite differently in different societies and in different time periods (Postman 1982), but will insist there is no need for concern.

All of these criticisms are anticipated in this paper. Firstly, it is acknowledged that the important process of human sexual development begins during childhood; the problem with the sexualisation of children is that precocious and unhealthy leaps towards the end of this developmental process are encouraged by advertising and marketing.

Secondly, a range of evidence is presented to support the claim that Australian children have become increasingly sexualised during the last decade. This evidence includes the new phenomenon of girls' magazines modeled on popular teen magazines for readers of primary school age, the recent invention of the 'tween' market ('tweens' are pre-adolescents who are claimed by marketers to be 'between' childhood interests and teenage pursuits), and the increasing incidence of body image concerns and eating disorders among younger children.

Thirdly, research from a range of relevant disciplines supports our argument that increasing sexualisation carries a number of risks for children and should be viewed as a matter of public concern.

Any discussion about the effects of broad cultural changes risks polarisation into two equally implausible positions: that cultural change has no effects on citizens or that it completely determines behaviour. Investigation in this paper is based firmly on a plausible middle ground. On the basis of our analysis, we believe it is reasonable to be concerned about the increasing sexualisation of children by advertisers and marketers, given the various risks to children such sexualisation entails. Moreover, when other cultural trends are taken into account, it is likely that concern will be amplified. In the United Kingdom, a group of teachers, psychologists and children's authors has recently published an open letter to the British Government, calling upon them to 'act to prevent the death of childhood', which they say is threatened by a 'fast-moving, hyper-competitive culture' (Fenton 2006). One signatory to the letter describes 'the fact that children's development is being drastically affected by the kind of world they are brought up in' as the 'giant elephant in all of our living rooms' (Fenton 2006). The broader cultural context must be borne in mind when thinking about the sexualisation of children and its implications.

Finally, it is important to highlight that the sexualisation of children is a trend. The analysis in this paper is consistent with research from the United States that shows that media sources of children's sexualisation are becoming increasingly influential; young Americans now use more media for longer periods of time at younger ages, and sexual content in the media has increased during the period 1985-2005 (Rich 2005, p. 329). It is not easy for any society to agree on where the line should be drawn in matters such as the sexualisation of children, let alone to agree on how such a line might be enforced. However, if public avoidance of these difficult questions continues, the trend towards increasing sexualisation of children is also likely to continue, and the potential for harm to children will increase in parallel.

2. The sexualisation of children in Australia

2.1 Introduction

Across the developed world, children are being increasingly sexualised at younger and younger ages, although it appears that the trend is particularly advanced in the United States. Australia's children are no exception. This section presents evidence of the sexualisation of children in Australia from three types of cultural material: advertising (both in print and on television), girls' magazines, and television programs (including music video-clips). These three types of material are interlinked by their participation in 'the culture of celebrity', and they cross-reference each other, sometimes explicitly. As such, it is appropriate to treat girls' magazines and television programs as promoting the general importance of looking sexy, even where they are not advertising specific products. Moreover, in some cases girls' magazines and television programs do advertise specific products. For example, girls' magazines include beauty advice pages that feature particular products, and music video-clips function as advertisements for the music as well as for associated merchandise. These three types of cultural material together account for the bulk of sexualising influences on children in Australia today.²

As will be seen from the review of material below, girls are sexualised to a much greater degree than boys.³ Rich Ross, president of Disney Channel Worldwide, recently described 'tween' years for girls as years when they have their 'lip gloss in one hand and [their] stuffed animal in the other' (Chaffin 2006). However, in parallel with the increasing sexual objectification of men in advertising (Rohlinger 2002), there is some evidence that over time boys will also become subject to increasing sexualisation pressures.⁴

The extent to which material sexualises children varies considerably. Although overt sexualisation is of greatest concern, some of the less explicit and more ambiguous material can also be problematic. For example, the boy and girl in the Myer catalogue advertisement in Figure 1 might be interpreted by a parent to be a brother taking care of his sister, but be interpreted by a child to be a boy 'checking out' a girl of the same age. As a marketing medium, this less explicit material may be more successful, since one image can send two quite different messages: one to the parent, and another to the child.

² Note that sexualised toys, such as the Bratz dolls, are another sexualizing influence (Levin 2005). Other influences that are likely to be significant but that are not considered here include material on the Internet and on cable television.

³ This is consistent with a now somewhat dated study of children's television programming in the US, which found that of all commercials promoting products to enhance appearance, over 85 per cent were directed at girls rather than boys (Ogletree *et al.* 1990).

⁴ See for example *Total Girl*, February 2006, pp. 34-35.

Figure 1 ‘I want cool kids’ casuals’, Myer catalogue



Source: Myer catalogue, February 2006

This issue of viewer interpretation is of particular importance for the sexualisation of children. When children dress and behave in overtly sexual ways, they are not necessarily aware of the way their sexualisation may be interpreted by other children and by adults.

Ten-year old girls talk about wearing tween fashion to impress each other. They feel grown up and it's how pop stars dress. But pop stars use sexiness knowingly (Freeman-Greene 2006).

Below we identify the kinds of things that indicate the sexualisation of children, and then apply this framework to the types of cultural material introduced above.

2.2 How are children sexualised?

Images of sexualised children are now common enough that they may appear ‘normal’. Hence, it is essential to identify the various aspects of sexualisation in order to make it clearly visible again. Most obviously, factors that contribute to sexualisation include clothing and poses that in adults draw attention to sexual differences such as the broad shoulders of the adult male, and the defined hips, waist and breasts of the adult female. Children do not yet possess these physical attributes, yet they are dressed and posed as if they do, often with the aid of cosmetics that mimic the secondary effects of sexual arousal, and sometimes in a setting that is normally used by adults rather than children. Typically, children appear more heavily sexualised when more of these factors – clothing, pose, cosmetics and setting – apply.

Clothing and accessories

Clothing that emphasises specific parts of the body, often at the expense of inhibiting movement or comfort, can have a sexualising effect. For girls, examples include: bolero cross-over tops and low necklines, both designed to emphasise the breasts of adult women; ‘crop tops’ which draw attention to the waist and navel area; dangling jewellery from necks, ears or wrists, dangling belts from the hips or waist, and rings on the fingers, again designed to attract attention to sexually differentiated features of adult women, and some styles of dress or skirt, most particularly very short skirts, and dresses held up by thin straps. For boys, examples include suit jackets designed to emphasise the shoulders of adult men. The children pictured at a party in the Myer catalogue advertisement in Figure 2 illustrate some of these.

In addition, sexualised girl models (like adult women models) almost always have long hair, a social indicator of sexual difference in the Western world, and it is usually worn loose to emphasise it. In contrast, sexualised boys have short hair, which is carefully styled, with evident use of hair styling gel, spray or similar aid.

Girls are sometimes pictured with adult-looking handbags, presumably to carry the cosmetics that are now heavily marketed to children, as in Figures 3 and 5.

Figure 2 ‘Light up the party’, Myer catalogue



Source: Myer catalogue, November 2005

Figure 3 ‘Stars: They’re just like us’ fashion feature, *Total Girl*



Source: *Total Girl*, April 2006, p. 56

Figure 4 Barbie eau de toilette advertisement, *Barbie Magazine*



Source: *Barbie Magazine*, March 2006, back cover

Physical poses

As with clothing, poses that draw attention to specific physical features can have a sexualising effect. We are accustomed to seeing these poses adopted by adult models, but they are now being replicated by children, who have not yet developed the adult physical features such poses are calculated to show off. For girls, examples include the full frontal pose (tilting of heads, shoulders and hips) (see Figure 4); the demure pose (downcast eyes, which have the effect of drawing attention to the body) (see Figure 5); and the coy pose (gazing towards the camera with the body turned to the side or away) (see Figure 6). For boys, the full frontal pose is different (hands in pockets, legs apart) (see Figure 2) but the coy pose is much the same (see Figure 7). Boys, like men, rarely adopt demure poses. Adoption of such poses as a norm by children would mark a dramatic generational shift away from the earlier childhood norm of a 'lack of self-consciousness about their bodies' (Freeman-Greene 2006). Children may also be posed in settings normally used by adults rather than children, for example, the settings in Figure 5 and Figure 7.

Figure 5 'Lazy days: chill out... dress up!' fashion feature, *Barbie Magazine*



Source: *Barbie Magazine*, May 2006, p. 59

Figure 6 'Beach Cool' fashion feature, *Total Girl*



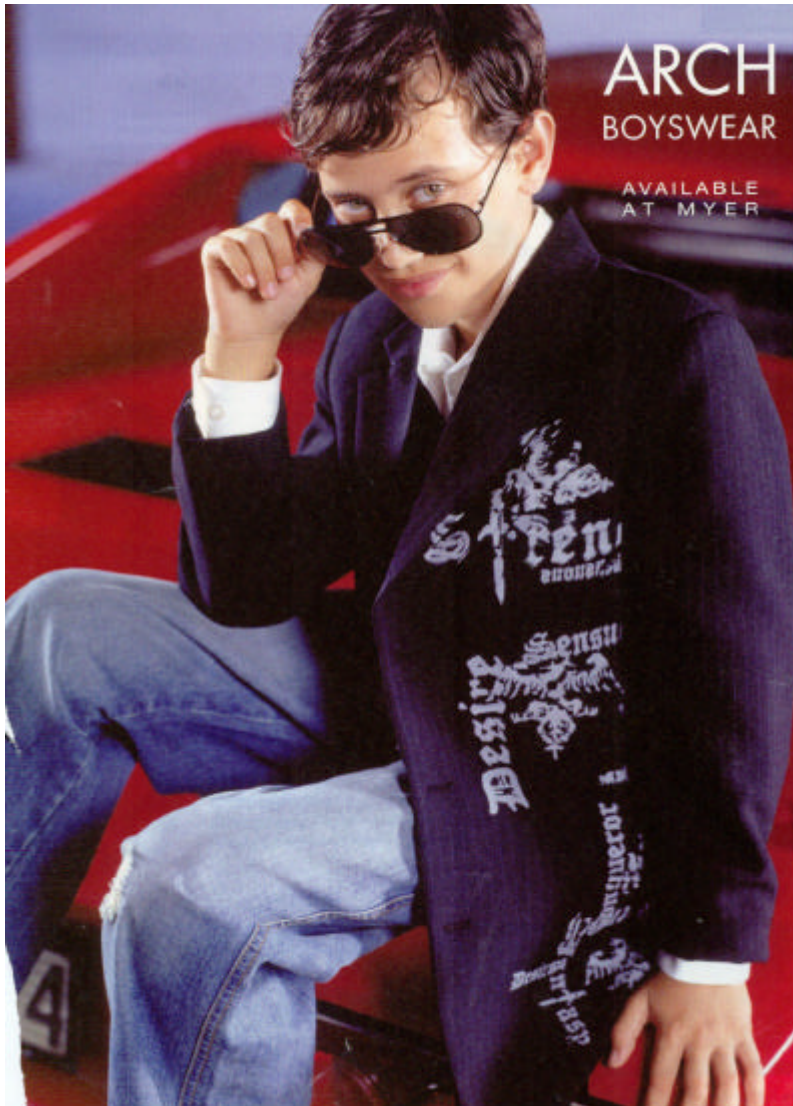
Source: *Total Girl*, January 2005, p. 62

Cosmetics

Adult women use cosmetics to make themselves more attractive to men. Behind the assumption that more defined lips, more defined eyes and pinker cheeks are 'more attractive' lies the fact that cosmetics emphasise the secondary effects of sexual arousal. Lipstick mimics increased blood flow to the mucous membranes, and blush mimics

temperature increase (Morris 1967, pp. 56-57, p. 89). Eye make-up emphasises pupil dilation. Sexualised girls wear make-up, and lip-gloss or lipstick is most evident, although blush and eye make-up is sometimes also present (see for example Figures 2, 3 and 4). Although toy make-up for girls has been available since the 1950s, the toy cosmetics market underwent a major expansion in the early 1980s (Varney 1994, pp. 26-27) and today cosmetics are often sold to girls directly as beauty aids rather than toys (see Section 2.3).

Figure 7 Arch boyswear advertisement, *Sunday Life*



Source: *Sunday Life*, 5 February 2006, p. 43

2.3 Advertisements

In our survey of advertising material, we discovered that children were sexualised for two quite different kinds of purposes: to sell products to children, and to sell products to adults. ‘Child-selling-to-child’ advertisements (CC ads) sexualise children to sell products primarily aimed at children, and thus implicitly legitimate precocious sexual behaviour in children. ‘Child-selling-to-adult’ advertisements (CA ads) sexualise children to sell products primarily aimed at adults, and the implicitly paedophilic connotations of this are even more disturbing. For example, over the five year period January 2000 – December 2005 there were 23 advertisements (from print, television, and outdoor categories) about which the Advertising Standards Board (ASB) received complaints that we judged to be complaints about the sexualisation of children.⁵ Table 1 gives details of these advertisements. Of these advertisements, we judged that nine were CC ads (39 per cent), while 12 were CA ads (52 per cent), and a further two could fall into both categories (9 per cent). The ASB descriptions of the advertisements, marked with an asterisk in Table 1, are included in Table 2 to illustrate the kinds of advertisements that we categorised as CC and CA ads.

The fact that more CA ads than CC ads were complained about to the ASB seems more likely to be due to these advertisements’ explicit use of children in adult contexts than to their frequency, since the evidence suggests that CC ads are much more common. We focus in this paper solely on the more common sexualisation of children that is framed as being ‘for children’ rather than ‘for adults’.

Additional examples of sexualised children in print advertisements or in fashion features, which function as advertisements, are published in Electronic Appendix 1, available at www.tai.org.au. These images were located through a search of easily available material, and we believe that they represent a very small proportion of all such images.

⁵ The Advertising Standards Board is appointed by the Australian advertising industry to receive written complaints from the public about advertising that might be considered offensive (ASB 2006).

Table 1 Advertisements sexualising children about which the ASB received complaints, 2001-2005

Reference No.	Date	Advertiser and Product	Medium	Category
286/05*	11 Oct 05	Beiersdorf Australia Ltd (<i>Nivea Body Contouring Cream</i>)	TV	CA
33/05	8 Mar 05	Frucor Beverages (Australia) Pty Ltd (<i>Evian</i>)	TV	CA
342/04*	7 Dec 04	Vehicle Distributors Aust Pty Ltd (<i>Renault Megane Coupe Cabriolet</i>)	TV	CA
341/04	7 Dec 04	Bendon Pty Ltd (<i>Elle Macpherson Intimates – piano</i>)	Print	CA
340/04	7 Dec 04	Bendon Pty Ltd (<i>Elle Macpherson Intimates – piano</i>)	Print	CA
310/04	9 Nov 04	Bendon Pty Ltd (<i>Elle Macpherson Intimates – piano</i>)	TV	CA
302/04	9 Nov 04	Mitsubishi Motors Australia Pty Ltd (<i>Colt</i>)	TV	CA
284/04	9 Nov 04	Beaumont Bathrooms	TV	CA
157/04	13 Jul 04	Mattel Pty Ltd (<i>Barbie Clothing</i>)	Outdoor	CC
100/04	11 May 04	Johnson & Johnson Pacific Pty Ltd (<i>Moisturising Body Wash</i>)	TV	CA
96/04	11 May 04	Mattel Pty Ltd (<i>My Scene Dolls</i>)	TV	CC
95/04	11 May 04	Funtastic Ltd (<i>MGA Entertainment – Bratz dolls</i>)	TV	CC
70/04	13 Apr 04	RMK	Outdoor	CA
365/03	11 Nov 03	Coffs Harbour Disposals	Print	CA
352/03	14 Oct 03	Target Australia Pty Limited	TV	CC
301/03*	14 Oct 03	Inghams Enterprises Australia Limited	TV	CC/CA
276/03*	9 Sep 03	Target Aust Ltd	Print	CC
262/03	12 Aug 03	Bambini Models Australia Pty Ltd	Print	CC/CA
180/03	10 Jun 03	Kellogg (Aust) Pty Ltd (<i>Coco Pops K*Pows</i>)	TV	CC
248/02	8 Oct 02	Just Jeans (<i>Jay Jays</i>)	TV	CC
206/02	10 Sep 02	Just Jeans Group (<i>Skirts</i>)	TV	CC
134/02	11 Jun 02	Prestige Auto Traders	Outdoor	CA
116/02	14 May 02	L’Oreal Australia Pty Ltd (<i>Maybelline Wet Shine Lip Colour</i>)	Print	CC

Table 2 Description of selected advertisements sexualising children and complaints received about them by the ASB, by category

Advertiser and product	ASB description of advertisement (from ASB case report)	Sample of complaints received by the ASB about the advertisement.	Category
Beiersdorf Australia Ltd (<i>Nivea Body Contouring Cream</i>)	The scenes in this television advertisement depict a mother and her young child in the living room of their house. The mother is lying face down on the sofa reading a book while the young boy plays with a toy car. He is shown to run the toy car up the mother's leg and lower thigh. As he does this, the child makes car noises. A voiceover states: 'Skin not as smooth as it used to be? ... New Nivea Body Contouring Cream'. The final scenes in the advertisement depict the child playing with the car toy on the mother's legs once more.	'In my opinion this ad is demonstrating to viewers – young and old – that it is okay, that it is appropriate behaviour, for a young child to be permitted to play with his toy cars, using a woman's thighs as the roadway ... teaches the child something which is wrong.'	CA
Vehicle Distributors Aust Pty Ltd (<i>Renault Megane</i>)	The [TV] advertisement features a young boy looking out his bus window and down into the Renault car next to the bus. He can see the female driver's legs and short skirt through the convertible glass rooftop.	'The advertisement used very young prepubescent boys and deliberately sexualises them. It verges on kiddy porn.'	CA
Inghams Enterprises Australia Limited	This television commercial opens with two young children, a boy and a girl sitting on a sofa. The camera pans back showing a mother sitting on a chair opposite the sofa. The mother, who is presumably the mother of the girl offers the children some food. As the mother gets up to leave, the young boy places his arm around the girl. The camera then shows the mother placing a tray of chicken nuggets in the oven, before cutting back to the two young children on the sofa. The children are shown to be leaning towards each other about to kiss. Just as they are about to kiss the mother re-enters the room with the plate of food. The children begin to eat the food, upset they had been interrupted. The advertisement closes with the Ingham logo on a red background.	<p>'... the part I found offensive was the age of the girl and boy which I put at between 9 to 11 years of age.'</p> <p>'... I think it is appalling to show children about to make out ... This ad shows that it is okay to be intimate and sexual at a young age and it is not.'</p> <p>'... I find this sexualisation of pre-pubescent children highly inappropriate. The body language of the two children is quite lascivious in imitation of older teenagers ... one can only wonder whether Inghams are trying to sell chicken to paedophiles with this creepy ad.'</p>	CC/CA
Target Australia Ltd	This catalogue advertisement features a photograph of a young girl modelling what is described as 'a cameo bra strap shell top'. Seated and leaning on one arm, the model is also wearing a short skirt.	'The strap looks just like a bra strap that has slipped out of the girl's top. The picture is sexually suggestive and I find this offensive because this is a child model. The pose is seductive as are the clothes she is advertising. The clothes are sized 7 to 14 comparable to the age group of the girls wearing these outfits.'	CC

2.4 A new range of magazines for girls aged 5-12

Popular girls' magazines such as *Barbie Magazine*, *Total Girl* and *Disney Girl* are a recent phenomenon. *Barbie Magazine* was first published in Australia in 1996, and was described as 'the first publication to appear in Australia that could be argued to be a children's version of adult women's magazines' (Sanders *et al.* 1998, pp. 112). *Total Girl* first appeared in 2002, and *Disney Girl* in 2004. In contrast, popular magazines targeting the teen market such as *Dolly* and *Girlfriend* have been published in Australia since 1970 and 1989 respectively. The extension of this genre of magazine to younger ages reflects both the increasing commercialisation of children's lives, education and entertainment (with girls now 'branded' as a *Total Girl* girl or a *Disney Girl* girl) and their earlier socialisation into the popularised teenage world of fashion, sex and pop stars.

All three girls' magazines are monthly publications with similar audiences. *Total Girl* targets the 'tween' audience of girls aged eight to eleven, while *Barbie Magazine* claims a slightly broader audience of girls aged five to twelve and *Disney Girl* claims its readers are aged between six and thirteen (Pacific Magazines 2006a; EMAP Australia 2006; ACP Magazines 2006a). By contrast, *Dolly* and *Girlfriend* magazines claim audiences among 14 to 17 year old girls (ACP Magazines 2006b; Pacific Magazines 2006b).

Although the girls' and the teen magazines are directed at apparently distinct audiences, they use very similar formats and contain similar images of the same celebrities. For example, the February 2006 issue of *Total Girl* (Pacific Magazines) and the March 2006 issue of *Girlfriend* (Pacific Magazines) both featured television actress Mischa Barton on the cover. Similarly the February 2006 issue of *Disney Girl* (ACP) and March 2006 issue of *Dolly* (ACP) shared the celebrity Olsen twins as their cover girls. The topics covered by the girls' magazines are also very similar to the teen magazines, as shown in the content analysis below. The content differs in level of maturity, especially with respect to explicit or overt sexualisation and sexual content. The girls' magazines clearly lead on to the teen versions published by the same companies and appear to prepare girls for more overt sexualisation in their future as teenagers.

A significant proportion of girls of primary school age read one or more of *Total Girl*, *Disney Girl* and *Barbie Magazine*. According to the Roy Morgan Young Australians survey (April 2005 – March 2006), among girls aged six to twelve, 27 per cent read *Total Girl*, 12 per cent read *Disney Girl*, and 10 per cent read *Barbie Magazine*. As shown in Table 3, in total, 34 per cent of girls aged six to twelve read one or more of these publications, and nearly half (44 per cent) of girls aged ten and eleven read one or more of these publications. Readership rates tend to increase with age, until they fall again at age twelve, when girls move on to teen magazines.

Table 3 Readership of girls' magazines by age (% of age group)

Magazine	Age 6	Age 7	Age 8	Age 9	Age 10	Age 11	Age 12
<i>Total Girl</i>	11	20	24	33	37	37	24
<i>Disney Girl</i>	9	9	11	14	14	15	9
<i>Barbie Magazine</i>	8	11	13	12	9	11	*
<i>At least one of TG, DG and BM</i>	20	27	30	40	44	44	29

Source: Roy Morgan Young Australians survey (April 2005 – March 2006)

Note: * Figures too small – suppressed.

Content analysis: Barbie Magazine, Disney Girl and Total Girl

A content analysis was carried out on the February 2006 issues of *Disney Girl* and *Total Girl*, and on the March 2006 issue of *Barbie Magazine*. As noted above, according to the publishers' websites, these publications are targeted at girls of primary school age, that is, from ages five to twelve, with some publishers suggesting slightly narrower age ranges (eight to eleven in the case of *Total Girl*).

In our analysis, material related to beauty (products, tips, make-overs), fashion (products, tips, admiration of), celebrities, or romance (crush) was identified as sexualising content. The celebrities included in the magazines are usually people famous largely for their appearance, such as actresses or models. Musicians also appear, but only those who are also young (aged from their teens to their early thirties) and sexy. Only two sports stars appeared in the magazines, and they were as sexualised and dolled up as the most successful catwalk model (*Barbie Magazine*, p. 64; *Total Girl*, p. 25). In contrast, book reviews, fictional content, pen pal noticeboards, pictures of readers, and advertisements for food or movies were identified as developmentally appropriate material.⁶ The estimates in Table 4 represent a conservative analysis of the content of the three magazines.

⁶ It is developmentally appropriate for children of primary school age to be interested in food and movies, although there is a further question about whether it is appropriate to advertise anything, including food and movies, to children who have not fully developed their cognitive capacities (Linn 2005). The broader question of whether advertising to children should be permitted at all is not considered in this paper.

Table 4 Content analysis of three magazines for girls aged five to twelve

Category	<i>Barbie Magazine</i>	<i>Total Girl</i>	<i>Disney Girl</i>
Beauty (%)	8	7	4
Fashion (%)	19	10	4
Celebrity (%)	23	35	38
Crush (%)	29	1	1
Total sexualising material (%)	74	53	47
Total developmentally appropriate (%)	20	43	46
Total miscellaneous (%)	6	3	7

Over half of the content of *Barbie Magazine* and *Total Girl* and close to half of *Disney Girl* was sexualising material. In addition, over one third of *Total Girl* and *Disney Girl* and close to a third of *Barbie Magazine* were representations of celebrities. Most disturbing was that almost three quarters of material in *Barbie Magazine* was sexualising, and close to one third of the entire magazine was devoted to crushes and boys. Merely one fifth of *Barbie Magazine* was identified as developmentally appropriate for the target audience. The content of these magazines is discussed in more detail below, with references summarised as BM (*Barbie Magazine*, March 2006), TG (*Total Girl*, February 2006) and DG (*Disney Girl*, February 2006).

Sexualising content: Beauty, fashion, celebrities and crushes

A large portion of the content of all three magazines is related to beauty, fashion, celebrities and crushes on men and boys. The magazines offer celebrity gossip, celebrity fashion pages, celebrity products and interviews with celebrities (see Figure 8). Countless pages are devoted to images and references to Paris and Nikki Hilton, Hilary Duff, Jessica and Ashlee Simpson, Kirsten Dunst, Lindsay Lohan, Mischa Barton, Rachel Bilson, and the Olsen twins (Mary Kate and Ashley). In *Barbie Magazine*, swimmer Leisel Jones, glamorously photographed with her mouth open and hands above her head, is not only sexualised but is also clearly promoting the beauty products of Innoxia, for whom she is an ‘ambassador’ (BM, p. 64). Gossip about celebrities frequently refers to their partners and ex-partners and their ‘ideal’ crushes or ‘on-screen’ crushes. Interviews with stars cover similar romantic, as well as more general, material. In a *Disney Girl* interview singer Ricki-Lee, who is pictured as a sexy and successful star, suggests that she would like to lose weight (DG, p. 20). Thus not only are young girls shown unrealistic and sexualised women as an ideal, but they are also told that these stars are obsessed with their weight and body image. Napoli *et al.* (2003), who conducted a formal study of the young models used in teen publications *Dolly* and *Girlfriend* alongside the still younger models used in *Barbie Magazine*, concluded that

all three magazines appeared to reinforce ‘the feminine ideal image’, and that this was of particular concern given that ‘the age at which young girls receive this message has decreased’ (p. 65).

The magazines do not stop at encouraging young girls to idealise a narrow selection of role models – they also encourage them to emulate their styles. Sections that encourage little girls to be like their role models, including Paris Hilton, Kirsten Dunst and Hilary Duff, show them ‘how to get their look’ (BM, pp. 38, 47, 50; TG, p. 65). In particular, it is astonishing that Paris Hilton should be considered an appropriate role model for girls who are not yet in their teens (see Figure 9); although she is heir to a substantial fortune, Hilton has no particular talent, and is famous largely due to a pirated video showing her engaged in fellatio. Hair styling and fashion imitation sections usually show a photo of the celebrity in question along with a real-life girl version who has been made to look the same (or similar). *Barbie Magazine* has pages showing young girls with plenty of make-up and Barbie brand jewellery emulating Barbie dolls’ style and hair-dos while *Disney Girl* shows girls how to emulate the more innocent character of Miranda from the *Lizzie Maguire* television series.⁷

Beauty products and advice are also ubiquitous (see Figure 10). Lip gloss, body lotion and hair products are represented as essential purchases for readers, despite the fact that the vast majority of these readers are still at primary school. Competitions for readers include the chance to win hair, beauty and fashion make-overs (BM, p. 13), be a cover-girl or take part in a fashion photo shoot (TG, pp.46-47), rock and roll make-overs (BM, p. 47), or to win prize packs including a range of products such as eye-shadow, eye pencil, lip gloss and shimmer stick, camisole sets, hair kits, and other clothing products (DG, p. 2; TG, pp. 92-93; BM, pp. 74-75). In *Disney Girl*, girls are also encouraged to ‘stand out in their school uniform’ by copying the hairstyles of their favourite celebrities (DG, p. 11).

⁷ See BM, pp. 15, 38, 47, 50, 62; DG, pp. 66-67.

Figure 8 'Star power' feature on celebrity products, *Total Girl*

St★r Power

Now you can dress like your **fave celeb**, smell like them, wear their watch and even sleep in their bed! TG checks out the **big-bucks** world of **celeb** products...

Jessica Simpson

Jess used her girly image to create a range of beauty products called Dessert and Dessert Treats, with yummy flavours like Cupcake and Lollipop. Jess has also released a range of junior sportswear, kids clothes, jeans, dresses, hats, watches, jewellery and undies under the JS and Sweet Kisses brand names.



Mandy Moore

Mandy's MBLEM range of tees come in her fave colours, printed with lyrics from her fave songs. Mandy says she could never find good-fitting tees so she decided to make her own. "I kind of did the line selfishly," she says. But Mandy gives a percentage of her sales to the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society, to help cancer research.




Jessie J. Jones wearing one of Mandy's creations.

GWEN STEFANI

After designing a range of handbags with LeSportsac, Gwen launched her fashion label L.A.M.B. The launch was so successful, Gwen has launched an additional label called Harajuku Lovers and even has a range of shoes out too! Oh, and she also designed a digital camera - so it can match your outfit!



Gwen shows her staff backstage at one of her fashion shows.

JENNIFER LOPEZ

JLo is the queen of celeb products! First she launched her JLo clothing range, and then released a range of perfumes - JLo Glow, JLo Miami Glow, Still and Live. She also launched a higher-end clothing range called Sweetface, angering animal rights activists with her use of real fur! Oh, and she also owns a Cuban restaurant called Madre's!



24

totalgirl.com.au

Beyoncé

Remember how Beyoncé's mum designed the costumes in the Destiny's Child days? Well, now they've called it a day, Beyoncé and her mum have launched a fashion line called House of Dereon, named after Beyoncé's grandmother. Beyoncé is also the face of Tommy Hilfiger's True Star and True Star Gold fragrances.



Source: *Total Girl*, February 2006, pp.24-25

BRITNEY

Britney signed on with Elizabeth Arden to release four fragrances over five years and after the huge success of her first perfume Curious, her new Fantasy range is set to be very popular too. Britney helped to design both of the bottles and like her celeb perfume-partners, appeared in the advertising campaigns.



Hilary

Since the introduction of Hilary's cute clothing range, Stuff by Duff, and in between her busy schedule, Hills has been in talks with Estee Lauder to create a new Hilary Duff perfume. "They really want me to design the whole thing and do it all myself, which is really cool," she says. Hilary is also working on a new higher-end fashion range for a slightly older market - we can't wait to check it out!



Some of Hilary's products - is there anything this girl can't do?

Delta

Delta joined forces with lingerie brand Arabella to design a range of underwear. But unlike other celeb undie designers Elle Macpherson and Kylie, Delta didn't model her designs herself. The range is stocked exclusively in Primark.



MARIA SHARAPOVA

Tennis Star Maria seems to be always launching a new product of some description. She already has her own fragrance and watch lines, and now she has also designed some jewellery and handbags for Samantha Thavasa Handbags.



NIKKI HILTON

The youngest Hilton sister started out designing bags with Samantha Thavasa Handbags and is often snapped toting one of her creations. Now she's moved into full on fashion design with her Chick range of clothing. The designs look tacky but with the Hilton name attached, they could become hot-sellers!



Nikki, with her Chick clothing line, proves she can do more than just party!

MK&A

Mary-Kate and Ashley have built an empire based on MK&A products! Not only do they have clothing, footwear and fragrance lines, but their range extends to dolls, videos, DVDs, books, cosmetics, school supplies and furniture!



Style? Check. Money? Check. Yep, MK&A really do have it all!



Figure 9 'Gorgeous Green!' fashion page, *Barbie Magazine*

barbie fashion

STAR STYLE

Chino cardigan \$48.95

Bardot Girl skirt \$49.95

Chino halter top \$45.95

Wicked Greta hair clip \$7.95

Accessoize earrings \$1.95

Loon necklace \$12.95

Candy wedges \$49.95

Fun bracelet \$10

Tate & Loretta bag \$34.95

Gorgeous Green! Get hold of the new-season colour and be the apple of everyone's eye, just like TV star **Paris Hilton**.

38 Barbie Mag

SHANE HOLLY WARR

Source: *Barbie Magazine*, March 2006, p. 38

Figure 10 'Cupid calling' beauty page, *Barbie Magazine*

barbie beauty

Cupid calling

Australian Idol winner Kate Bonagura says that finding your one true love is what makes you beautiful. For Kate, her great love has always been music, and she says she started singing "as soon as I could talk." Even though she's rumored to be romantically linked to fellow Idol contestant James Van Der Beek, she reckons she wouldn't mind spending Valentine's Day with her favourite singer Robbie Williams!

1. Start Valentine's Day in the right way by applying The Body Shop Born Lippy Strawberry Lip Balm. Tasty!
2. Need totally smooth lips in a heartbeat? Whack on some Fresh Faced Kiss Me Lip Balm.
3. Got a pal with an ache? Surprise them with a sweet Venustus heat pillow.
4. Lather up with Innova Love And Happiness Enchanting Shower Gel on love's special day. So beautiful!
5. The perfect gift for your best friend is some Girl Happy Strawberry Crush Shimmer Body Lotion with a bonus lip gloss.
6. Freeman Raspberry, Almond & Kiwi Lathering Facial Scrub smells delicious and will leave your face shiny and new.
7. To get your crush to notice you, walk by wearing Love At First Glow by J.Lo Eau de Toilette. It smells so pretty.
8. How cute is this container? Aquolina Pink Sugar Eau de Toilette is the perfect cheer-up gift for someone not having a great Valentine's Day.

60 Barbie Mag

Source: *Barbie Magazine*, March 2006, p. 60

The sexualisation implicit in these girls' magazines does not stop with women and girls. Girls are also encouraged to view men and boys as sexual objects, potential partners or crushes (see Figure 11). The *Barbie Magazine* issue discussed was flagged as a 'cute crush issue' (BM, p. 1) and contained full page and smaller images of teenage boys and men up to thirty years of age. Images of these men and boys were framed with remarks such as 'who's your celeb dream date?', 'sweet boys', 'our top 5 crushes' (BM, pp. 4, 33, 34). There is a risk that if five to twelve year old girls are actively encouraged to have crushes on, and dream about dating, adult men, they will be more inclined to see adult sexual advances as flattering.

Figure 11 'Are you his friend or his crush?' quiz, *Barbie Magazine*

barbiequiz

Are you his friend or his CRUSH?

6 signs that he likes you

- ♥ You often catch him staring at you from the corner of your eye – although when you look at him he quickly looks away.
- ♥ If he's shy, he'll blush when you say "hi."
- ♥ He makes excuses to talk to you, like purposefully forgetting all his pens so he can ask you for one of yours in class.
- ♥ He is forever trying new ways to get your attention, and may even come across as a show-off. Be warned though, this may include teasing you and being mean. Boys have been known to act like they don't like you when really they do!
- ♥ He stutters or mumbles when he talks to you and can't seem to get his words straight.
- ♥ He flatters you and makes you feel special. This may include sending you cute text messages or simply treating you differently to all the other girls (and boys) in your class.

76 Barbie Mag

You've known each other...

- For years.
- Not that long.

You hang out together:

- All the time.
- Never!

When he talks to you he:

- Introduces you.
- Excludes you.

Around you he's:

- Confident.
- Shy.

Are his friends your friends too?

- Yes.
- No.

Does he stare or ignore?

- Ignore.
- Stare.

He treats you like:

- One of the boys.
- A girl.

He makes an effort to get your attention:

- All the time.
- Never.

Has he asked for your number?

- No way.
- Yes!

He often:

- Compliments you.
- Confides in you.

Friend
You guys are such great pals that the thought of anything romantic is out of the question. He's comfortable around you and thinks you're a very cool chick!

Crush!
This boy definitely thinks of you as more than a friend. His shyness and compliments are a dead giveaway! Now you just need to work out if you feel the same way...

Source: *Barbie Magazine*, March 2006, p. 76

One page of the *Barbie Magazine* crush issue describes '10 signs you have a crush' (BM, p. 6). The background features a suggestive picture of two characters, from the teenage television show *The O.C.*, about to kiss. This television show is in fact rated M (recommended for persons aged 15 years and over), but it is the most talked-about program in all three magazines. The actors from *The O.C.* (Adam Brody, Mischa Barton and Rachel Bilson) are among the many celebrities found in the magazines, despite the fact that the show is clearly rated as inappropriate viewing for the magazines' target audience. *The O.C.* is also the topic of a 'readers' debate' in *Total Girl* with readers aged 12 writing in (TG, p. 75). The plethora of messages that encourage girls to view all

males in their lives as crushes or potential crushes are more strongly pushed in *Total Girl* and *Barbie Magazine* with the proportion of content focused on boys and crushes peaking in the latter. The language used in these two magazines is also more highly sexualised. Everything from boys to clothes, celebrities, music and even backpacks, is described as hot and cute, cool and sweet, reinforcing to girls the qualities that are most appreciated in all aspects of life – qualities which they should presumably aspire to have.

Developmentally appropriate content

Interspersed among this highly sex- and image-focused material are puzzles, recipes, fairy stories, comics and fiction as well as book reviews and DIY stickers.⁸ Toys are a common topic for the magazines as are children's television programs, pictures and posters of cute animals and other material that would normally be associated with girls of primary school age. This material is a truer reflection of the maturity and age of the readers who are now being encouraged to be concerned with their looks and their style and who they have a crush on.

The pictures of readers in the magazines are a stark contrast to all the other images of child models and celebrities in the magazines.⁹ Girls are shown in the magazines as the young girls that they are. They play basketball, sing in choirs, play the flute, and love sport, reading and scrap-booking. Yet the lifestyle and products that they are being drawn into and sold do not reflect these interests. The result is that girls are starting to write in for fashion, beauty, and love tips, not advice on which book to read or how to play a perfect back-hand. As mentioned, the only sporting role models in the publications were a sexualised Leisel Jones, and the new and improved version of Anna Kournikova, Maria Sharapova. The readers are being enticed into the popular and cool world of make-up and fashion by being given 'free' gifts and winning prizes in competitions to get a make-over. They are also being invited to see themselves not as healthy, active and imaginative girls, but as hot and sassy tweens on the prowl.

Advertising and media literacy

Advertising and product promotion is common in all magazines ranging from 'season must haves' to competition prizes, paid advertisements and sponsored segments. In many cases, the difference between the ads in the magazine and the magazine content is minimal. In *Total Girl*, for example, an article on Bratz dolls is immediately followed by an ad for Bratz dolls, blurring the distinction between paid advertising and magazine content (TG, pp. 66-68). Celebrity endorsed products are mixed in with celebrity gossip and advice on products mixed in with advice on best friends.

The ability of children of primary school age to understand the difference between the advice they are given in relation to peer pressure and the 'need' to purchase certain products is questionable. In *Total Girl*, girls are warned that peer pressure can be a bad influence through remarks such as your friends 'might try to get you to be mean to

⁸ See for example: BM, p.14, pp.16-19; DG, pp. 37-41, p. 43, pp. 57-63; TG, pp. 70-73, p. 91, p. 98, pp.110-113.

⁹ See: TG, pp. 2-3, 42-43; BM, p. 9; DG, pp. 78-80.

another girl they don't like or wear certain brands to fit in' (TG, p. 76). However, readers are also informed of this seasons 'must have' products and styles without a hint of irony. Furthermore, both the advice on products and the advice on life are given by the magazine editors and staff with the authority of the adult to much younger and inexperienced readers who look up to them. To further confuse matters, the magazine staff constantly alternate between playing the role of a peer and that of a more experienced and hip older sister. This amounts to exploiting the social ambiguity of the pre-teenage years and encouraging the sexualisation and adultification of young girls. For example, in *Total Girl*, Olena, a member of the *Total Girl* 'team', recommends an Australis brand make-up kit to readers suggesting that '[t]his little party pack is perfect for parties. I can reapply my make-up whenever I need to!' (TG, p. 11). This may be appropriate for the adult Olena but not for an eight year old girl. The fact that other (adult) members of staff are recommending Nintendo games and Game Boys contributes to the blurring of this distinction. The message to readers is that girls who play Nintendo should also be sure to re-apply their make-up at parties.

From their analysis of the first twelve monthly issues of *Barbie Magazine*, Sanders *et al.* noted that the 'clear message throughout the magazine is that to have fun, to be "cool", to be happy, to be part of the group, a girl needs products, products, products' (1998, p. 113). They concluded that 'each issue is a large and clever advertisement which uses development and psychological knowledge to market products to young and vulnerable children' (Sanders *et al.* 1998, p. 114).

Developmentally appropriate content 'drowned out'

Developmentally appropriate content of the magazines (such as advice on not succumbing to peer pressure, different dancing styles, consuming dairy products, or encouraging comfortable sports clothing) is either framed using beauty or completely drowned out by the rest of the magazine content encouraging girls to be fashion, beauty and body conscious (for example, see TG, p. 76). One clear example of the mixed messages that girls receive from the magazine is *Total Girl*'s 'Are you in a rush to grow up?' quiz. Girls are asked questions such as 'Do you love lip gloss but can't wait to wear lip stick?', 'Are you getting sick of wearing your hair in a ponytail everyday and are experimenting with different hair styles?' and 'Do you beg your mum to let you stay out longer?'. The quiz ends with girls placed in three categories related to their perceived rush to grow up. The category titled 'Put the breaks [sic] on!' advises girls to 'take your time growing up and slow down' (TG, p. 89). Yet the rest of the magazine pushes make-up and fashion products, teaching girls to emulate their teenage and adult role models and encouraging them to enter the adolescent world of boys and parties.

2.5 Children's television viewing

According to Australian Bureau of Statistics data on children's participation in culture and leisure activities, 'watching TV or videos' is by far the most popular activity, one in which virtually all children participate, and which occupies a substantial portion of children's spare time (ABS 2003). In 2003, the median number of hours of television or

video viewing per week for children aged five to eight years was 15, and for children aged nine to eleven years, 20 (ABS 2003, p. 33).¹⁰

However the demographics of television audiences for specific programs are not publicly available, although they may be purchased from OzTAM (Australian Television Audience Measurement), the company that monitors Australian television ratings. This lack of publicly available information is surprising given the pre-eminence of ‘watching TV or videos’ among children’s leisure activities. Admittedly Australia has led the way internationally in requiring commercial television licensees to broadcast a minimum of 390 hours per year of high-quality television programs for children, rated P for preschoolers and C for children aged five and over (ACMA 2006a; ACMA 2006b). The Australian Communication and Media Authority’s Children’s Television Standards require P and C programs to be made specifically for children (defined as people aged under 14), be entertaining, be well produced, enhance children’s understanding and experience, and be appropriate for Australian children (ACMA 2006a). However, the high number of hours spent by children ‘watching TV or videos’ suggests that they are also viewing many television programs that are not specifically designed for them.

The Australia Institute sourced a report from OzTAM on children’s viewing figures for a number of television programs of interest. These included programs based around music videos – *Video Hits*, *So Fresh*, and *Rage* – as well as *The O.C.* and *Big Brother*. OzTAM collects television viewing data for the five major metropolitan areas in Australia: Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth.¹¹ About two thirds of the Australian population live in these five major metropolitan areas. Percentage estimates below are based on this data, and national percentages may differ slightly.

Music video programs

Some programs that are rated as suitable for general viewing contain high levels of sexual innuendo, including programs screening music videos which air during the mornings on weekends, a time when many children are likely to be watching television. The period 6.00 am to 10.00 am on Saturdays is recognised as a peak viewing period for children, one in which only material classified G (suitable for general viewing), P (preschooler) or C (children) may be broadcast.

Programs screening music videos broadcast during the mornings on weekends include the following. *Video Hits* is screened on Channel 10 from 8.30 am – 12 noon on both Saturdays and Sundays (Network Ten 2006). It is classified G, with the exception of the live segments, which occur after 10.00 am and are TBA (to be announced) (Network Ten 2006). *So Fresh* screens on Channel 9 from 10.00 am – 11.30 am on Saturdays. It is classified PG.¹² *Rage* screens on ABC from 6.00 am – 9.00 am on Saturdays, and also

¹⁰ The mean number of hours was higher for both age categories: 19.4 hours for children aged five to eight years, and 22.5 hours for children aged nine to eleven (ABS 2003, p. 32).

¹¹ OzTAM also collect television viewing data nationally for Subscription television.

¹² The other free-to-air stations (Nine prior to 10.00 am, ABC-2 from 9.30 am and Seven from 6.00 am) screen mainly cartoons or children’s shows rated C or G during the Saturday morning timeslot (SBS and SBS News both screen news from around the world).

screens from 5.00 am – 6.30 am on Sundays. It is classified G at those times.¹³ However, *Rage* also screens at other times over the weekend – from 11.55 pm Friday night to 5.00 am Saturday morning (when it is classified M), from 5.00 am – 6.00 am Saturday morning (when it is classified PG), and from 12 midnight until 5.00 am Sunday (when it is classified M).

OzTAM figures for these music video programs broadcast on weekends for the period 1 January 2006 to 12 August 2006 show that child audiences (age five to twelve) for these programs are small but significant. In the five major metropolitan cities, on Saturday mornings, on average, 13,000 children view *So Fresh*, and 13,000 view *Video Hits*, while *Video Hits* on Sunday mornings attracts on average 24,000 child viewers. In the five major metropolitan cities, over the entire weekend, on average, 5,000 children view *Rage*. It is not possible to tell from the OzTAM report sourced by the Australia Institute how many of these child viewers see more than one music video program, but if there were no overlap, that is, each child viewer saw only one music video program, in total less than four per cent of children aged five to twelve would see a music video program each weekend – about 55,000 children in the five major metropolitan cities. If there were some overlap, that is, some children see more than one music video program each weekend, then the total percentage and number of children aged five to twelve who view these programs would be lower.

The material children see when watching music video programs often contains a high degree of sexual innuendo.

Although music videos are fairly diverse in themes and scenes, if there is such a thing as a typical music video it features one or more men performing while beautiful, scantily clad young women dance and writhe lasciviously. Often the men dance too, but the women always have fewer clothes on. The women are mostly just props; not characters, not even people, really, they appear for a fraction of a second, long enough to shake their butts a couple of times, then the camera moves on (Arnett 2002, p. 256).

It appears that even quite concentrated and explicit sexually suggestive behaviour and appearance, such as that found in some music videos, falls outside the television regulatory codes as they are currently formulated.

For example, the music video accompanying The Pussycat Dolls' song 'Buttons', features the six Pussycat Dolls, several of whom remove clothing as the video progresses to end up dressed in knee-high boots, micro-skirts and push-up bras or corsets, along with one fully clothed male, rapper Snoop Dogg. The lyrics are dominated by the repeated phrase 'loosen up my buttons babe'. It appears that the Dolls are performing for Snoop Dogg in a private nightclub floorshow, since the scenery and

¹³ As of July 28 2006, the format of *Rage* changed to include 'jtv', the new television counterpart to ABC Radio's youth music station, Triple J. As part of this change, the ARIA top 50 video clips previously shown by *Rage* will be replaced by the top 20 as voted for by Triple J listeners (ABC 2006a, ABC 2006b). Prior to that date, viewers were advised on the 'playlists' published on the internet prior to the program screening that 'Some clips may be missing from the rage Top 50 for various reasons including being unavailable or not suitable for the G rated timeslot of the Top 50' (ABC 2006c).

lighting suggest this context but no audience is shown. The Dolls dance and pose around and on top of a horizontal waist-high pole and chairs, as well as inside a tunnel. The choreography incorporates a good deal of pelvic thrusting and the Dolls often run their hands down and around their semi-naked torsos. Occasional steamy images of the Dolls' faces, with open mouths, are interspersed among the dancing scenes. During July and August 2006 this video was repeatedly broadcast on *Video Hits* on Saturday morning.

It is perfectly consistent to have no objections to adults and even teenagers viewing such material, but to also consider that ongoing exposure to such material may be harmful to children's development. The distinction between art and pornography is subject to contest, but given the particular vulnerabilities of children, a more cautious approach would seem prudent.

However, regulation of such areas is notoriously difficult. The complexities of regulating sexually suggestive behaviour and appearance are highlighted by consideration of correspondence between Young Media Australia and Network Ten about a music video ('The Way You Move' by Outkast) screened on the Saturday morning program *Video Hits* in 2004.¹⁴ The essence of Young Media Australia's complaint was as follows.

The video clip featured many scantily clad women, being perused by fully clad men. Further in a dance sequence where three persons were lined up close behind each other, the thrusting by the young man at the rear of the three persons was sexually suggestive. YMA notes that CTVA Code 2.11.2 requires that the 'visual depiction of sexual behaviour must be brief, infrequent, with little or no detail and strictly limited to the story line'.

YMA grants that the behaviour fell far short of actual or stimulated sexual acts, but believes that much of the behaviour depicted was inappropriately sexual in tone and intent.

Network Ten's response drew on the distinction between art and pornography, claiming that any sexual references implied by the dancing remained 'very discreet in the highly stylised, recognisably artificial format associated with the music-video genre', and that any physical dance movements 'are not meaningful' beyond the 'typically stylised art form' of dance. Network Ten further claimed that 'any sexual inference would operate above the awareness levels of children'.

The idea that culture in any form could be regulated by a puritanical check-box approach is ridiculous. Would we insist that dancers are covered neck-to-knee and that choreography not include hip or rib isolations? The list of criteria would be difficult to articulate and impossible to apply. However, there is something equally ridiculous about the idea that concentrated and explicit sexually suggestive behaviour and appearance such as that in The Pussycat Dolls' 'Buttons' video (described above) is 'not

¹⁴ Letter from Paul Walsh, Network Manager, Regulatory Business Affairs, Network Ten Pty Ltd, dated 8 April 2004, in response to complaint made on 1 March 2004 by Marion Sullivan, Secretary, Young Media Australia.

meaningful' beyond the stylised artistic context. As Rich (2005, p. 330) writes, sex has many cultural, sensual, and experiential associations, which requires us to recognise that:

it is not just overtly sexual material [i.e. depictions of sexual intercourse] that motivates sexual thoughts or behaviors... If we are to conduct useful and valid research on whether media use predisposes young people toward risky sexual behavior, we need to broaden our vision of what that media input may be (Rich 2005, p. 330).

Exposure to highly sexualised material such as that contained in some music videos, combined with the messages saturating all kinds of advertising that sexiness is highly desirable, leads children to mimic this sexy behaviour, sometimes to the dismay of the adults who seek to protect them. Early childhood development expert Diane Levin quotes the following story from one grandmother.

Jenna, my four-year-old granddaughter and I were in a store buying shoes for the new school year. The radio was playing and she said to the sales clerk, "Is that the Spice Girls singing?" He shook his head "No," and asked if she liked the Spice Girls. She nodded her head. He asked, "What's your favourite song?" Jenna looked at him coyly and said "Let Me Be Your Lover!" When he asked if she knew the words to the song, she began to sing the song – including all the "gyrations" of her little body. I wanted to sink into a hole and cry! (Levin 2005, p. 142)

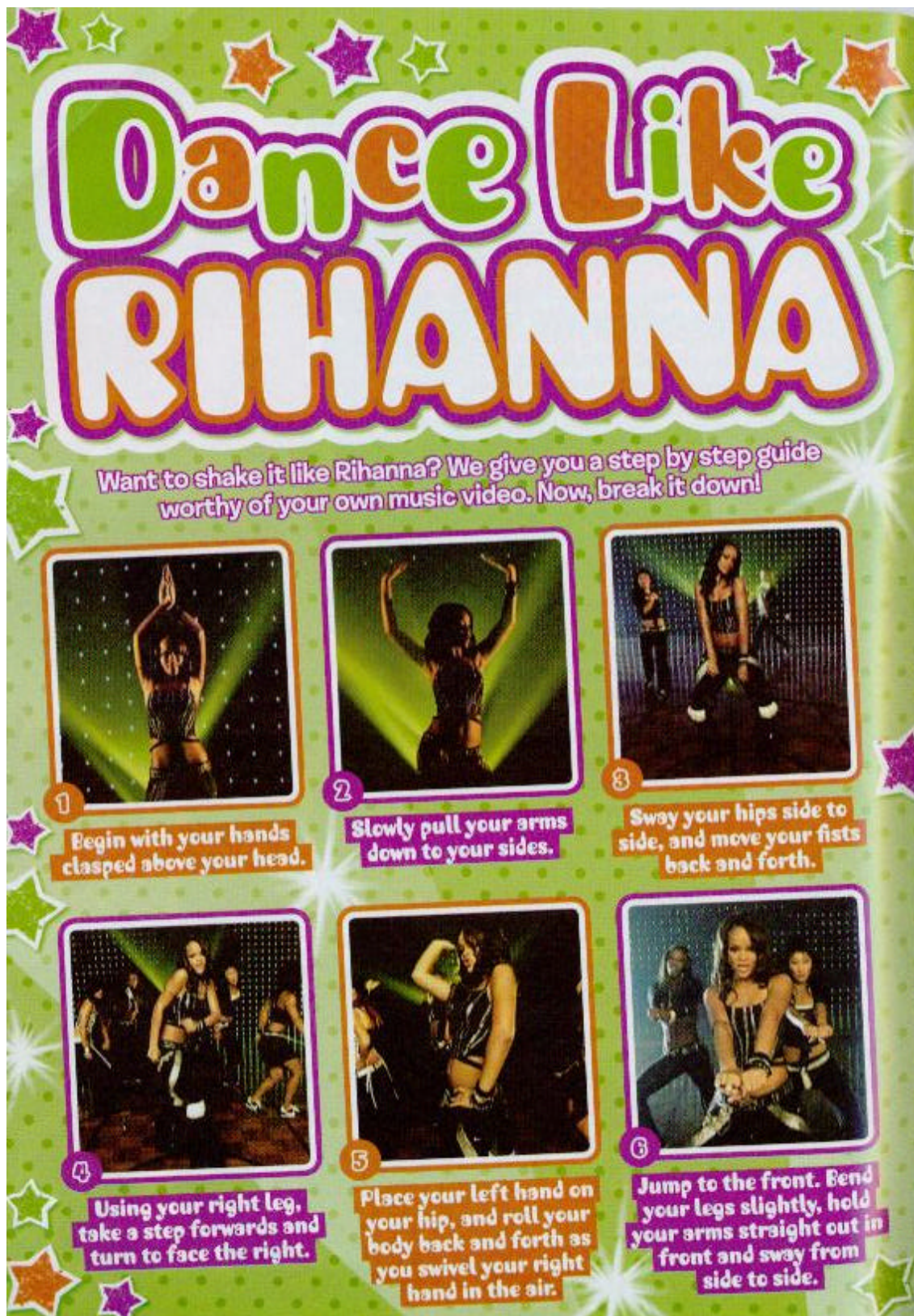
Figure 12 shows that children are not just 'picking up' such sexy behaviour, it is also actively being taught to them by magazines such as *Total Girl*, which is targeted at eight to eleven year old girls. Stills from a video clip of pop star Rihanna are used to assist readers to learn the moves. In the stills, Rihanna is dressed in tight black and silver clothes with abundant midriff and cleavage showing, and the background suggests a stage in a nightclub. Girls are instructed to 'sway your hips side to side' and 'roll your body back and forth'. *Total Girl* presents these instructions against an apple green, orange and purple background decorated with cut out stars. The contrast between this 'little girl' background and the black clothing and bare flesh that dominates the stills of Rihanna could not be more marked.

Adult concerns are not limited to music videos but also extend to television programs more generally.

I'm concerned about the way sex and sexuality is used on television these days. It's not about sex for love or even affection – it's about using sex as a way of getting power. It works that way for both males and females. What a terrible message to send to our kids (Father of a ten-year old girl, quoted in Linn 2005, p. 125).

Two programs that our research suggested might be of particular concern for Australian children include *The O.C.* and *Big Brother*.

Figure 12 'Dance like Rihanna' feature, *Total Girl*



Source: *Total Girl*, September 2006, p. 18

The O.C.

The O.C. is a teenage drama 'based on the trials and tribulations of families and friends living in Newport Beach – a super-rich suburb in California's Orange County' (McWhirter 2006). Described by one New York critic as a 'Californicating teen soap', it incorporates prom glamour (with plunging designer necklines), cheerleaders, regular spots for up-and-coming musicians and bands, sports cars, brawls, occasional forays into drug-taking, and of course, a great deal of dating (Greenblatt 2006). *The O.C.* is rated M, that is, recommended for viewing only by persons aged 15 years and over, due to its sexual content and portrayal of drug use. The 2006 season was screened at 8.30 pm on Wednesday nights.

As noted earlier, the stars of *The O.C.*, in particular Mischa Barton and Adam Brody, often feature in girls' magazines, without any mention that the program is rated M. Moreover, in the September 2006 issue of *Total Girl*, the DVD of *The O.C. (Season 3)* opens the page entitled 'Hot DVDs', with the following endorsement:

Missing *The O.C.* already? We have just what the doctor ordered! ... season 3 has just landed on DVD so you can relive all those I-can't-believe-it moments again and again... it won't leave your DVD player! (*Total Girl*, September 2006, p. 98)

Although the DVD is pictured with the M classification on the front clearly visible, it appears that the *Total Girl* editorial team are not concerned about recommending it to their eight to eleven year old readers.

Given the high readership of girls' magazines among girls of primary school age (for example, among girls aged nine to eleven, more than one third read *Total Girl*) it is not surprising to find that according to OzTAM data sourced by the Australia Institute, in the five major metropolitan cities, on average 4.6 per cent of children aged five to twelve viewed each episode of *The O.C.* season broadcast on Network Ten during 2006. This equates to approximately 65,000 children in the five major metropolitan cities aged five to twelve – more than the total who view the music video programs – despite the fact the show is recommended only for viewing by persons aged 15 or over, and is broadcast at 8.30 pm during the week.

Big Brother

Launched in Australia in 2001, *Big Brother* involves a group of young men and women who are locked in a house on the Gold Coast for three months, with their behaviour constantly recorded on camera. Each week, one or two of the 'housemate' contestants are 'evicted' from the house, as contestants nominate, and viewers vote on, who they want to see go. Essentially, the show is a popularity contest, since those who stay on longer win prizes, with the final housemate left in the house winning hundreds of thousands of dollars in prize money.

During the 2006 season of *Big Brother*, episodes broadcast seven days a week on Network Ten, on weekdays and Saturdays at 7.00 pm, and on Sundays slightly earlier, at 6.30 pm.¹⁵ Most of these episodes were edited versions of life in the house although Friday night was a live episode. Additional *Big Brother* ‘events’ during the evening timeslot and finishing before 10.00 pm included extra episodes in different formats. ‘Nominations’ involved contestants each individually choosing the other contestants they would most like to see evicted. Viewers were then able to vote on whom they would most like to see evicted from among the contestants who are shown to be most unpopular from this ‘in-house’ nomination process. The outcome was shown in special ‘Evictions’ and ‘Double evictions’ features. New people were introduced to the house in episodes known as ‘Intruders’, and there were also a range of other special episodes including interviews and games.

Late screenings of the 2006 season of *Big Brother: Adults Only* (known during the 2005 season as *Big Brother Uncut*) showed more graphic detail of daily life in the house, in particular, shower scenes and sex scenes, but were axed after protests from many that they breached community, and television classification, standards (Haywood 2006). Subscribers could view footage of life in the house live on the Internet at all times.

Big Brother goes well beyond the average television serial, and commentary on it varies widely. Some argue that it is accessible and democratic programming,¹⁶ which reflects important social and individual issues and encourages interactive critical viewing – since viewers can vote for housemates they don’t like to be evicted (Brunero 2006). Others see the series as exploitative and voyeuristic, functioning more than anything else as ‘mild porn’, and tag it ‘Big Brothel’ (Nguyen 2006). It is possible that over time the show has progressed from being less of the first to more of the second, as one viewer of the show from the 2001 to the 2005 season explains.

The original difference between *Big Brother* Australia and the rest of the world is [that] we had interesting people to start with and it wasn’t all about nakedness and getting it on ... the show was not built around sexual encounters, rather on the interesting interactions and reactions of different people and personalities.¹⁷

During the 2005 season, there were two particularly explicit sexual incidents on *Big Brother*.

In one episode, a housemate rubbed his crotch into a female contestant’s shoulder as he gave her a massage. In another, a male dropped his pants, grabbed a woman’s breast and called her a “whorebag” (Masters and Jones 2006).

The producers attempted to ‘clean up’ the show for the 2006 season, but were proven to have failed when one of the male contestants held a female contestant down on her bed while another male contestant, clad in boxer shorts, pushed his crotch in her face (Murphy and Stapleton 2006). Although the incident, described by contestants as

¹⁵ Times vary slightly from city to city, so we use Sydney times for the purposes of this discussion.

¹⁶ The show has consistently attracted a large audience over its six seasons – one each year since 2001.

¹⁷ Response from ‘Jasmin’ on the B&T blog that published Nguyen 2006.

‘turkey slapping’, was not broadcast on television, it was seen by subscribers watching the live Internet streaming of activities in the house at 4.00 am on Saturday 1 July.

The incident featured on the front page of newspapers around Australia the following Monday, with politicians expressing strong disapproval. *The Courier-Mail* commented that the program encouraged such behaviour.

By putting together a group of beautiful young people in the same house, and making them share beds and showers and walk around in revealing clothing, the show’s producers ensure that the atmosphere in the house is sexually charged (*The Courier-Mail* 2006).

Even when sexual incidents such as the above are not shown during *Big Brother* episodes or special broadcast before 10.00 pm (when children are most likely to be watching), they are widely discussed in the broader community and the contestants regularly discuss who kissed or slept with whom during broadcasts before 10.00 pm.

It is not surprising, given the high ratings *Big Brother* achieves, that OzTAM data for the 2006 season reveal that large numbers of children aged five to twelve view it. For all *Big Brother* events, both regular episodes and specials, finishing before 10.00 pm, on average between eight and 15 per cent of children aged five to twelve watched the show, that is, in the five major metropolitan cities, between 113,000 and 212,000 children.¹⁸

Concern in Australia about the role television plays in the sexualisation of children is already on the public record. More detailed analysis of children’s viewing of programs that may contribute to their sexualisation would be a useful direction for further research.

2.6 The sophistication of advertising and marketing techniques

Advertisers are now targeting children using increasingly sophisticated techniques. In marketing jargon, the children’s market is now highly ‘segmented’ along lines of age, gender, race, income, ethnicity and geography (Preston and White 2004, p. 116). Levin and Linn observe that ‘marketing agencies are as relentless in their quest for knowledge about children as is any academic institution, and they are certainly better funded’ (2004, p. 225). Children are recognised by marketers as a particularly valuable group to capture: they influence parental purchases, they often have their own money to spend, and it is likely they will continue purchasing the same brands into adulthood. Research shows that more than half the brands used in childhood are still used in adulthood (Preston and White 2004, pp. 117-118). The marketers themselves appear to see nothing problematic about a media-saturated environment that promotes children forming their

¹⁸ Sydney finishing times were used as a guide to which events to include. There was one exception to the pattern quoted above. The episode entitled ‘*Big Brother – Interview*’, broadcast on Monday 3 July, was viewed by only 2.7 per cent of children aged five to twelve (approximately 38,000 children in the five major metropolitan cities) (OzTAM report provided to the Australia Institute). This episode covered the ‘turkey slapping’ incident, and the consequent removal from the house of the two male contestants. Presumably many parents did not allow their children to watch discussion of this incident.

identities in part through identification with given brands from toddlerhood (Preston and White 2004, p. 118).

Research on children's understanding of television advertising consistently shows that younger children (those aged under eight) have a less well-developed understanding of advertising than older children. In particular, older children understand the persuasive intent of advertising, while younger children are more likely to see the same advertising as informative (Mallalieu *et al.* 2005; Preston 2004; Segal 2003). As older children become teenagers, although they understand persuasive intent, they are entering a vulnerable period of self-consciousness, which marketers exploit (Segal 2003).¹⁹

Despite some evidence suggesting that 'Generation Y' adolescents (those born between 1979 and 1994) are highly media literate and very cynical of marketing (Bagnall 1999), such cynicism about the marketing of particular products or brands does not necessarily translate into cynicism about the desirability of consumption in general. A parallel point might be made for sexualisation, which is tightly linked to the culture of consumption. In using sex to market their products, marketers incidentally promote sexualisation as desirable. Even if children were able to reject the links between advertising and particular products or brands, it is a further and much more difficult step for them to reject the cultural underpinnings on which most advertising depends, including the desirability of both consumption and sexualisation.

In any case, evidence suggests that the media literacy of children and teenagers varies widely. One study of 200 US teenagers in a rural context found most of them to be very naïve about commercials and their marketing function (Fox 1995). The researcher noted that classic propaganda techniques were employed in these commercials: 'repetition, testimonials, bandwagon appeals, transfers of one quality to another, and highly synthesized music and imagery' (Fox 1995, p. 79).

Comprehensive information about the amount and content of media literacy education received by children of primary school age around Australia is not publicly available, which makes it impossible to assess the degree to which children are being equipped to understand and negotiate the promotion of sexualisation by advertising and marketing.

¹⁹ See Pechman *et al.* (2005) for a review of the literature that suggests that adolescents are particularly vulnerable to advertising and promotion.

3. Risks to children

3.1 Introduction

The sexualisation of children in advertising and marketing material brings with it a number of risks to children. Below we present the effects of sexualisation on children in five different categories: physical harm, psychological harm, sexual harm, the 'opportunity cost' of sexualisation, and its ethical effects. Although separation of the various effects into categories is useful to highlight the reach of sexualisation into children's lives, such separation remains somewhat artificial, since many of the effects occur simultaneously. In the case of eating disorders, for example, physical and psychological harm are closely interrelated.

3.2 Physical harm

In discussion of the sexualisation of children it is often noted that in developed nations children now reach puberty earlier than they did in the past. For example, Odone cites a UK study of 1,150 eight-year-old children called 'Children of the Nineties' that found that one-sixth of all eight-year-old girls show some signs of puberty, compared to one in 100 a generation ago. Also, one in 14 eight-year-old boys have pubic hair, compared with one in 250 a generation ago (2002, p. 19). To place these physical changes in context, however, experts in childhood development often note that children's emotional and cognitive development has not advanced at the same pace (Levin and Linn 2004; Linn 2005). As a result, children's bodies are maturing before they are psychologically mature. Children are thus ill-equipped to deal with sexualising pressure which implies that only a limited range of mature body types are attractive and desirable. An increasing emphasis on a particular body type as the ideal is central to the evidence of sexualisation presented in the previous section.

For girls, the ideal body is based upon the ideal woman's body – slender but shapely, dressed somewhere between prettily and provocatively, with clothing emphasising certain body parts. For boys, the ideal body is based upon the ideal man's body – muscular, with 'broad shoulders and well-defined upper body, but flat stomach with narrow hips' (Tiggeman 2005, p. 362). Recently it has been found that a muscular ideal now applies to women and girls as well, although to a lesser degree, with both sexes now focused on achieving 'a slim, toned body' (McCabe and Ricciardelli 2005, p. 573).

Many studies suggest that increased exposure to this 'ideal' body type in various media is associated with an increasing incidence of eating disorders among older children and teenagers, although there is far more research on girls than on boys. For example, a study of nearly 3,000 Spanish 12 to 21 year olds found that those who read girls magazines had a doubled risk of developing an eating disorder (Strasburger 2005, pp. 280-282). A US study of nearly 7,000 girls aged 9 to 14 found that the risk of beginning purging behaviour (vomiting or use of laxatives) increased along with the importance girls placed on looking like females on television, in movies or in magazines (Field *et al.* 1999).

Eating disorders are complex conditions caused by ‘a combination of psychological, interpersonal, social, physiological and external factors’ (CEED 2006a). However, there is no doubt among medical professionals that marketing and advertising carry some responsibility for the increase in their incidence. The Australian Medical Association (AMA) position statement on body image and health notes: ‘Young people are dieting and expressing dissatisfaction with their body shapes at an increasingly young age. This is of great concern, as dieting is a known precipitant factor in the development of eating disorders’ (2002, p. 1). It also asserts that ‘marketing and advertising’ contribute to this problem with their ‘portrayals of physical perfection’ (AMA 2002, p. 1).

Children’s body image concerns are sometimes thought to be a healthy antidote to growing childhood obesity, but in fact they are likely to be counterproductive if they act as a negative motivation for body management.

[S]elf-acceptance is the key that provides a *positive* motivation for caring for yourself and your body through behaviours such as healthy eating and being active (O’Connor 2001).

The age at which young people are hospitalised for eating disorders in Australia appears to be falling (see Appendix 1). This is consistent with recent evidence from research into the occurrence of body image concerns and disordered eating behaviours at early ages (see below).

Severe manifestations of eating disorders have high personal and public health costs – a single case of anorexia nervosa generally costs more to treat than throat cancer or cerebral meningitis, and more than a hip replacement (Cross 1997, p. 62). But even ‘mild’ eating disorders may have side effects on physical health, including headaches, deficiencies in essential vitamins and minerals, bowel dysfunction, tooth decay, dehydration and reduced ability to concentrate and think clearly (CEED 2006b). Research discussed below shows that many children are now developing body image concerns at very young ages. To the degree that such concerns translate into even mild eating disordered behaviours, children are likely to suffer physical harm during their childhood growth period, when nutrition is particularly important.

There is a risk that the increasing sexualisation of children is contributing, or will contribute, to more eating disorders. Even mild eating disorders are likely to damage children’s physical health.

3.3 Psychological harm

Beauty ideals are presented as part of ‘complex cultural scripts that link thinness (or muscularity) and attractiveness to happiness, desirability, and status’ (Tiggeman 2005, p. 364). Studies of body image carried out both in Australia and in similar countries have now established, first, that ‘girls as young as 6 to 7 years of age desire a thinner ideal body’ (Dohnt and Tiggemann 2006, p. 141), second, that girls of this age are ‘aware of dieting to lose weight’, and third, that girls of this age are ‘beginning to engage in eating disordered behaviours’ (p. 142). Less research has been carried out on boys, but one recent Australian study found that boys and girls aged from eight to thirteen years were ‘equally focused on losing weight’ but that boys were more focused

on ‘increasing muscle’ than girls, although some concern was also shown among girls about muscle size (McCabe and Ricciardelli 2005).

Advertising and marketing representations of the ideal body are not the only factor affecting children’s body image. Other factors that have been investigated include Body Mass Index and messages received from parents and peers. However, researchers note that parents and peers may themselves be influenced by media representations, and messages given by them may be affected by this influence (McCabe and Ricciardelli 2005; Clark and Tiggeman, in press).

One Australian study found that among 100 girls aged nine to twelve years, exposure to appearance-focussed media (including *Total Girl*) is indirectly related to body dissatisfaction via conversations about appearance among peers (Clark and Tiggeman, in press). ‘[T]he more girls talked about topics such as clothes, makeup, and their favourite pop stars, the more they perceived their friends to be focussed upon appearance issues, and the more they themselves internalized these appearance ideals’ (Clark and Tiggeman, in press). Among the young girls who were the subjects of this study, 49 per cent expressed a desire to be thinner, although only 15 per cent could be described as in any way overweight.

Beyond the effects of highly idealised media images on children’s body satisfaction, some child development experts note that as children are exposed to increasingly sexualised popular culture, those children who have ‘rebellious, creative or free-thinking tendencies’ are at particular risk (Linn 2005, p. 138).

They want to be non-conformists, but the symbols of their nonconformity (from skateboard culture to hip hop) become popularized. The more adventurous – and often angrier – kids seek out increasingly outrageous expressions of their rebellion. In media, this often means more graphic violence, more outrageous behavior, and more explicit sex (Linn 2005, p. 138).

At present, attention-seeking sexual behaviour appears to be more of a concern for older children and young teenagers. For example, when psychologists Lamb and Brown discuss their research with middle-school students (approximate ages 10 to 15 years), they describe ‘the girl who wore a see-through shirt to school and the girl who wore only her underwear and a trench coat’ as making ‘extreme pleas’ for attention (Lamb and Brown 2006, p. 47). As popular culture becomes more sexually explicit levels of attention-seeking sexual behaviour could escalate and attention-seeking sexual behaviour could become more common among older children and teenagers. Moreover, as images of sexualised children become more common in advertising and marketing material, it is also possible that younger children will also develop more attention-seeking sexual behaviours (2006, p. 48).

Two different kinds of psychological risk to children as a result of their sexualisation are documented in the literature, and there may also be further risks that have not yet been investigated. Firstly, there is a risk that the increasing sexualisation of children is contributing, or will contribute, to increasing children’s body dissatisfaction, leading children of a normal healthy weight and fitness level to want to be thinner and more muscular. Such body dissatisfaction may then contribute to the development of eating or

behavioural disorders (for example, obsessive exercise) in some children. Secondly, there is a risk that levels of attention-seeking sexual behaviour could escalate, attention-seeking sexual behaviour could become more common, and it could occur at earlier ages.

3.4 Sexual harm

There are two types of sexual harm to children that may be linked to increasing sexualisation. The first is related to the risk that the sexualisation of children could promote paedophilia. The second is related to the long-term trend for sexual activity to occur earlier in the teenage years, with associated increased potential for unwanted sex and contraction of sexually transmitted infections. If this trend continues, it will eventually affect children as defined in this paper (those aged 12 and under). A discussion of the legal age of consent is relevant to both these risks, and so it precedes consideration of them below.

The age of consent

Images that portray children as sexual agents who accept or even desire sexual interaction suggest, if only implicitly, that children are capable of meaningfully consenting to such interaction in the way that adults do. However, consent implies a fully informed understanding of the consequences of an action. In Australia, the age of sexual consent is set by state laws and therefore varies; for heterosexual sex, it is either 16 or 17 years of age, and for homosexual sex, it is either 16, 17 or 18 years of age, depending upon the jurisdiction (Bronitt and McSherry 2005, pp. 604-5). Consent also takes into account the need to minimise substantial power differentials (as exist between adults and children), because these are all too likely to lead to coercion in the guise of consent. Although there is some debate about exactly where the age of consent should be set, given normal human maturation processes there seems little doubt that to set it under 16 would be to increase the possibility both of consent being given without full understanding of the consequences, and of substantial power differentials playing a role in coercion.

History does show the importance of questioning forms of protection implemented by the state, such as a legal age of consent. Media and communications academic Catharine Lumby draws on the metaphor of a double-edged sword of dependence and powerlessness to ask: ‘what’s the relationship between the desire to protect and the desire to control?’ (1998, p. 52). In the context of a more general critique of links which are commonly made between popular culture and paedophilia, she takes issue with the suggestion that ‘teenage girls are entirely powerless’ and argues that one of the ways in which they exert their power is by experimenting with their bodies and their ‘emerging sexuality’ (p. 52).

This position fails to acknowledge the limited capacity of children and teenagers to process information and their vulnerability to commercial and sexual exploitation. While Lumby’s point that it is important to examine protective devices for their potentially oppressive dimensions is valid, it seems to us that the general protective function of the concept of consent far outweighs any oppressive results it may have in particular cases.

Beyond the issue of consent to sexual interaction, the evidence also indicates that young people do not have the capacity to make free and informed choices about whether or not they sexualise themselves. Merskin writes that it is important to recognise ‘the lack of agency little girls have in the process of becoming desirable’ (2004, p. 128). Asher argues that even teenage girls ‘do not realize that assuming the role of seductress will limit their own sexual expression and will strip them of power, though it may feel otherwise’ (2002, p. 23). In particular, children attempting to make choices about their sexualisation are faced with the powerful combination of a consistently narrow range of desirable images offered by advertising and marketing with the existence of peer group pressure. Children’s ‘choice’ to dress and behave in a sexualised way may be due more to a fear of being socially disadvantaged by not doing so than any perception of advantages to be gained. This combination of advertising and popular culture with peer group pressure also forces parents into an unenviable position; parents are well aware of the in-groups and out-groups formed by children of primary school age, and no parent wants their child to have to be the odd one out in the schoolyard.

Sexualisation of children may promote paedophilia

Advertisers and marketers frame children as willing participants in their sexualisation when in fact they are not able to consent meaningfully either to sexualisation or to the sexual interaction it points towards. This framing of children as consenting effectively distracts viewers from children’s right to bodily integrity.²⁰ Although a direct causal link between the sexualisation of children and their vulnerability to paedophilia has not been proven, the possibility of such a link has already caused widespread concern. As one psychologist writes:

It would not be difficult to make a case that such images are the soft porn of child pornography and that they exploit childhood by introducing adult sexuality into childhood innocence ... they could be understood as the precursor to child sexual abuse in the way that pornography has been understood by some feminists as the precursor to rape (Walkerdine 1999, p. 14).

Walkerdine concludes that such an interpretation is simplistic, but this does not detract from the fact that it is indeed one possible interpretation of the images of sexualised children, one that has concerned many commentators. For example, thirteen years ago, journalist Joy Overbeck (1993) wrote:

In an era when sexual violence against children is heartbreakingly common ... anything that eroticizes our children is irresponsible, at best.

More recently, Michelle Elliot of the UK charity Kidscape warned that: ‘parents have to beware. If you dress your child up in a sexual way [you will] make them vulnerable [to paedophiles]’ (Odone 2002, p. 18). Professional opinions from those who work with sexual offenders have also been voiced in the media. For example, John McCarthy, from the Safe treatment programme for sexual offenders in New Zealand, is reported as

²⁰ Insofar as images of sexualised children and young teenagers function in this way for viewers, it is possible to see them as a contemporary social re-enactment of the historical legal status of children as simply ‘chattels’ (property) – to be used as adults desire.

explaining that while individual girls are not specifically at risk, the fact that children generally are dressed up and wear make-up normalises the desires of sex offenders. As McCarthy says:

As fast as we say it is not okay for men to have sex with children because children are not interested in sex, they get bombarded with images of girls looking older than they are... [sex] offenders 'grow up' the age of the girl in their mind and believe the girls are sexually available (Anonymous 2005).

However, because paedophilia and child sexual abuse are complex social problems, it is difficult to isolate clear evidence of a causal link between sexualised images of children as discussed in this paper and paedophilia, and still more difficult to isolate a causal link between sexualised images of children and child sexual abuse. We discuss these issues briefly below but conclude that given the difficulty of obtaining strong evidence in such areas, and given that children are among the most vulnerable citizens in the community, the sexualising of children should be avoided. Our research suggests that this conclusion is the prevailing view among both experts and commentators.

The relationship between paedophilia and child sexual abuse is itself complex. Paedophilia is a psychiatric disorder defined in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV (DSM IV)* (1994). Paedophiles who act on their desires to commit sexual acts with children are guilty of child sexual abuse. However, it is not clear that all those who sexually abuse children are paedophiles in the psychiatric sense. Most child sexual abuse is perpetrated by someone known to the child, often a family member,²¹ and in some cases such people may be motivated not by sexual desires but by a more general drive for power, control or violence. It is unclear whether many of these abusers fit a paedophilic profile as defined in the *DSM IV*, although their behaviour is equally criminal.

The diagnostic criteria for paedophilia are as follows.

- A. Over a period of at least six months, recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges or behaviors involving sexual activity with a prepubescent child or children.
- B. The fantasies, sexual urges or behaviours cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational or other important area of functioning.
- C. The person is at least age 16 years and at least 5 years older than the child or children in criterion A (APA 1994, p. 528).

One report based on eleven case studies of paedophiles concluded that offenders generate 'their own "erotic" materials from relatively innocuous sources such as television advertisements, clothing catalogues featuring children modeling underwear, and similar sources', but it also cautioned that the 'relationship between fantasy and

²¹ Joe Tucci, Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Childhood Foundation, confirms this but also notes that exact Australian figures are not available because of the way data in that area are collected and presented by the relevant authorities (personal communication, 14 August 2006).

offending [sexual crimes] remains generally underresearched' (Howitt 1995, pp. 15-16). One of the difficulties in isolating a causal link is a problem of self-reporting, since sex offenders may claim that pornography or sexualised images led to their offending in an attempt to dilute their own responsibility (Howitt 1995, p. 17).

Although strong evidence is difficult to obtain about the risks of the sexualisation of children promoting paedophilia and child sexual abuse, we argue that in this area, society has an obligation to adopt a precautionary approach given the particular vulnerability of children. The relevance of this concern is highlighted by the fact that a man on trial for paedophilia in Sydney in September 2006 was found to have a computer with access not only to child pornography but also to child modelling sites (Kennedy 2006). The advertisers and marketers who sexualise children should be required to prove that such sexualisation does not increase the risk of harm to children.

Sexualisation may promote earlier sexual activity

Sexualised images do not prepare children and adolescents for the realities of sex. In summary, although evidence for a causal relation between exposure to sexualised images and earlier sexual activity in teens is still very limited, the available evidence suggests that such a relationship does hold. Further research is currently underway.²² Evidence for a further causal relation between earlier sexual activity and both a higher incidence of unwanted sex and higher rates of sexually transmitted infections is more extensive and the existence of these causal relationships is well accepted. A brief overview of the Australian and international literature in this area is given below.

Research on the effects of sexual content in the media on sexual attitudes and behaviours in adolescents is extremely limited, and studies of effects on children are virtually non-existent. Strasburger notes that, while the literature on the effects of violence in media content is now well developed (with over 3,000 studies on the harmful impact of media violence on children and adolescents), the literature on the effects of sexual content in the media is still underdeveloped, with only eight studies at the time of writing (2005, p. 276). However, these studies all indicate significant correlations between viewing of sexual content in the media and sexual activity, including testing positive for sexually transmitted diseases. Strasburger acknowledges that such correlation might simply reflect the fact that sexually active teens may seek out more sexual content in their media, but points out that the single longitudinal study completed at the time of writing demonstrated a more direct causal link. It concluded that among nearly 1,800 American teens aged 12 to 17, increased exposure to sexual media doubled the chance of their having initiated sexual intercourse or increased noncoital activity in the following year (2005, p. 277).

A causal relation between exposure to sexualised images and earlier sexual activity is supported by psychological theories, in particular cultivation theory and social learning

²² In 2005 the American Academy of Pediatrics also published a special supplement of its journal with the topic of media exposure and sexual behaviour, the summary of which noted the scarcity of research in this area, and identified important future research directions (Escobar-Chaves *et al.* 2005a). Details of six relevant longitudinal studies underway in the US at the time of publication of the *Pediatrics* supplement are given in the appendix to one of the supplement articles (Escobar-Chaves *et al.* 2005b, pp. 321-3).

theory. Cultivation theory suggests that television and other forms of media tend to cultivate acceptance, at a broad cultural level, of the beliefs, values and perspectives they portray (APS 2000, p. 2). Social learning theory and socio-cognitive models suggest that individuals develop mental 'primes' and 'scripts' from material viewed which can then guide later behaviour (APS 2000, p. 2). It therefore seems likely that a pattern of increased exposure to sexual media leading to earlier sexual activity might be found among Australian teens, similar to the pattern found among American teens, but such research has not yet been undertaken in Australia.

Nonetheless, it is well established that sexual activity among Australian teens has increased over time. The National Survey of Australian Secondary Students, HIV/AIDS and Sexual Health, conducted by researchers at La Trobe University, has interviewed Year 10 and Year 12 students (typically aged 15 and 17 years respectively) every five years from 1992. Sexual activity in this age group increased over the decade 1992-2002, and in 2002 the survey found that the majority of young people in Years 10 and 12 were sexually active in some way.²³ Vaginal intercourse was reported by approximately 25 per cent of students in Year 10 and just over 50 per cent of those in Year 12. Over 45 per cent reported giving or receiving oral sex. The majority of students reported overwhelmingly positive feelings in relation to their most recent sexual encounter (Smith *et al.* 2002a).

The age of first sexual intercourse (defined in studies as vaginal intercourse) has been steadily falling in Australia during the last 40 years, consistent with trends in Europe and the United States (Rissel *et al.* 2003). This is sometimes advanced as a reason for lowering the legal age of consent.²⁴ However, there are some significant risks associated with sexual activity, which any argument for lowering the legal age of consent must confront. Two such risks are of particular concern: unwanted sex and sexually transmitted infections. Both of these have the potential to cause serious long-term harm.

Unwanted sex

The La Trobe study found that of the sexually active Year 10 and 12 female students in 2002, 28 per cent reported having had unwanted sex at some time in their lives (Smith *et al.* 2002b, p. 39). The most common reasons cited for having engaged in unwanted sex were being too drunk and pressure from a sexual partner (Smith *et al.* 2002b, pp. 39-40). This is of particular concern where unwanted sex is experienced as sexual coercion (being forced or frightened into unwanted sexual activity), because there are

²³ This is consistent with the Australian Study of Health and Relationships, which was carried out during 2001-2002. It revealed that among 16 to 19 year-olds, nearly 27 per cent of men and nearly 25 per cent of women reported they had had their first sexual intercourse before 16 years of age (Rissel *et al.* 2003, p. 135). The declining age of first sexual intercourse is also confirmed in what young Australians themselves say about their relationships and their sex lives (Huntley 2006).

²⁴ The fact that around one quarter of young Australians now have sex before age 16, the youngest legal age of consent in the different Australian jurisdictions, may go some way towards explaining the finding by the Australian Childhood Foundation (ACF) that 16 per cent of Australians did not believe or could not make up their minds that sex between a 14 year old and an adult is sexual abuse (Tucci *et al.* 2006, p. 19). The ACF report commented: 'These findings reflect the ambivalence of some sectors of the community to accept that teacher Karen Ellis and tennis coach Gavin Hopper should have ever been convicted of sexually assaulting young people in their care' (Tucci *et al.* 2006, p. 19).

‘clear and strong associations between experience of sexual coercion and poorer psychological, physical and sexual health’ (de Visser *et al.* 2003).

Moreover, other studies suggest that the younger a girl is at first sexual intercourse, the greater the chance that she has had involuntary or forced sex (Bar-on *et al.* 2001). The Australian Study of Health and Relationships revealed that in 2001-2002, over 10 per cent of Australian women had been sexually coerced (been forced or frightened into an unwanted sexual experience) before the age of 17, as had almost 3 per cent of men (de Visser *et al.* 2003, p. 200).

The rise of ‘raunch culture’, in which very overt sexualisation has become fashionable for young women (Levy 2005) may contribute to the fact that when young Australian women are asked about their sex lives, some of them say things like there was ‘an immense and unnecessary pressure to have sex’ when they were 13 and 14, and that ‘giving into it ... was the culture’ (Huntley 2006, p. 62). Taking all this into account, the idea that it might be appropriate to reduce the legal age of consent, in line with new social norms, seems unlikely to be responsible considering the possible implications for teenage girls.

Sexually transmitted infections

The other significant risk young people face as a result of earlier sexual activity is contraction of a sexually transmitted infection. The prevalence of sexually transmitted infections in the general population appears to be increasing,²⁵ and the La Trobe study found that young people’s knowledge of sexually transmitted infections was ‘poor’, and that there had been a ‘general decline in knowledge about HIV transmission’ over the period 1992-2002 (Smith *et al.* 2002a). In 2002, the La Trobe study reported that rates of condom use had remained steady over time, with 60 per cent of young men and 44 per cent of young women always using a condom, and a further 31 and 44 per cent respectively sometimes using a condom (Smith *et al.* 2002a). However, because sexual activity in this age group has increased, the total amount of unprotected sex occurring among young people has also increased, thereby increasing the potential of young people contracting a sexually transmitted infection.

Chlamydia trachomatis is by far the most common sexually transmitted infection in Australia. It is spread by vaginal, anal and oral sex. The incidence of chlamydia is increasing (Yohannes *et al.* 2006, p. 20), and in both men and women, rates of diagnosis of chlamydia are highest among those aged 20-24. In 2004, over 600 per 100,000 men aged 20-24, and over 1,100 per 100,000 women aged 20-24 were diagnosed with chlamydia (Yohannes *et al.* 2006, p.37). It is important to note that men and women of these ages were teenagers during the 1990s, a period when ‘pornographication of the mainstream’ had already begun (McNair 1996, p. 23). It appears that the fantasy of sex as it appears in popular culture is not balanced by widespread understanding of the physical risks of real sex. If left untreated chlamydia can cause serious complications.

²⁵ At present, it is clear that the number of cases of sexually transmitted infections being diagnosed has increased (Yohannes *et al.* 2006, p. 20). However, the number of reported diagnoses of sexually transmitted infections is not necessarily an accurate reflection of the prevalence of these infections. It may simply be a reflection of testing patterns (NSW Department of Health 2006b, p. 9).

In women, complications can include pelvic inflammatory disease (inflammation of the reproductive organs), chronic pelvic pain, infertility and ectopic pregnancy (pregnancy that develops in the fallopian tubes instead of the womb). In men, complications can include inflammation of the testes and recurrent urethritis (NSW Department of Health 2006a).

The increase in sexual activity among young people, and in particular, consideration of those consequences of this increase that are harmful (increased potential for both unwanted sex and contraction of sexually transmitted infections) highlights the importance of school-based sexuality education. Holistic sexuality education incorporates not only information about the ‘mechanics’ of human sexuality (including physiology, contraception, and protection against sexually transmitted infections), but also explores the social context of sex (including values, attitudes and social pressures) and seeks to foster the development of healthy interpersonal relationships (Goldman 2000, p. 12). Such education could provide a ‘reality check’ against which students would be able to evaluate the fantasy of sex as represented in popular culture, including the often-glamourised image of sex presented in advertisements, magazines and television shows. However sex education is not compulsory in Australia, and the approach to sex education, and the amount of it provided, varies widely from school to school (Williams and Davidson 2004, p. 98).

In summary, the significant risks to young people as a result of earlier sexual activity, in particular the potential for unwanted sex (especially for young women) and contraction of sexually transmitted infections, both of which may have serious long-term consequences, need to be balanced against the positive feelings the majority of young people report about their sexual activity. The fantasy of sex as it appears in popular culture needs to be balanced by effective and holistic sexuality education about the risks that sexual activity entails, including strategies for protection against these risks. Any further expansion or intensification of fantasy sex in popular culture in general is of some concern given the risks to young people, especially young women, of earlier sexual activity. In particular, the sexualisation of children is of great concern, because it reduces the sexual distinction between adults and children. Combined with the fact that sex is widely represented in advertising and marketing as something that fascinates and delights adults, the sexualisation of children could play a role in ‘grooming’ children for paedophiles – preparing children for sexual interaction. The risks that the sexualisation of children may pose in encouraging children either to initiate sexual experimentation or to agree to an experiment initiated by an older person, well before they can fully understand the potential immediate and long-term consequences, must be taken very seriously.

3.5 The ‘opportunity cost’ of sexualisation

The opportunity cost to children of focusing on developing a sexualised appearance and personality is that they will thereby have less time to devote to other things. This is a general harm that is additional to the specific physical, psychological and sexual harms related to the sexualisation of children discussed above. Developmental psychologists Lamb and Brown offer the following example.

Physical challenges prepare [children] for both social and intellectual challenges to come. So those crop tops and tight low-rise jeans do more than discourage movement. They tell your daughter – at an age when she needs to feel big, try new things, and widen her reach – that how she looks is more important than what she can do ... She may look cute in the moment as a mini Barbie or a corseted Cinderella, but the hill she forgoes or the race she doesn't run will impact how she interacts with the world for a long time (Lamb and Brown 2006, p. 14).

It is also widely recognised that body image concerns, in conjunction with the uniforms often required in organised sport, act as a barrier to teenage girls' participation in sport (ECITARC 2006, pp. 29-30). As body ideals are now being marketed more heavily to younger girls, it is likely that such concerns will also begin to affect their participation in sport.

There is a risk that sexualisation will lead children, and in particular girls, to spend a large proportion of their time, money and mental energy on conforming to sexual stereotypes, and being distracted from other activities that may well contribute more to their short and longer term happiness. Although paying some attention to physical appearance is important and may be enjoyable for children, excessive focus on particular forms of physical appearance is likely to limit children's overall development rather than foster it.²⁶

3.6 Ethical effects

It is sometimes claimed by the advertising and marketing industries that they merely reflect prevailing community values and standards, and as such, cannot be blamed for various undesirable social effects. However, the opposing view is almost unanimous among humanities and social science scholars: advertising and marketing function as a 'distorted mirror', reinforcing only a particular set of cultural values and symbols (Pollay 1986, pp. 22-3). This can be seen in the implicit messages about 'what it takes to be attractive, how men and women treat each other, and what's valuable about being male or female' in advertising and marketing material (Linn 2005, p. 129). Common media messages about adult sexual behaviour normalise the treatment of women as objects, present sex and violence as linked, and show sex as a commodity (Linn 2005, p. 130). These messages mean that the sexualisation of children goes well beyond matters of appearance to include the promotion of particular 'behaviors and values, especially related to sex' (Linn 2005, p. 132).

Gendered values and behaviours have long been a feature of advertising to children, but the explicit sexualisation of children in some advertising goes beyond standard gender stereotypes to suggest stereotypical sexual relationships between the children. See for example the 'tough' framing of the boy in Figure 13 relative to the girl.

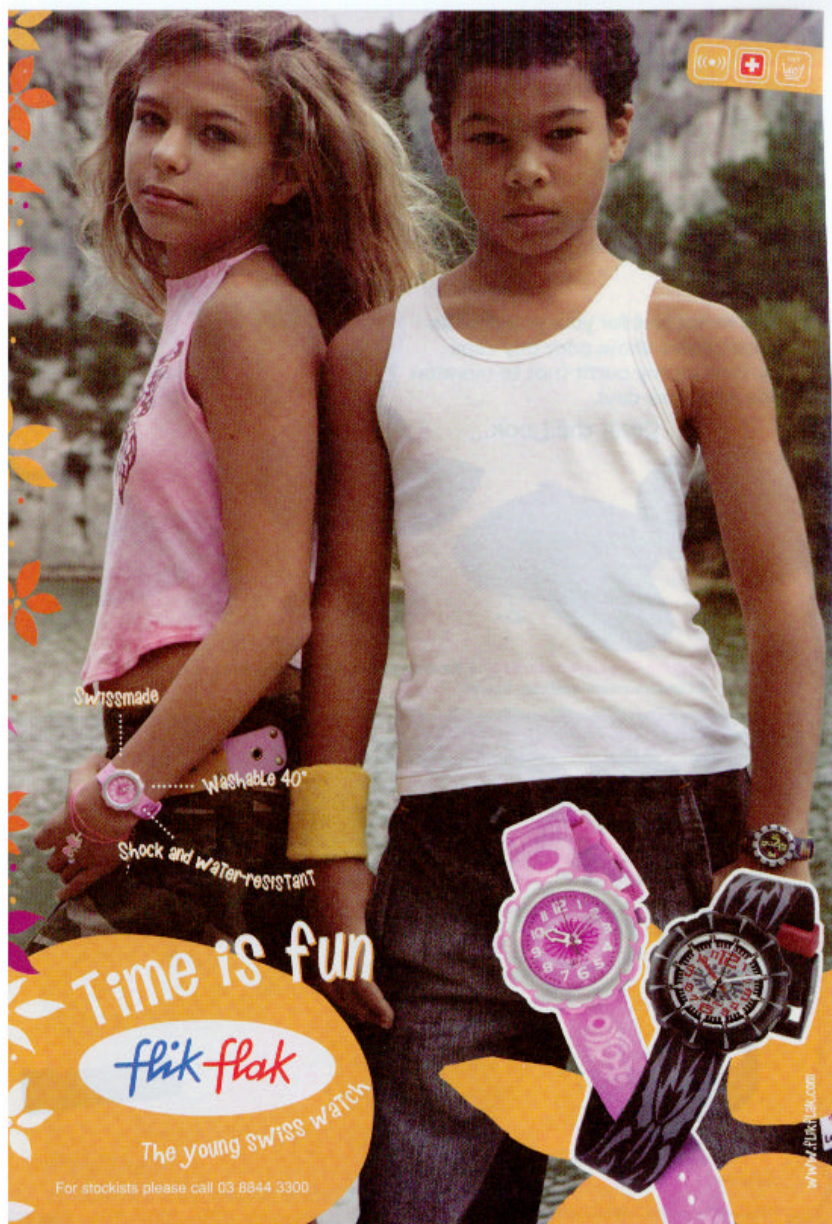
Dominion (power, force, mastery, domination, control, and so on) is one of the qualities marketers encourage corporations to highlight in products marketed to

²⁶ This point is extrapolated from Wolf (1990), pp. 290-1.

tween boys. For tween girls, products should be associated with relationships and closeness (Linn 2005, p. 137).

The routine exposure of young children to images of adult sexual behaviour devoid of emotions, attachments or consequences works against them developing 'the foundation they need to become adults who are capable of forming positive, caring sexual relationships' (Levin 2005, p. 148). That children themselves are now being sexualised in advertising and marketing material in ways that emphasise male domination seems likely only to increase the risk that the ethical values that foster healthy relationships will be undermined, in particular for boys.

Figure 13 Flik Flak advertisement, *Total Girl*



Source: *Total Girl*, April 2006, p. 68

4. Who benefits from the sexualisation of children?

4.1 Children

As argued in the previous section, there is a contradiction implicit in the idea that children themselves benefit from sexualisation because their sexuality gives them a source of power in a world in which most of the power is held by adults. In fact, this very power imbalance means that any sexual engagement children might have with adults is more than likely to end in the further disempowerment of children. Even mutually consenting adults can have difficulty negotiating the power relations involved in sexual engagement. For children seeking to become empowered in an adult world, a more promising route would be to focus on developing cognitive and emotional capacities that enable them to negotiate power relations more maturely and with less risk to themselves. Such capacities also enable young people to choose to use their sexuality in a respectful way, rather than for seeking to gain an advantage over others.

In fact, as shown above, children face a range of risks associated with their sexualisation. These include: an increase in eating disorders at younger ages; increasing body dissatisfaction; more extreme attention-getting sexual behaviours; first sexual intercourse at younger ages; promotion of paedophilia; the undermining of other aspects of their overall development; and the absorption of ethical values that undermine healthy relationships.

4.2 Parents

Many parents are concerned about the increasing sexualisation of children. Although research does suggest that the effects of stereotypes on television can be prevented by active mediation (Nathanson *et al.* 2002), it is widely recognised that most parents ‘don’t have the time and energy it requires to fight the ubiquitous and overwhelming influence the media have on their children’s inner lives’ (Segall 2003). The idea that it is primarily a parental responsibility to protect children may have been reasonable in a past era where one parent (usually the mother) was a full-time homemaker, but in contemporary Australia this idea is becoming increasingly outdated. If advertisers and marketers were restrained, the burden of trying to minimise the associated risks to children could be lifted from parents. As Lamb and Brown point out in their book for parents:

While products aimed at tween girls promise perfect faces and bodies, friends, and boyfriends, the marketers and manufacturers don’t have to confront the negative impact on girls: the confusion about sexuality and romantic relationships, the anxiety about weight and appearance, the struggle with popularity and fitting in. No, they leave that to you (Lamb and Brown 2006, p. 6).

Some parents also express irritation at the fact that in being expected to refuse their children’s demands for access to sexualised and sexualising material they are ‘cast in the role of the killjoy’ by producers, advertisers and marketers (Freeman-Greene 2006).

However, in some cases there may be more positive parental responses to the sexualisation of children. Western societies remain differentiated along class lines, although it is often argued that such lines are now more visible in terms of ‘cultural’ rather than ‘economic’ capital. Those with high cultural capital may be more likely to object to the increasing sexualisation of children. For example, Kleinhans notes that people with ‘high cultural capital could look at the kind of child modelling contests made famous by the murder of Jon Benet Ramsey as “white trash” events’ (2004, p. 20).

Walkerdine provides useful insight into how class differences may affect understandings of sexualisation. She analyses popular films to illustrate the way ‘eroticisation presents for [the little working-class girl] the possibility of a different and better life’, a possibility which is not necessary for the middle-class child (1999, p. 15).

It is not surprising ... that the tabloid discourse [around sexualised children] is about talent, discovery, fame: all the elements of the necessary transformation from rags to riches, from flower girl to princess, so to speak. Such a transformation is necessarily no part of middle class discourse, fantasy, and aspiration. Rather, childhood for the middle class is a state to be preserved, free from economic intrusion and producing the possibility of the rational and playful child who will become a rational, educated professional, a member of the ‘new middle class’ (Walkerdine 1999, p. 20).

This attraction of sexualisation for relatively culturally or economically disadvantaged children may act as a barrier to recognition of the various risks it poses for them among adults who are themselves relatively culturally or economically disadvantaged. Denial of these risks may be driven by an underlying sentiment of ‘how dare you [middle-class commentators] stand in the way of our children advancing themselves?’

4.3 Producers, advertisers and marketers

It is widely known that children are a lucrative market. According to social research company Australia Scan, the tween market, which covers 7 to 13 year olds, is worth more than \$10 billion in Australia, of which anywhere between \$250 million and \$1 billion is spent on clothing (Wells 2006). Myer is planning to open a separate ‘tween’ clothing section, offering smaller sizes in its existing teen and young women’s brands, because, according to Myer’s general manager of apparel, tweens don’t want to wear children’s clothing any more, and instead prefer ‘to wear what’s in fashion, what their older brothers and sisters are wearing’ (Wells 2006). In the United States, it is estimated that children under the age of 12 directly influenced the spending of up to \$300 billion in 2000 (Preston and White 2004). It is also estimated that in the US budgets for advertising to children rose from \$100 million in 1983 to \$16 billion in 2004 (Kanner 2006).

Many writers have noted that the sexualisation of children is linked to the relentless drive of business for new markets (Cohen 1999; Kleinhans 2004; Kanner 2006). Preston and White write that while children have been marketed to since the 1920s, from the late 1980s marketing to children has become increasingly sophisticated in the ‘quest to identify and exploit new markets’ (2004, pp. 116-7). Michelle Elliot, director of the UK

charity Kidscape, which works to prevent the bullying and sexual abuse of children and young people aged under 16, is quoted as saying:

[manufacturers] claim that they're responding to demand. But it's not true. They've run out of teenagers and they're asking – what next? (Odone 2002, p. 18)

Kleinhans records that when Abercrombie for Kids was criticised for selling g-string underpants to girls as young as seven years, the 'company responded that [the underpants] were intended for 10-year-olds, an age at which, according to the company, girls are style conscious and want underwear that does not produce a visible panty line' (2004, p. 18). But of course there is no evidence anywhere in the world that ten-year-old girls have ever approached companies requesting the production of g-string underpants for children. In such areas the reality is far more likely to be that companies invent new products and then rely on advertising to attract a market for them.

Beyond the general drive of corporations for new markets, a number of critics also draw attention to the more particular issue of increasing corporate dominance in popular culture. McChesney (1999) points out that the global media market is now dominated by a small number of transnational corporations, including Sony, Disney and Time-Warner, which own both media content and media distribution networks. For example, the same corporation will control music production companies, the radio stations that play the music, and the television stations that broadcast the music videos. McChesney writes that these media conglomerates 'exist simply to make money by selling light escapist entertainment' (1999). Light escapist entertainment is what sells, so if the largest possible audience is to be retained, there are ramifications for the kind of content offered.

[It's not] moral perversity that keeps sex and violence on the air and serious subjects off. It is television executives' desire to maintain as large an audience as possible for as long as possible for the purpose of selling goods and services (Bagdikian 1997).

Mark Crispin Miller agrees that contemporary commercial pressures tend to make 'the quality of most media product highly dubious', to the point where he describes it as a 'cultural crisis involving children' (PBS 2005). He adds:

I don't think anybody, deep down, really feels cool enough – ever. That's the nature of advertising, to keep you hungering for more of the stuff that's supposed to finally put you there, but never does (PBS 2005).

It is appropriate to note however that although the sexualisation of children, especially the marketing of fashion and image-related products, aims above all to increase children's consumption, it also has the secondary effect of shifting their consumption from certain types of products to other types.

The [advertising] industry itself admits that relentless commercial pressure is forcing a retreat from childhood. Colegrave [a marketing executive] says that the 'cut-off point for buying toys has been falling by one year every five years'. Most of today's children stop playing with Lego when they are six or seven (Cohen 1999).

5. The need for public debate

The sexualisation of Australian children by advertising and marketing is increasing and this involves a wide range of risks to children. Although strong evidence on the level of community concern about this issue is not available for Australia, it is likely that many Australians are concerned. US survey data shows that there is a significant degree of community concern about the increasing sexualisation of children in the US, and the fact that concern about the issue regularly appears in the Australian media suggests that there may be similar levels of concern here.

However, there has as yet been no sustained public debate about the sexualisation of children in Australia. This may be partly due to the absence in Australia of a strong coalition of child-focused organisations, with the specific role of regularly putting the issue on the public agenda.²⁷ Although many experts are concerned about the increasing sexualisation of children, for most of them the issue falls slightly to the side of their particular area of expertise. Young Media Australia currently plays the role of advocating for children with respect to media issues, and has been doing so for almost fifty years.²⁸ It is the most obvious candidate for co-ordinating a strong coalition of child-focused organisations, but would need a reliable funding base to be able to do so effectively. The fact that a sustained public debate has not yet occurred may also to some degree result from the lack of a substantial body of Australian research into the many aspects of the sexualisation of children. More research in this area would enable a better-informed public debate.

A forthcoming Australia Institute Discussion Paper will consider a range of policy measures that could reduce the risk of harm to children based on an assessment of the current regulatory frameworks covering the major sources of children's sexualisation: advertising, girls' magazines and television programs.

²⁷ The Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (CCFC) in the United States is an excellent example of such a coalition. The coalition includes health care professionals, educators, advocacy groups and concerned parents, and has as its aim to 'support the rights of children to grow up – and the rights of parents to raise them – without being undermined by rampant consumerism' (CCFC 2006).

²⁸ Young Media Australia is the trading name of the Australian Council on Children and the Media, formerly the Australian Council for Children's Films and Television. Its website can be found at: <http://www.youngmedia.org.au/>.

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Appendix 1 Eating disorders in Australian youth

According to Professor Susan Sawyer, the Director for the Centre for Adolescent Health at the Royal Children's Hospital (RCH) in Melbourne, there is some evidence that young people are developing eating disorders at an earlier age, although this evidence has not been published.

Sawyer notes that out-patient statistics for eating disorders (most commonly anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, or binge-eating disorder) may not be reliable indicators of an increase in the incidence of these medical conditions, as they may simply reflect an increase in the number of people seeking help as eating disorders become more widely recognised by the general public.

However, statistics for in-patients – young people who have been hospitalised because they are very unwell and at significant risk – are more reliable because regardless of community knowledge about eating disorders, by the time young people are seriously ill they will normally have been taken to a doctor, at which point they will be referred to a hospital for treatment.

Sawyer says that while the RCH had not changed their criteria for hospitalisation for eating disorders (a range of objective medical criteria such as blood pressure measurements are used), during the period 2003-2006 there had been a doubling in the number of in-patients admitted for eating disorders under the age of 15, from 10 in-patients in 2004 to 22 in-patients in each of 2005 and 2006 to date (Professor Susan Sawyer, personal communication).

From July 2002 – June 2005 the Australian Paediatric Surveillance Unit collected baseline data on children (aged 5 to 13 years inclusive) with early onset eating disorders. One hundred and one cases were confirmed, with a mean age of 11.8 years. The data collection was initially limited to inpatients only but was revised after the first year to include outpatients as well. Children were found to present with significant weight loss and associated medical and psychological complications (Morris *et al.* 2006). The most notable differences between this younger population with early onset eating disorders and older populations with eating disorders were, firstly, that almost all the cases in the child population were cases of anorexia nervosa (in older populations there is a higher proportion of bulimia nervosa), and, secondly, that there was a higher proportion of males in the child population (almost 25 per cent) than in older populations (Dr Sloane Madden, personal communication). The existence of this data means that over time it will become possible to ascertain more reliably whether young Australians are developing eating disorders at earlier ages.



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