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If discussions about the sexualisation of children ended up as a question of personal taste in the past, those days are coming to a close. Expert opinion and research now warn that children face a range of risks resulting from premature sexualisation. As a result, increased pressure will be applied to advertisers, marketers and broadcasters to go easy on children when spruiking their wares.

This news will come as a great relief to the many parents whose strong intuition tells them that children do indeed need to be children – to develop at their own pace, in their own ways. When the Australia Institute released the first detailed report on the sexualisation of children, entitled *Corporate Paedophilia*, in October 2006, it was as if the floodgates had opened. Parental concern poured in from all around the country.

In stark contrast to the claims made by politicians from both major parties that 'parents can just say no' to child sexualisation, we heard time and time again from parents that, despite their best efforts, they were finding it impossible to protect their children.

Advertisers and marketers prey on children's need to 'fit in' with the peer group. Too often, this leaves parents between a rock and a hard place. Do you buy the sexualised toy or CD or item of clothing or girls' magazine that you feel is inappropriate for your child's age group, or do you risk your child becoming the brunt of the brutal politics of the playground? And these are just the areas that parents can supposedly control. How can parents prevent their children from seeing the hypersexualised billboards littered around most major cities? A recent jeans ad on a billboard shows a young woman in microshorts (the item being advertised) with her top unbuttoned down to the navel to partially expose one nipple, sprawled against a mirror sucking a lollipop. The industry-run Advertising Standards Board dismissed the many complaints that it received about the ad, but gave no guidance on how parents were to explain the image to their children. And what about the music video, barely distinguishable from soft porn, that suddenly begins to play on a row of TVs in the electrical-goods store?

In saying that it is up to parents, exclusively, to shield their children from premature sexualisation, politicians are asking the impossible. Due to the risks to children, political leadership is needed.

The greatest risk to children from premature sexualisation is perhaps the least obvious. Child-development experts speak in one voice about the importance of play activities in laying the foundations for children's later development. When today's parents were children, they participated in a broad range of play activities: informal sports, reading, problem-solving games, open-ended creative play and constructive activities (Lego was a favourite in our family). If children, particularly girls, now discard these sorts of pastimes as 'uncool' at an early age and instead adopt highly sexualised games such as modelling, makeovers and imitating pop stars, this could have profound implications for their longerterm cognitive and physical development.

Equally, middle childhood (ages eight to 12) is a key period in which children develop an understanding about their place in the world outside the immediate family. Celebrity culture, heavily marketed to girls of primary-school age in magazines such as Disney Girl, Total Girl and Barbie Magazine, sends a clear message to young girls that what really matters in the wider world is not what they think, not what they care about, not what they can do, but what they look like.

The best efforts of parents to counteract this message are not always effective.

In fact, one South Australian study showed that among seven-year-old girls of a normal healthy weight, half want to be thinner. At the same time, experts in adolescent medicine report that hospitalisations for eating disorders are occurring at younger ages – an ironic twist on childhood-obesity concerns. Of course, not all children will develop eating disorders. But bringing all the adolescent angst about looks and weight forward to such a young age is, at the very least, deeply unfair. A seven year old can only just read and write, and still cries when she or he falls over. With cognitive and emotional capacities still in early developmental stages, how do advertisers, marketers and broadcasters expect children to cope with relentless messages to the effect that looking sexy is the way to feel good about yourself?

The sexualisation of children affects girls far more than boys – but the signs are that, over time, boys too will become more sexualised. In one ad for a major department store, a pre-pubescent boy of about 10 years of age is perched on the back of a red sports car. He is wearing a suit jacket over jeans and looking over a pair of sunglasses. The location, clothing and pose call to mind a young man sitting on his hotted-up car ready to 'pick up'. There is no indication in the image that the boy is 'just playing', as in earlier advertisements that showed girls in Mum's high-heeled shoes with messily applied lipstick, or boys in Dad's jacket with the tie hanging at a rakish angle. No, the image being portrayed is smooth and sophisticated.

Nonetheless, it is undoubtedly the girls who cop the full weight of sexualisation. People who claim that girls have always dressed up and imitated adults are missing two important facts.

In the past, girls typically imitated people such as mothers, teachers and nurses. For all the gender-specific limitations of such role models, at least they were built around various meaningful relationships and skills: mothers care, teachers teach, nurses heal.

Now, girls imitate Paris Hilton and Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen. The primary characteristic of these young women is not their capacity to engage in skilled and caring relationships, but their appearance.

Worse, it doesn't stop at imitation these days. Toy make-up has been on the market in Australia since the 1950s. Today, primary-schoolaged girls are being sold makeup not as a toy but as a daily accessory. Padded bras in girls' size 8 are available in a popular doll's brand. A range of simpler bras from girls' size 8 are available in department stores, and 'bralettes' from girls' size 3 and up are manufactured by another popular brand. The smallest size would look like an adult's headband if it weren't for the tiny removable straps. These items are being sold as daily wear. Girls are being encouraged in their daily lives to adopt appearances once exclusively linked with adult sexuality.

Most confronting of all, when advertisers and marketers present children in clothing, make-up and poses that are more commonly seen on 'sexy' adult models, the advertisements send a message that it is acceptable for adults to see children as 'sexy'. Normal adults find such a message shocking – but there are some extremely disturbed adults who find it affirming. It has been confirmed by criminologists and social workers who work with paedophiles that advertisements that sexualise children undermine the strong social norms that to some degree restrain paedophiles from acting on their desires.

The sexualisation of children is increasing across the developed world, as advertisers, marketers and broadcasters compete to expand their share of the child market with scant attention to the consequences for children. Children are being sold 'sexy' before they really understand what it means, and, when criticised, advertisers tend to either claim ignorance or allege that they are only giving children what they want.

The trend towards the increasing sexualisation of children seems unlikely to stop by itself. As UK educational expert Sue Palmer comments: "It seems that we've reached the point when adults' right to media freedom has come into direct conflict with children's right to grow up in a non-toxic environment". So whose rights are more important?

Underlying politicians' apathy about the sexualisation of children is the bigger issue of how little political importance children are accorded in Australia. Normally, only tips of this iceberg are visible, such as the low wages of childcare workers, or the fact that Australia is one of only two countries in the OECD where paid maternity leave is not provided to all women. If all the talk about 'family values' was really serious, our children would have a much better quality of life.

The first step in stopping the sexualisation of children would be for all media and advertising codes of practice to acknowledge the developmental, physical, psychological and sexual risks to which premature sexualisation exposes children. But ultimately, regulation of all media and advertising that affects children needs to occur through one government body acting in the public interest.

The current patchwork of regulatory arrangements has failed to prevent the sexualisation of children. Children suffer from cumulative exposure to sexualising material from a number of sources, most importantly television and outdoor advertising, girls' magazines and television programs. The current separation of the relevant regulatory bodies for

each of these means that none of them is properly aware of the full range of sexualising material to which children are exposed.

Parents and professionals who work with children are, however, very much aware of it, and they are increasingly calling for government to act to protect childhood and support those who care for children. At present, the many industries contributing to the sexualisation of children are profiting, while children themselves and those who care for them are shouldering the costs.

As parents and professionals who work with children point out, the time and energy that they currently spend in trying to protect children from the advertising and media onslaught (as well as in healing the damage it causes) would be far better spent on the positive aspects of caring for children. In short, if government regulated better, children could have healthier and more enjoyable childhoods.

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