

## Seniors Groups: **Letting Children Be Children**<sup>1</sup>

### **Decor**

You could decorate for today's meeting with photos of members of the group as children, with child stars or even children's games. People might also be encouraged to bring framed photos of their grandchildren to decorate the room.

### **Introduction**

In October a special week is set aside each year to celebrate Children's week. Why is this necessary today? Surely every week is children's week! Well in Australia today there is a growing concern about the loss of innocence in childhood through the impact of advertisers and marketers.

There is strong feeling around Australia that during childhood, and certainly during the pre-teen years, children should be free to develop at their own pace, in their own ways however Australians voiced their concern that children's freedom to develop at their own pace and in their own ways is under threat from heavily sexualised advertising and marketing. While parents do their best to protect their children, many feel that they are losing the battle.<sup>2</sup>

Today's meeting celebrates children and also raises the important need to resist the sexualisation of children so we can 'let children be children'.

### **Game to get started**

Ask members of the group to bring in photos of themselves as children. See if people can guess who each photo is.

### **Get informed**

Read the following articles to inform yourself of the topic. The first two articles may be appropriate to print and hand out to members of your meeting.

Adult world must let girls be girls, article from the *Sydney Morning Herald* (article on DVD in Sexualisation of Children pack)

*War Cry* article from October 2011: Innocence Lost (*War Cry* included in Sexualisation of Children pack)

Australia Institute report 'Letting children be children' (article on DVD in Sexualisation of Children pack)

### **Sharing**

Encourage members to remembering their childhood, sharing what they remember about the following topics:

- What toys / games you played as a child
- What was your favourite clothes
- How did your family spend the evenings?
- What was your favourite food?
- How much money did you spend on lollies / treats?
- What technological changes do you remember coming to your home as you were growing up?

### **Quiz**

Using the power point presentation "child stars" (on DVD in Sexualisation of Children pack), can your members name the following child stars from television?

### **Discussion: How things change**

Use the PowerPoint "how things have changed" (on DVD in Sexualisation of Children pack) talk about how things change to generate a discussion about changes through time. There are photos there of how telephones, washing machines and children's toys have changed. Finish by discussing how the treatment and perceptions of children have also changed over time. Some of these changes have been good and led to increased education and protections for children (maybe the group can give examples of these positive changes). However other changes raise concerns for us, like the sexualisation of children today which we are discussing today.

### **Learning**

There is a growing concern in Australia and other western countries today that young people are being targeted by marketers and advertisers in a sexualized way which denies them the innocence of youth and the ability to simply allowing children to be children.

As quoted in the *War Cry* of 22nd October 2011, *Innocence Lost*;

*While the sexualisation of children (think skimpy underwear or lingerie, otherwise known as 'lounge' for young girls) has monopolised the media's attention of late, it's the latest trend from some retailers and advertisers of treating children as mini adults that has parents groups, Christians and other concerned citizens seeing red.*

'Put yourself in the position of an advertiser,' Dr Emma Rush writes. 'They have to push the boundaries to get attention, but they don't want to attract a backlash like the one seen four years ago...so this is the result. The public don't like sexualisation? Let's try adultification instead.'

With Children's Week (22–30 October) almost upon us, this carries with it a certain poignancy, not to mention urgency. In addition to bringing attention to the plight of disadvantaged children around the world, the annual event reminds adults, and children alike, of the importance, and impermanence, of childhood.

Without putting too fine a point on it, what's at risk is innocence itself, says the Salvation Army's Colonel Jenny Walker. 'Ultimately, I think children are being robbed of their childhoods. Childhood is being devalued in our society.'

'The sexualisation of children is having significant effects on their cognitive and mental health, as well as what they believe about themselves.' The evidence of this is everywhere, she says, from the schoolyard to the numerous studies that have been done.

'The single most common reason young girls get admitted into hospital is self-harm,' says Colonel Walker. 'And the single most common reason behind self-harm is this whole idea of body image dissatisfaction. Girls and children are being told that their value comes from their body image.'

'They're not being valued for who they are and who God has made them. If you don't have the perfect body where does that leave you? Children are being forced into having sexual encounters at younger and younger ages and this leads to feelings of shame and guilt.'

### Quote

"What we allow is what we approve" —Dr Glen Cupit Senior Lecturer in Child Development. University of South Australia.

### Do Something

Sign a petition calling on Diva, the jewellery and accessories store popular with teenage girls, to withdraw its Playboy-branded jewellery at [www.collectiveshout.org](http://www.collectiveshout.org). Collective Shout is a grassroots campaigning movement against the objectification of women and sexualisation of girls in the media, advertising and popular culture.

Kids free 2be kids: Website to find out and do more  
<http://www.kf2bk.com/home.htm>

Are you concerned about:

How children are portrayed in advertising - i.e. What they wear, how they're posed?

The images children are exposed to in their environment - i.e. Billboards, magazines, internet, TV?

The toys, dolls and games children play with?

Exposure to adult sexual images that a child is not developmentally ready to absorb?

There is a groundswell of people all over Australia who are also concerned, including experts in the field of child development.

Log on to this website to find out more and learn how you can help.

### Devotions

In Matthew 18 we read one of the most well known encounters that Jesus had with children in the first century. This is all the more amazing in a society in which children were not necessarily the centre of attention that they are today.

*And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.* (Matthew 18:2–6 ESV)

In these verses, we not only hear about the value of children to Jesus, but we are also warned of our responsibility to protect them as best we can. In today's world in which children are at risk of losing their innocence through media and also inappropriate adult relationships, it is vital that we take our responsibility even more seriously.

Conclude your meeting with prayer for the children of your families, Corps or centre. Use the prayer guide attached as you pray.