

**SEXUALISATION  
OF  
CHILDREN:  
WHAT YOU  
NEED TO KNOW**

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# Sexualisation of children– Why should we care?

**While victims of injustice and poverty have always had trouble being heard, none have had more trouble, historically, than children. In the Bible, we are told specifically to care for children as they are listed among the most vulnerable victims of injustice. In fact, we are instructed to make this act a sign of true worship to God.**

Whether exploited in child labour or prostitution, drafted as young teenagers into armed forces, forced as young girls into a lonely life as domestic workers, deprived of an education to work on the family farm, or denied adequate nutrition and health care, children need help and protection from an adult world that perpetrates most of the abuse.<sup>1</sup> And while we may feel immune to many of these injustices in the developed world, the sexualisation of children by all facets of society is generating a new form of oppression for our children.

Adults are charged with the responsibility of caring for the rights of children, yet laws are failing to protect vulnerable young people who are increasingly being subjected to sexualised imagery. Their inability to process these images has led to

generations of children who feel required to be admired for their beauty and sexuality, not just as adults, but while still children. Sexualising material serves to normalise adult sexual themes to children; this is a major contributing factor to the genesis of problem sexual behaviour in adolescents and young adults.<sup>2</sup>

We must begin to understand just how pervasive and abusive sexualising children has become, and then we must unite to force the regulations and changes required to protect our children. Too long have we accepted that the innocence of childhood is a value of yesterday, and not only have we failed to protect that innocence, we have become a society that profits from its destruction. Pressuring and exploiting children into cognitively destructive behaviours for financial gain is one of the most harmful practices of the western world, and it is largely ignored by all who have the power to intervene. Children have a right to develop and mature without complex adult themes thrust upon them. Children have a right to develop and mature in a state of innocence. Children have a right to their childhood, and we must ensure that we afford them this right.

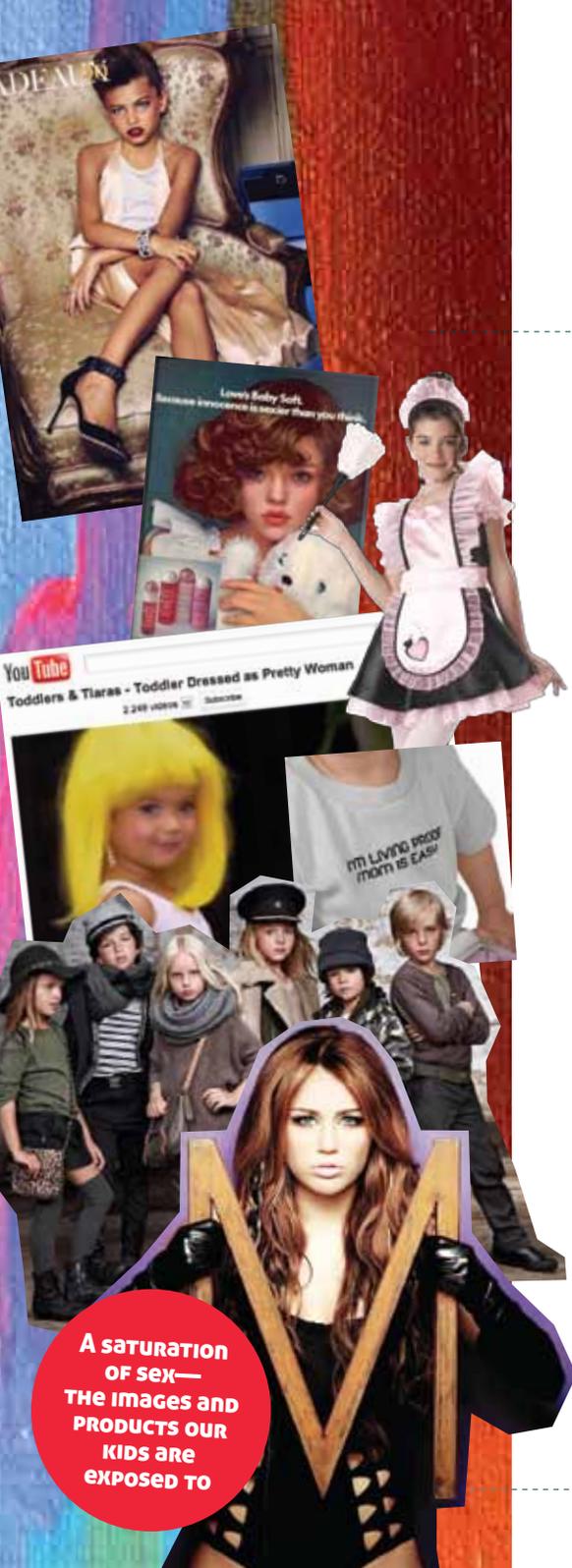
<sup>1</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission, United Nations. <sup>2</sup> Women's Forum Australia.

# What do we mean by sexualisation?

Let's clarify, this issue is not a product of conservative and puritan values that urge children to be seen and not heard.

Justice for children is not that they would be clothed head to toe and banished from viewing television or any other form of popular culture. This issue is very much about the exploitation of children for financial gain. It is the exploitation of children who have no ability to comprehend how sexualized images attack their cognitive and physical development. While many parents view sexualized content for children as 'just a bit of fun', few fail to realize just how destructive this 'fun' will be for their child.

It has never been unusual for a young child to dress up in mum's make-up and high heels, or to dream of being a firefighter or police officer. Children often live in an imaginary world where they play the roles of adults, and this is a normal and healthy part of their development. However, in recent decades, we have seen a move away from this innocent play toward a more dangerous and sexualised form of play.



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We see children adopting stereotypical forms of adult sexuality when they play, rather than simply carrying out stereotypical gender roles. For example, one kindergarten teacher observed that Bratz dolls have changed the way little girls play with dolls: 'They no longer play mother and care for and play with their doll in that nurturing way. They become one of the dolls when they play with them'.<sup>3</sup>

It is not uncommon for children to affirm that they are 'dating' another child, and the reference to having a boy or girlfriend for a child in preschool is increasingly common. Similarly, the exposure to adult themes in music video clips has had an obvious effect of the way children dance, where sexualised moves are simulated and choreographed. Perhaps the most alarming is the marketing of sexualised products and clothing directly to children, and often by children.

Children are being presented in images or directed to act in advertisements in ways modelled on adult sexual behaviour.<sup>4</sup> Hipster jeans and

brassieres for toddlers, 'g-strings' for six-year-olds, high heels as everyday wear for small children, and boy clothes that match identically with clothes worn by adult males or that have adult themed slogans upon them—we have moved into an age where the products for children and adults are indistinguishable.

The major difference in play, dance, conversation, clothing and accessories is that instead of the child entering into the adult world as a form of play and imagination, the child begins to live there permanently. Children see themselves as adults, and not as children pretending to be adults. This is not a question of whether children should have some knowledge or understanding of sex. It is a question of whether children should see it as appropriate and necessary to be presented as sexually available, alluring and active.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Maggie Hamilton, *What's Happening to Our Girls?*, p.18. <sup>4</sup> Rush and LaNauze, 2006, 1. <sup>5</sup> Glen Cupit, 'Bratz, Brittney and Bralettes' lecture.

# What is happening to our girls?

**It has been said that 'one barometer of the health of society is the measure of mental health of our children and young people'.<sup>6</sup>**

This measure does not bring us good news. While boys are not immune, social statistics reveal the depth of concern for girls, from physical and mental health to hyper-sexual activity. Strong empirical evidence indicates that exposure to ideals of sexual attractiveness in the media is associated with greater body dissatisfaction among girls and young women, leaving girls feeling 'ugly' and 'gross' or 'untouchable'.<sup>7</sup>

While it is impossible to prove that the facts above are directly correlated to sexualised imagery, researchers are confident that this is a major influence on the mental health of girls. '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.'<sup>9</sup> And in Australia,

'Studies of body image have now established that 'girls as young as 6 to 7 years of age desire a "thinner ideal body"'.<sup>10</sup>

Body image is not the only side effect of sexualisation. The increase in sexual activity among adolescents is at an alarming rate, and the age of sexual activity is ever decreasing. Sex with three or more partners while still of school age has increased dramatically to 25% of all girls, and the number of sexually active girls who have had a bad experience is at 38%.<sup>11</sup> It is now 'common' for girls as young as 15 to be sexually active with a partner of 22 years.<sup>12</sup>

Children and young people are not mature enough to understand the complexity of sexual relationships, and yet the portrayal of young people engaging in sexual activity gives the impression that it is not only desirable, but also healthy. Images that portray children as sexual agents who accept or even desire sexual interaction suggest, if only implicitly, that children are

<sup>6</sup>Anglican Dude, 'Bratz, Brittney and Bralettes' lecture. <sup>7</sup>Faking it – Women's Forum Australia p31.

<sup>8</sup>*body+soul* SNS 26/6/11, p13. <sup>9</sup>Field et al. 1999, p. 35. <sup>10</sup>Dohnt and Tiggemann 2006, p. 141.

<sup>11,12</sup> Glenn Cupit, *Bratz, Brittney and Bralettes*. <sup>13</sup>[www.tai.org.au/documents/dp\\_fulltext/DP90.pdf](http://www.tai.org.au/documents/dp_fulltext/DP90.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Glenn Cupit, *Bratz, Brittney and Bralettes*.

capable of meaningfully consenting to such interaction in the way that adults do.<sup>13</sup>

The results are devastating. 'Never have we had so many young people that are anxious, depressed and lonely.'<sup>14</sup> We must act now, or continue to see our young people suffer unnecessarily.

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### **A summary of some of the research below gives a painful snapshot of the harmful effects of sexualising girls:**

- \* 1 in 4 teenage girls in Australia want to have plastic surgery.
- \* Self harm is the highest cause of hospital admissions in the 13–19 age bracket. It is estimated at 7% with about ⅓ of admission directly related to depression.<sup>8</sup>
- \* 70%–76% of Australian high school girls consistently choose an ideal figure that they wish to have that is thinner than their own.
- \* Only 16% of young women are happy with their body weight.
- \* 1 in 100 adolescent girls are anorexic
- \* 1 in 5 are bulimic
- \* Body dissatisfaction has been shown to be directly related to declining self-esteem among girls, negative mood and mood disturbances.
- \* 90% girls say they have been on a diet.

# What is happening to our boys?

Too often we believe that the sexualisation in the public sphere is only affecting girls and women.

However, if we were to believe that, we would have to believe that our boys are villains, naturally seeking sex and pornography and fulfilling their sexual and violent desires against innocent and unsuspecting girls. If it is true that our girls are being sexualised, then it is also true of our boys.

The consequences of these influences can be devastating. One Australian study<sup>15</sup> showed that 57% of women had experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence over their lifetime, and that more than a third of women experience violence from a former or current partner. In the study, 18% of women reported being sexually abused before the age of 16. Only 1% of the women surveyed identified having been raped by a stranger.

These results are typical across the country, and reveal that males are

perpetrating crimes against women they not only know, but know intimately. We have created a society in which men and boys believe it is acceptable and normal to exert violence against women. We don't excuse the behaviour and we know where this lesson is being taught.

'A five-year-old boy can buy a lad mag and learn that women are only sex objects and he has entitlement to their bodies. If he logs on to Zoo magazine's website, he can watch videos of girls stripping and lap-dancing, one set up as if the woman is being stalked and secretly filmed in her bedroom while she strips, another of a "ridiculously hot" girl being so frightened, she is screaming and crying uncontrollably in a ball. This is not just about sexualisation. Sexual harassment is being eroticised.'<sup>16</sup>

Boys are being violated and warped as they grow into men, and leaving the problem and the consequences of the problem in their hands is unfair, and unrealistic. We are not

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doing women any favours by ignoring this issue as it relates to boys.

'Boys who are not enthusiastic about (sexualised culture), or speak out against it, run the risk of being ignored or ridiculed, of being labelled "gay", "unmanly" or not liking sex. Boys and young men are under pressure to act out a model of masculinity in which power and control over women, and men, is normal. In which violence is normal.'<sup>17</sup>

Speaking out against the sexualisation of boys is incredibly important, not just for the health and well being of girls and women, but for the protection of boys from abusive and/or adult acts they have no natural desire to perform. We must begin to see young boys just as vulnerable to abuse and malformation, as we see young girls, and advocate for their freedom from sexualisation.

## Strategies for protecting your child

- 1.** Tell your children from a very early age, and often, that they are loved for who they are, not for how they look.
- 2.** Be open and firm about your personal values and limits, explaining these to your children.
- 3.** As they get older, help them understand that beliefs that link 'beauty' with happiness and success are mistaken. Talk through the opportunities that do lead to happiness and success.
- 4.** Talk about the role of advertising with adolescents. Explain that ads are designed to make you think that being sexy is the same as being successful. Discuss why advertisers (and society) would want us to believe that.
- 5.** Minimize children's exposure to commercial media and kids' magazines, and find alternatives that they can enjoy.
- 6.** Don't buy skimpy clothing or adult clothes for young children.
- 7.** Shop wisely—simply refuse to support a company that uses objectifying images to sell their product.

<sup>15</sup> [www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/statistics.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/statistics.html)

<sup>16,17</sup> [www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/rachel-bell-our-sexual-obsession-damages-boys-as-well-as-girls-437307.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/rachel-bell-our-sexual-obsession-damages-boys-as-well-as-girls-437307.html)

## Becoming parents to a society of children: Ways you can get involved in the solution

**It has been said that the standard you walk by is the standard you accept.**

There are multiple ways we can begin to turn the tide on the sexualisation of children, and many of the activities take less than 15 minutes out of our day. We encourage you to look through the following list and become active in this issue, either as an individual, or as a community group.

- 1.** Visit the Collective Shout website for easy ways to get involved in this kind of advocacy ([collectiveshout.org](http://collectiveshout.org)).
- 2.** Write to department stores to complain, and applaud where good clothing choices are offered.
- 3.** Write to politicians, and local

business owners expressing your concerns.

- 4.** Write to advertisers, media outlets: newspapers, radio and television networks to tell them how you feel about the message of their products. Advertisers need to be convinced that there is a groundswell of community attitudes on this issue.
- 5.** Find out what advocacy is already happening in your community and join in with their work.
- 6.** Advocate for more research to be performed in this area.
- 7.** Find ways to promote the image of women and children we do want to see.

**"There is no trust more sacred than the one the world holds with children. There is no duty more important than ensuring that their rights are respected, that their welfare is protected, that their lives are free from fear and want and that they can grow up in peace."**

**—Kofi Annan**

# Resources\*

## Books to Read:

*The New Manhood: the Handbook for a New Kind of Man*, Steve Biddulph — Finch  
*Raising Boys*, Steve Biddulph — Finch  
*What's Happening to our Boys?*, Maggie Hamilton  
*Getting Real—Challenging the Sexualisation of Girls*, Melinda Tankard Reist  
*The Butterfly Effect. A Positive New Approach to Raising Happy, Confident Teen Girls*, Danielle Miller  
*What's Happening to Our Girls?*, Maggie Hamilton  
*Adproofing Your Kids*, Tania Andrusiak and Daniel Donahoo  
*This Little Kiddy Went to Market: The Corporate Capture of Childhood*, Sharon Beder (with Wendy Varney & Richard Gosden)  
*So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualised Childhood, and What Parents Can Do To Protect Their Kids*

## Research Links:

*Letting Children be Children*—UK Report of the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood.

[www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/CM%208078](http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/CM%208078)

US Study. Young girls clothing sexualised: Too much Too young.

[www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2011/05/110509091420.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2011/05/110509091420.htm)

Films hypersexualise teen girls most.

[www.annenberg.usc.edu/News%20and%20Events/News/110422smith.aspx](http://www.annenberg.usc.edu/News%20and%20Events/News/110422smith.aspx)

Impacts of music videos. 2007 Study.

[www.sussex.ac.uk/press\\_office/bulletin/15jun07/article1.shtml](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/press_office/bulletin/15jun07/article1.shtml)

UK Home Office Report on the Sexualisation of Young People.

[www.webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100418065544/homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/sexualisation-young-people.html](http://www.webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100418065544/homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/sexualisation-young-people.html)

Children Viewing Adult-Targeted TV May Become Sexually Active Earlier in Life

[www.prweb.com/releases/2009/05/prweb2386804.htm](http://www.prweb.com/releases/2009/05/prweb2386804.htm)

Does Watching Sex on Television Influence Teens' Sexual Activity?

[www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB9068/index1.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9068/index1.html)

The new American Psychological Association report on the sexualisation of girls

[www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.html](http://www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.html)

*Corporate Paedophilia* by Dr Emma Rush & *Letting Children Be Children* by Dr Emma Rush

[www.tai.org.au/index.php?search=letting+children+be+children&act=search&q=node%2F19](http://www.tai.org.au/index.php?search=letting+children+be+children&act=search&q=node%2F19)

Australian Psychological Society Parent Guidelines

—Protecting girls from sexualisation in the media (1)

[www.psychology.org.au/news/media\\_releases/20Oct2007](http://www.psychology.org.au/news/media_releases/20Oct2007)

—Protecting girls from sexualisation in the media (2)

[www.psychology.org.au/publications/tip\\_sheets/girls\\_positive\\_image/](http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/tip_sheets/girls_positive_image/)

