

# Think Piece: Sexualisation of children

**T**he sexualisation of children is a complex issue, relating to such issues as body image, loss of sexual innocence at an early age, increased promiscuity and related diseases, and the insidious underworld of pornography.

Yet the response of Scripture is surprisingly simple. The first affirmation relating to humans at the start of the Hebrew Scriptures is that the Creator saw the creation of humanity as being in God's image and pronounced very good (Genesis 1:2–31). This is the first of many points at which the worth of human persons is recognised. The New Testament speaks of God's desire for us to be children of God (John 1: 12–13). Not only so, but the uniqueness and worth of human persons is stressed in the promise that God's children will be like him (1 John 3: 1–3).

One of the issues of sexualisation of children involves the increasing tendency for children to see themselves as sexual objects. The child's developing self-perception increasingly can involve her or his perceived sexual attractiveness (or otherwise) to others. In its most extreme form, this results in sexual objectification—seeing oneself as an object. The intrinsic worth of human persons, affirmed by Scripture, is discounted by such objectification.

It is hardly surprising, given such objectification, that children become affected by anorexia and bulimia at younger ages. Nor is it surprising that pre-teen children are becoming involved with 'sexting', and early teens are experiencing multiple sexual partners.

**The more that children are seen as 'objects'—including by themselves—the easier it is for children to become 'commodified' by the porn industry.**

Recent studies of the brain reveal that there is actual change to the brain with regular expression of anger, regular use of pornography and other habitual thinking. The implications of this are significant, if someone were to develop a pattern of thinking

negatively of themselves—either as someone whose 'worth' is found only in their sexual attractiveness, or that they consider themselves unattractive and therefore somehow worthless.

Long before the benefits of modern brain research, or contemporary psychology, Paul stressed the importance of focussing the mind on things that are true, pure, lovely and admirable. (Phil 4:8). Helping

our children to develop healthy, life-giving patterns of thinking, is vitally important.

Healthy thought patterns would also involve monitoring what they watch on TV. The shaping effect of the increased sexualisation evident in our culture—and reflected in what comes out of Hollywood—is something we ignore at our peril.

This increased sexualisation is being fostered by the corporate moguls behind 'big porn'—the key power-brokers in the pornography industry. There is a deliberate move to influence the 'tastes' of users of pornography towards ever-younger pornographic 'models'. The more that children are seen as 'objects'—including by themselves—the easier it is for children to become 'commodified' by the porn industry.

Against such insidious evil, we note that Scripture shows Jesus affirming the worth of children. In Luke 18:15–17 (and similar passages in Mark & Matthew), Jesus implies the innocence and simplicity of the faith of children. He encourages others to be like children. By implication, then, Jesus would stand against anything that causes the loss of a child's innocence. Jesus becomes more intense in his condemnation of anyone who does something to

'scandalise' a child—where 'scandalise' is a more literal translation of the original word used in the New Testament, that is often translated as 'cause to stumble'. Jesus makes it clear that, for someone who scandalises a child, it would be 'better for a millstone to be hung around his neck and for him to be cast into the depths of the sea' (Matthew 18:6, Mark 9:42, Luke 17:2). Strong words indeed—but appropriate for those within 'big porn' who engage in child pornography.

What is less easily apparent is the extent to which there is some measure of culpability in the actions of well-meaning adults who allow the increased sexualisation of their own children. Perhaps what is needed is the continued reminder from Scripture of the worth and dignity of children, and that their innocence and vulnerability must be protected by our vigilance, our awareness of the issues, and our willingness to take a stand.