Submission to the Parliament of NSW Inquiry into the sexualisation of children and young people

Australian Psychological Society

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The Australian Psychological Society (APS) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Parliament of NSW's inquiry into the sexualisation of children and young people.

The APS is well placed to contribute to this consultation. We made a submission to a Senate inquiry into sexualisation in 2008, have developed resources for parents and made many submissions into related inquiries around online safety with particular reference to young people.

Psychologists and other mental health professionals have become increasingly concerned about the prevalence of sexualised material in all forms of media and marketing in Australia. In particular, the increasing exposure of such material in online environments, including access to pornography, as well as through gaming and in young people's depictions of themselves (through social media and sexting) is of growing concern.

Viewing highly sexualised images of women, or violent material for example, has many risks for children's psychological development and mental health, as well as concerning general societal effects like an increase in sexism, increased rates of sexual harassment and sexual violence, and negative impacts on how men regard women.

The APS supports this inquiry and other actions to address and reduce the impact of sexualisation on children and young people.

Recommendations

The APS recommends that the Advocate for Children and Young People:

Work collaboratively with governments, industry, schools and community organisations to raise awareness of the harmful impact of sexualisation of children and develop appropriate policy and legislative responses to prevent this harm.

In particular, collaborating with the Australian Council for Children and the Media, the National Commissioner for Children, the E-Safety Commissioner and more generally with other youth focused organisations as well as women's health organisations to develop and deliver public education campaigns aimed reducing the harmful impact of sexualisation on children and young people.

Advocate for the strengthening of existing standards of classification, so as to reduce admissible levels of sexualised content within existing categories relating to children.

Systematically monitor and report on sexualised content, with dissemination of results of such monitoring to the public, government and industry.

Work with state and national education departments to ensure all schools provide appropriate media, sex and respectful relationship education, as well as have in place policies to promote e-safety.

Support parents to monitor their children's screen time (social media, television, film, and gaming), discuss viewed material, encourage critical viewing skills and increase awareness of rating systems.

Support initiatives that focus on children's abilities and send strong messages to focus on what young people think, do or care about, rather than what they look like. For example, in Victoria the 'Kick like a Girl' program for young girls to participate in Australian Rules football, and initiatives in schools that promotes prosocial, age-appropriate engagement with media and social media.

Engage children and young people themselves to develop and deliver initiatives to counter the overly sexualised culture and empower children to become active rather than passive consumers of media.

RESPONDING TO THE INQUIRY

The sexualisation of children and young people in electronic, print and social media and marketing

There has been a trend over the last two decades towards the increased use of sexualised images of children and early adolescents in all forms of media, the internet and advertising. There are two main problems: direct and indirect sexualisation of children, particularly girls. Direct sexualisation of children occurs when children are presented in advertising and magazines in ways that are modelled on adults who are overtly sexualised. Children are dressed in clothing and posed in ways designed to draw attention to adult sexual features that the children do not yet possess. Less obvious sexualisation of children occurs through the ubiquitous sexualised advertising and popular culture targeted at adults.

The values implicit in sexualised images are that physical appearance and beauty are intrinsic to self esteem and social worth, and that sexual attractiveness is a part of childhood experience. According to the APA task force on the sexualisation of girls (APA 2010), sexualisation occurs when:
• a person's only ascribed value comes from his or her sexual appeal and behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics;
• a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy;
• a person is sexually objectified, and rather than being seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making, is made into a thing for others' sexual use;
• sexuality is inappropriately and prematurely imposed upon a person such as a child.

All forms of media provide examples of sexualised images, mainly of girls and women. These images are not just restricted to advertising, but include most other forms of media – television, music, music lyrics, movies, sport, video games and the internet.

In addition to the concerns about the impact of media on the sexualisation of children, there are broader socio-cultural influences that also have a sexualising effect. These include products that sexualise girls (products that promote images of sexy, sexualised people to children include clothing, make-up, dolls (e.g., Bratz

dolls), and the influences of girls' interpersonal relationships with parents, teachers and peers, who can also support and promote sexualising messages.

The exposure of children and young people in NSW to sexualised images and content in public places, electronic, print and social media and marketing

Along with exposure of children to sexualised images in *physical* spaces, such as through the media, advertising, television, in print, is the increasing use and exposure to such images via the internet and social media. In particular, online exposure can happen via online advertising, electronic gaming, social media articles and posts and through pornography.

The APS has previously raised serious concerns about the impact of children's access to online technologies, particularly content and contact risks associated with this access. Children are likely to be exposed to online technology from a very young age and increasingly have immediate and ongoing access to online environments. Among other content that is potentially harmful for children, pornography is readily available on the internet, with one source estimating that 12 per cent of all websites are pornography sites, and 25 per cent of all search engine requests are for pornography (English, 2005, cited in APA, 2010). Most boys aged from the age of 13 have seen pornography online, with access being accidental (often through search engines) and effortless (as well as anonymous). According to some sources, the average first age of exposure to pornography is 11 years, with 100% of 15 year old males and 80% of 15 year old females reporting that they have been exposed to violent, degrading online pornography, usually before they have had a sexual experience themselves(Horvath et al, 2014). . Internet pornography is a disturbing introduction into human sexuality. At the same time that pornography has become more mainstream, it has also become more aggressive. A recent content analysis of the most popular porn found that 88% of scenes included acts of physical aggression and 48% of the scenes contained verbal aggression (Horvath et al, 2014).

All sectors of the population are affected. Pornography's reach crosses social, economic and cultural boundaries. It affects straight and gay young people and impacts on both boys and girls. Young men are more likely than their female peers to use porn alone and in same sex groups, and to view a wider range of images. Gay porn, however, is often referred to as a source of liberation for same-sex attracted young people. Yet, in a world in which their sexual orientation may be invisible or derided, portrayals of gay and lesbian sex can be equally gendered, aggressive and limiting. The mainstreaming of pornography is reinforced by its influence on popular culture; in music videos, films, television programs, advertising and fashion.

Psychologists have long recognised the role pornography has played in the sexualisation of women and girls and its potential harmful effects on children and young people. With the proliferation of the internet, and the increasingly violent nature of much pornographic content, serious concerns are now emerging within and beyond psychology about the impact on young people's expectations of sex and sexuality, the role pornography plays in facilitating and normalising violence against

women, and how it contributes more broadly to representations and normative understandings about sex, sexuality and gender in society.

There is also a growing awareness in many schools of the ways in which the pervasiveness and influence of explicit sexual imagery can undermine students' healthy development. Much of what young people are learning from pornography is problematic in that pornography conveys complex messages about gender, power, sexual health, bodies, pleasure, consent, performance, sexuality and sex, yet many young people often do not have the critical frameworks required to deconstruct and understand these messages.

The APS has also expressed concern that in reality, much pornographic content depicts unsafe sexual acts that are harmful for sexual health, and frequently overlook crucial notions of mutual pleasure (or female pleasure), respect and negotiating consent. Research on pornography imagery indicates that women more often than men are portrayed in a sexual manner (e.g., dressed in revealing clothing, with bodily postures or facial expressions that imply sexual readiness) and are objectified (e.g., used as a decorative object, or as body parts rather than a whole person).

Pornography increasingly plays a significant role in shaping social norms in relation to sexuality, particularly among young people. This is associated with increased confusion and anxiety as young people feel pressured to behave in ways commonly displayed in pornography.

Furthermore, the APS has echoed the American Psychological Association's concerns about the links between exposure of children to pornography and the sexual abuse of children, and between pornography and sex trafficking, including trafficking for the purpose of producing pornography and the potential for pornography to fuel trafficking via increased demand (APA, 2015).

Exposure to sexualisation also occurs via video games, which are accessible, affordable and anonymous for children and young people. They are played on computers, consoles and mobile phones or tablets by an ever-increasing number of people for longer periods of time (Arriago et al., 2013). Children are particularly susceptible as gaming is very appealing and is often sanctioned by parents as a safe activity. Violence and sexualisation are often presented together in video gaming. Many games contain extreme violence and players often engage in gaming for many hours at a time, maximising their exposure. Content that involves sexualisation of women and often violence against women has led to the "R" classification of some games, however even games not classified as R still often involve sexualised images of the women and girls portrayed in less explicit ways.

In addition, the APS has raised concerns related to the possible harmful impacts of sexting (the taking and sending of sexually explicit images). While sexting is distinctly different to pornography (and can be a healthy form of sexual exploration where it is consensual), there is increasing pressure on young people (particularly young women) to take and send sexually explicit images, with potential for intentional harm by others including cyber bullying, harassment, sexual abuse and pornographic use of the images. Schools are increasingly required to respond to incidents relating to explicit sexual imagery, including 'sexting' incidents, involving

the circulation of sexual imagery of students. This increase in incidents reflects a shift both in the place of new technologies and the role of explicit sexual imagery in many young people's lives.

The impact on children and young people of growing up in a sexualised culture;

Evidence on the sexualisation of children, particularly girls, suggests that sexualisation has negative consequences for girls and the rest of society. According to the APA report(2010), the cumulative exposure of children and young people to sexualised images and themes has negative effects in many areas. We refer the inquiry to the full report: www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.html and summarise the main findings below:

Cognitive effects
Exposure to an array of sexualising messages can lead girls to think of themselves in objectified terms ('self-objectification'). This is a process in which girls learn to see and think of their bodies as objects of others' desire, to be looked at and evaluated for its appearance. Self-objectification has been found to reduce young women's ability to concentrate and focus their attention, thus leading to impaired performance on mental activities.

Information processing models predict that not all individuals will be equally affected by what they view, and this has been found to be so. Scripts are more likely to be encoded and enacted when the material viewed is consistent with experiences encountered by individuals in their environment. For example, viewed violence is more likely to influence those who are already vulnerable because they live in environments (homes, schools, neighbourhoods) which are characterised by similar behaviour.

Depression, self-esteem and eating disorders
Research links sexualisation with three of the most common mental health problems of girls and women: eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression or depressed mood.

Vulnerable young people may be influenced by media representation of the narrow thin ideal to develop body image disturbances and eating disorders. Sexualisation and objectification have been found to undermine confidence in and comfort with one's own body, and can lead to a range of negative emotional consequences, like anxiety, shame and inadequacy.

Sexual development
Sexualised images of children are not in keeping with the rights of children to develop as sexual beings within a developmentally appropriate timeframe. Adolescent girls who engage in self-objectification have been found to have diminished sexual health, including reduced sexual assertiveness and a decrease in protective behaviours. Frequent exposure to narrow ideals of attractiveness is associated with unrealistic and/or negative expectations concerning sexuality, and may lead to sexual problems in adulthood.

<u>Identity development; attitudes and beliefs</u>
Sexualised advertising and marketing sends a message that what's important is not what you think or do or care about, but what you look like. These messages impact on how children develop their understanding about their place in the world outside the immediate family. It also affects how girls conceptualise femininity and sexuality, where appearance and physical attractiveness is seen as central to women's value, and can lead to the endorsement of narrow stereotypes of gender roles and of sexual stereotypes that depict women as sexual objects.

<u>Other effects</u>
More general societal effects may include an increase in sexism, fewer girls pursuing careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, the idealisation of youth, increased rates of sexual harassment and sexual violence, and negative impacts on how men regard women, and on their ability to form and maintain intimate relationships with women. A related example is the common co-occurrence of aggression and sex in various media, where aggressive sexuality is presented as a sign of manliness, and women are often treated as property and/or as promiscuous. Research shows effects of viewing sexual aggression on men's attitudes, with increasing moral disengagement, and reduction of self-censure for their own acts of aggressive sexuality. While this research refers to adult images, it is also the case that paedophiles frequently justify their behaviour on the basis of children's 'seductiveness'. These effects are likely to be gradual and insidious, and therefore very difficult to research in an ethical manner. Policy makers cannot hope to base decisions on 'hard' empirical research data in this area, but rather on trends and patterns which are consistent with psychological theory.

Adequacy of current measures at state and federal level to regulate sexualised imagery in electronic, print and social media and marketing, and effectiveness of self-regulation measures

The APS supports a strong role for regulation of sexualised imagery. While concerns about the impact of media content on children's wellbeing are often relegated to 'parental responsibility', parents' choices can be supported or made more difficult by the systems put in place to regulate the type and timing of content shown. Parents don't parent in a vacuum, and the way children are raised impacts on the broader community; therefore, it is in the community's interests to ensure that children are not exposed to harmful media that may have detrimental impacts on their wellbeing now and into adulthood.

Government legislation and regulation therefore, plays an essential role in setting standards for children's media and online experiences and in protecting children from harm.

The National Classification Scheme for films, computer games and certain publications provides protection for those most vulnerable in society and aims to protect the rights of consumers, especially children. The NCS also plays an essential educative function, in providing information to parents and carers to help them to choose material for their children. It is important to recognise the strong role that this system plays in informing personal choice. It is a valuable source of consumer advice. Guidelines about what time programs can be shown and the type of material

that will be broadcast provide parents with a short cut to decision making that protects their children from potential harm.

For more recommendations for supporting and strengthening the National Classification System, please see the recent [APS submission into Personal Choice and Community Impacts – Film and Literature Classification Inquiry](#). In particular, the APS is concerned about the recent changes to the Free TV (the Association of Commercial TV stations of Australia) Code of Practice, which mean, among other things, that all G time zones have been replaced by PG time zones and programs rated M and MA15+ can be shown earlier in the evening.

The APS echoes the concerns expressed by the Australian Council for Children and the Media ACCM, that despite a trend towards streaming of television programs outside regular screening times: there is a valid connection between protection of children and time zone interventions. Parents have long relied on TV programs shown at certain times of the day being safe for children and many families still view television programs together in the early evening, and assume programs will be suitable for families with children at this time of night time. Additionally, zones have an educative value about what is age-appropriate viewing.

While these changes are not part of the NCS, they signal a move towards lessened protection for the most vulnerable. Rather, the APS supports the call by ACCM for a more evidence-based approach to reviewing classifiable elements and guidelines. In particular, ACCM has expressed concern with the operation of the NCS at the lower end, and especially how distinctions are drawn between the G, PG and M categories, and has advocated an overhaul of these categories to make them more age-specific and the criteria better aligned with the evidence about child development.

Classification systems should reflect mitigation of this risk in the guidance of content that can be displayed at what times on free to air television. In addition to content classifications of other media such as films and games. This includes advertising which is not only shown during programing directed at children, but also at times when children are likely to be watching.

Measures to assist parents in fulfilling their responsibility to protect and educate children

While we acknowledge that it is not solely parents' responsibility to monitor media exposure, there is evidence that the effects on children of what they view are lessened if an adult is present who discusses the content with the child (Singer, Singer, Desmond, Hirsch & Nicol, 1988). Such discussion presumably prevents the uncritical adoption of scripts from the viewed material. Parents and other family members can also help make sexualisation visible by discussing other cultural messages with girls.

Parents can also find ways of counteracting sexualising messages with children by teaching girls to value themselves for who they are, rather than how they look. Similarly, boys can be taught to value girls as friends, sisters, and girlfriends, rather than as sexual objects. The Australian Psychological Society released a tip sheet for parents (APS, 2008) suggesting ways that parents can help girls question their

choices, educate their children, encourage them to participate in activities that emphasise skills and abilities over physical appearance, and help them to find healthy role models. We enclose that tipsheet for your information.

Many of the strategies to address access to online environments and content, including access to pornography, by young people centre around the support, education and limits provided to children. These are not specific to the Internet, as they apply to how children are supported, protected and assisted to thrive in all aspects of their lives. For example, parents who provide children with good supervision and who set boundaries, while at the same time granting their children a level of psychological autonomy, enhance the development of protective social skills among their children.

Enhancing online safety for children and young people also involves supporting the development of young people as competent online citizens, promoting online literacy and fostering their ability to critique information. Specifically, the APS has recommended that parents and schools provide young people with the knowledge to critique pornography and understand that the imagery has been constructed for a commercial purpose. It is also recommended that adequate sex education is provided that includes consideration of the role of pornography (among other factors) on sexual behaviours and decisions, how to make safe choices and what makes for healthy relationships.

For young people, limiting their access to online technologies can be a helpful cyber safety strategy. Parents and schools need to play an active role in monitoring and boundary setting for young people in relation to cyber safety, but this must be done in conjunction with trusting and respectful relationships.

Measures to educate children and young people and assist them in navigating the contemporary cultural environment

The APS supports the recent Australian Government policy announcement to provide respectful relationship education in all schools. Engaging children and young people in quality, relationally-based sex education is a protective factor against sexual exploitation and being a victim of abuse, and key to healthy and respectful sexual expectations and practices (Pratt, 2015). School based strategies are recommended to deliver such education, which must go beyond the mechanistic approach (reproduction, sexual diseases) to talk about expectations, norms and equipping them to be critical of the overly sexualised images and scripts they are exposed to.

The APS has recommended a range of cyber safety strategies that aim to give children, along with their parents/carers and teachers, safe and responsible ways of using and accessing content online, like teaching children what to do if they come across inappropriate content, teaching them to question information sources and content (e.g., providing children with the knowledge to critique pornography and to understand that the imagery has been constructed for a commercial purpose; ask them what messages they think the images send to young people about relationship expectations), learning how to install and use filters, talking to children about where they go online, and discussing the type of sites that are appropriate for their age

and those that are not, and encouraging children to enjoy a range of activities (both online and offline) to promote a range of influences in their lives.

The APS recommends that young people are engaged in the development and delivery of efforts to prevent, minimise and challenge the culture of sexualisation and in setting the agenda for this function and in all key decision-making processes.

Possible measures that the Children's Advocate can take to assist children and young people to navigate the cultural environment successfully

The APS recommends that the Children's Advocate:

Work collaboratively with governments, industry, schools and community organisations to raise awareness of the harmful impact of sexualisation of children and develop appropriate policy and legislative responses to prevent this harm.

In particular, collaborating with the Australian Council for Children and the Media, the National Commissioner for Children, the E-Safety Commissioner and more generally with other youth focused organisations as well as women's health organisations to develop and deliver public education campaigns aimed reducing the harmful impact of sexualisation on children and young people.

Advocate for the strengthening of existing standards of classification, so as to reduce admissible levels of sexualised content within existing categories relating to children.

Systematically monitor and report on sexualised content, with dissemination of results of such monitoring to the public, government and industry.

Work with state and national education departments to ensure all schools provide appropriate media, sex and respectful relationship education, as well as have in place policies to promote e-safety.

Support parents to monitor their children's screen time (social media, television, film, and gaming), discuss viewed material, encourage critical viewing skills and increase awareness of rating systems.

Support initiatives that focus on children's abilities and send strong messages to focus on what young people think, do or care about, rather than what they look like. For example, in Victoria the 'Kick like a Girl' program for young girls to participate in Australian Rules football, and initiatives in schools that promotes prosocial, age-appropriate engagement with media and social media.

Engage children and young people themselves to develop and deliver initiatives to counter the overly sexualised culture and empower children to become active rather than passive consumers of media.

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Attachments

http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/

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About the APS

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) is the national professional organisation for psychologists with over 22,000 members across Australia. Psychologists are experts in human behaviour and bring experience in understanding crucial components necessary to support people to optimise their function in the community.

A key goal of the APS is to actively contribute psychological knowledge for the promotion and enhancement of community wellbeing. Psychology in the Public Interest is the section of the APS dedicated to the communication and application of psychological knowledge to enhance community wellbeing and promote equitable and just treatment of all segments of society.

Psychologists regard people as intrinsically valuable and respect their rights, including the right to autonomy and justice. Psychologists engage in conduct which promotes equity and the protection of people's human rights, legal rights, and moral rights (APS, 2007). The APS continues to raise concerns and contribute to debates around human rights, including the rights of clients receiving psychological services, and of marginalised groups in society (such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, asylum seekers and LGBTI individuals and groups) (http://www.psychology.org.au/community/public-interest/human-rights/). Underpinning this contribution is the strong evidence linking human rights, material circumstances and psychological health.