



Sexualisation of children and young teens

Julie Gale

Julie is the founder of Kids Free 2B Kids. She is also a comedy writer and performer and has performed her one woman shows at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival. Julie has been raising public, corporate and political awareness about the sexualisation of children since February 2007. She has generated great media interest about the issue and has appeared on television, radio and in newspaper articles throughout Australia and internationally. Julie's work instigated changes to the children's advertising codes and she also helped to instigate the 2008 senate inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment. She received a 2009 National Leadership Achievement Award from the Centre for Leadership for Women, and is named in the 2011 Australian Who's Who of Women.

The release of the reports *Corporate Paedophilia* and *Letting Children be Children* by the Australia Institute in 2006, instigated nationwide discussions about the issue of sexualisation. In the early days there were some suggestions that the issue was a 'moral panic' but it is now recognised by child development professionals, and increasing research, and as an issue of mental health and wellbeing.

Sexualisation can be defined into two broad categories.

1. Direct Sexualisation – How children are portrayed or posed in advertising.
2. Indirect Sexualisation – What children are exposed to in their environment, including advertising intended for an adult audience.

The American Psychological Association taskforce on the sexualisation of girls (2007) defines it as:

A person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behaviour, to the exclusion of other characteristics. A person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness with being sexy. A person is sexually objectified - that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making.

Sexualisation has been linked to an increase in anxiety, depression, eating disorders, body image issues, lower academic performance, and sexual activity at earlier ages.

According to Dr Joe Tucci, CEO Australian Childhood Foundation, and Professor Chris Goddard, Director Child Abuse Research Australia, Monash University, the preponderance of sexualised messages is contributing to an increase in the number of children who are engaging in problem sexual behaviour with other children. The Australian Childhood Foundation has pioneered therapeutic programs for children as young as seven years old who engage in problem sexual behaviour with other children. (Staiger et al, 2005).

Whilst the problem behaviour of a significant proportion of these children can be traced back to histories of abuse, neglect and disruption, it is Tucci and Goddard's (2008) clinical experience that approximately 20% of this population of children have evolved this behaviour without prior experiences to trauma.

In these circumstances, a contributing factor to the genesis of problem sexual behaviour is the increasing volume of sexualised imagery and themes available in popular culture and accessible to children. Without access to explanatory

frameworks for understanding these themes, children can engage in behaviour which enables them to test often distorted beliefs about sexuality. In doing so, they harm other children and complicate their own developmental trajectories.

I started Kids Free 2B Kids in Feb 2007 because I had become increasingly concerned by what my kids were exposed to. It is one thing to 'turn off' the TV or to be mindful about what kids are exposed to in the home environment – but in the public arena, kids are literally bombarded with adult concepts of sex and sexuality (and increasingly violent imagery) without having the maturity to understand or unpack those messages. Children are being involuntarily exposed, and often it is before they have started to understand, or ask questions about their own naturally emerging sexuality. The advertising industry is self regulated. It has a voluntary code of ethics and there are no strong penalties for advertisers who don't comply. It's a reactionary system and relies on public complaint. Therefore, nothing will be done about a billboard if no-one complains. Complaints are assessed by the Advertising Standards Board (ASB). Billboards are not screened or vetted before they go into the public arena.

When I started campaigning, it became obvious that most people did not know how, or where to complain, felt powerless and believed that their complaint would not make a difference. The ASB (similarly to broadcasters) deduced that low numbers of complaints meant there was no problem. Kids Free 2B Kids encourages the community to speak out, make formal complaints and to understand that this is a powerful tool in helping to create change.

In recent years the numbers of complaints have increased and recent internal research by the ASB showed that they were out of touch with community standards. (No surprises there!) The ASB has also started to acknowledge that some images do contribute to the sexualisation of children. It must be said, however, that the ASB has never consulted with relevant child development professionals when deliberating on complaints relevant to the impacts on children.

Many of the sexualised images in the public arena would not be acceptable in a workplace

because of sexual harassment laws, but those laws do not apply in the public space.

Kids Free 2B Kids helped to instigate the 2008 senate inquiry into the sexualisation of children. Since then, the recommendations have been largely ignored and there has been no evidence of proactive responsibility from industry. Three years later we are still waiting for the 18 month review!

Recommendation 1 (of 13)

1.12 The committee considers that the inappropriate sexualisation of children in Australia is of increasing concern. While noting the complexity of defining clear boundaries around this issue, the committee believes that preventing the premature sexualisation of children is a significant cultural challenge. This is a community responsibility which demands action by society. In particular, the onus is on broadcasters, publishers, advertisers, retailers and manufacturers to take account of these community concerns.

1.13 Noting this heightened concern, the committee believes that this issue should be followed up and therefore recommends that the steps taken to address it by industry bodies and others should be further considered by the Senate in 18 months time.

The recent UK Report of an Independent Review of the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood - Letting Children be Children - leaves the Australian Governments action on this issue in its wake. The UK report acknowledges that parents need and want support to assist them in raising their children in a society that is wallpapered with sexualised imagery.

Speaking out by Kids Free 2B Kids and other groups such as Collective Shout has instigated a lot of change in recent years. There is a groundswell of people from all sectors of the community voicing concern and wanting to see change including parents, child advocates, educators, child development professionals and some politicians. Through collective action we have consistently held industry to account – but this is reactionary action and is ultimately unrelenting and exhausting. As long as industry remains self-regulated, there will no focus or

commitment to the mental health and well-being of young people. Dollars always come first!

No previous generation of children has had to deal with such continued exposure to adult content. From outdoor advertising, porn magazines at kids eye levels, sexualised music video clips, inappropriate content in prime children's viewing hours on TV and Radio, sexualised fashion aimed at young teens, mini-me adult clothing marketed to the very young, young girls magazines ... the list goes on.

Our government would do well to pay heed to the concerns of leading child/adolescent psychiatrists and psychologists. Children are being impacted. A Federal Children's Commissioner with some clout and an independent body to oversee children's interests in the media would be a good start.

But first ... a good look at the recommendations from the UK report would point our Government back in the right direction.

Anyone interested in learning more can access research and other information on the Kids Free 2B Kids website and you can join Facebook to keep up with the latest. <http://www.kf2bk.com/>

By speaking out we can all help to create the change children deserve.

What we allow is what we approve.

(Dr Glen Cupit Senior Lecturer in Child Development, University of South Australia.)

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