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Corporate Paedophilia

Sexualisation of children in Australia

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Summary

Images of sexualised children are becoming increasingly common in advertising and marketing material. Children who appear aged 12 years and under, particularly girls, are dressed, posed and made up in the same way as sexy adult models. ‘Corporate paedophilia’ is a metaphor used to describe advertising and marketing that sexualises children in these ways. The metaphor encapsulates the idea that such advertising and marketing is an abuse both of children and of public morality.

In the past, the sexualisation of children occurred indirectly, primarily through exposure of children to representations of teen and adult sexuality in advertising and popular culture. The very direct sexualisation of children, where children themselves are presented in ways modelled on sexy adults, is a new development. The pressure on children to adopt sexualised appearance and behaviour at an early age is greatly increased by the combination of the direct sexualisation of children with the increasingly sexualised representations of teenagers and adults in advertising and popular culture.

This paper documents and analyses the sexualisation of children aged 12 and under in relation to three types of cultural material: advertising (both print and television), girls’ magazines, and television programs (including music video-clips). Other sources of children’s premature sexualisation, such as toys and material on the Internet, are not considered here.

Sources of children’s sexualisation

A range of examples of sexualised children in advertisements are analysed in the paper. The essential point is that children are dressed in clothing and posed in ways designed to draw attention to adult sexual features that the children do not yet possess.

For example, in one advertisement a girl apparently aged about ten wears a chain pulled like a choker around her neck, with the ends dangling where her cleavage would be if she were older. Her hot pink tank top and black trousers hang slightly loosely from her child’s frame. Two belts hold the trousers up, with another chain hanging from a belt loop. An oversized ring on one of her fingers dominates one hand, and she wears pink lipstick and a pink velvet cap. She adopts the female full frontal pose which is familiar to us from images of adult women models – the head is tilted and turned to one side, the shoulders are tilted one way and the hips the other.

In a woman, the effect of the outfit and the pose would be to draw attention to the features that signal women’s sexual difference from men, in particular the breasts, waist and hips, as well as the lack of body hair. The lipstick would be widely considered ‘attractive’ on a woman, but the evolutionary basis for this is that it mimics the increased blood flow to the mucous membranes when humans are sexually aroused. That a pre-pubescent child is presented in this way to sell a product strikes many as grotesque – and that the product is an *eau de toilette* directed at girls of primary school age only heightens the incongruity.

Girls' magazines that are essentially children's versions of teen and adult women's magazines have appeared on the market in Australia since 1996 and appear to mark a substantial shift in children's culture.

The three most popular girls' magazines in this genre are *Barbie Magazine* (targets readers aged 5 to 12 years), *Total Girl* (targets readers aged 8 to 11 years), and *Disney Girl* (targets readers aged 6 to 13 years). Like the teen and adult versions, these magazines contain a large amount of material related to beauty, fashion, celebrities or 'crushes'. Aimed at children of primary school age, such material encourages the premature sexualisation of the readers. A content analysis of a sample edition of each of these magazines demonstrates that in the case of the latter two, approximately half of the content is sexualising material, and in the case of *Barbie Magazine*, fully three-quarters of the content is sexualising material. Between them, the three magazines are widely read: data from the Roy Morgan Young Australians survey shows that in total, 34 per cent of girls aged 6 to 12 read one or more of these magazines. Readership peaks among 10 and 11 year old girls, 44 per cent of whom read one or more of these magazines.

The direct sexualisation of children, particularly girls, in advertisements and girls' magazines occurs in a context where children are also exposed to highly sexualised representations of adults and adult behaviour in television programs, particularly music video programs screened on Saturday mornings. Although these programs are classified G or PG, the classification code appears to allow highly sexually suggestive material, particularly in the 'program context' of music videos, provided it is not a depiction of actual sexual intercourse. Girls' magazines not only give a prominent place to music celebrities such as The Veronicas, Rihanna, and now, Paris Hilton, but girls are actively encouraged to mimic the videos. For example, in the September 2006 issue of *Total Girl*, girls of primary school age are instructed to 'roll your body back and forth' and 'sway your hips side to side' with stills of Rihanna, all flesh and tight black clothing, to prompt them.

When these three sources of children's sexualisation are considered together – as children actually experience them – it is apparent that young children today, particularly girls, face sexualising pressure unlike that faced by any of today's adults in their childhood. Such sexualising pressure has the potential to harm children in a variety of ways, and the paper draws on research from a range of disciplines to illustrate the risks to children of premature sexualisation.

The risks to children of premature sexualisation

Firstly, many studies have linked exposure to the ideal 'slim, toned' body type that is considered sexy for adults to the development of eating disorders in older children and teenagers. There is already some evidence that children in Australia are developing eating disorders at a younger age than previously. Even a 'mild' eating disorder can have significant effects on a child's physical health. The idea that increased emphasis on body image for children might be helpful in the context of significant increases in childhood obesity is misguided, since negative motivations stemming from a sense of inadequacy can be very counterproductive. Positive motivations like self-acceptance are more effective in the promotion of healthy living.

Secondly, the sexualisation of children has psychological implications, although they have not yet been fully researched. Studies have shown that exposure to ‘appearance-focused media’ increases body dissatisfaction among children. Apart from contributing to the development of eating disorders, this may have further effects that are not yet fully understood. For example, it is widely recognised that body image concerns are a barrier to teenage girls’ participation in sporting activities. It is possible that as younger girls develop higher body dissatisfaction, this barrier may also affect their participation.

Psychologists have also noted that, given that precocious sexual behaviour is an attention-getting strategy used by some older children and young teenagers, the general sexualisation of children may escalate the level of sexual behaviour necessary to attract attention. It has also been observed that premature sexualisation can lead to other aspects of child development being neglected; if large amounts of time, money and mental energy are devoted to appearance this will distract from other developmental activities, be they physical, intellectual or artistic.

Two specifically sexual risks follow from the sexualisation of children, which reduces the sexual distinction between children and adults.

Firstly, children may be encouraged to initiate sexual behaviour at an earlier age, well before they have full knowledge of the potential consequences. Earlier sexual activity in teenagers is linked to a higher incidence of unwanted sex (particularly for teenage girls) and to increasing potential to contract sexually transmitted infections. Both unwanted sex and sexually transmitted infections can have serious long-term consequences.

Secondly, because sex is widely represented in advertising and marketing as something that fascinates and delights adults, the sexualisation of children could play a role in ‘grooming’ children for paedophiles – preparing children for sexual interaction with older teenagers or adults. This is of particular concern with respect to the girls’ magazines, which actively encourage girls of primary school age to have crushes on adult male celebrities. At the same time, the representation of children as miniature adults playing adult sexual roles sends a message to paedophiles that, contrary to laws and ethical norms, children are sexually available.

There has as yet been no sustained public debate about the sexualisation of children in Australia. This paper provides a framework for analysis of the issue in order to bring the phenomenon of corporate paedophilia and the risks it entails for children, to public attention. Although solutions are not straightforward, in the absence of any public debate the trend towards increasing sexualisation of children by advertisers and marketers appears likely to continue, with associated risks for children.

A forthcoming Australia Institute Discussion Paper will offer a range of policy measures that could reduce the risk of harm to children based on an assessment of the current regulatory frameworks covering the major sources of children’s sexualisation – advertising, girls’ magazines and television program.