

YWCA of Adelaide- Policy Statement on the Sexualisation of Children

13 October, 2009

Policy Proposal

The YWCA of Adelaide proposes that: The South Australian Government either amend the *Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Act 1995(SA)* or introduce new legislation, for the purpose of establishing a "PG" type classification system for girls' magazines sold in South Australia

Issue and Impacts

The sexualisation of children occurs in two ways:

- Children are exposed to sexualised messaging which are intended for an adult audience
- Children are themselves presented in sexualised ways in media targeted to children, or to which children are exposed.

Both pathways must be challenged because of their detrimental effect on children's health and well being.

There is growing evidence in Australia and overseas that sexualisation of children is having real and lasting health impacts. The 2007 American Psychological Association's 'Task force on the sexualisation of girls' has reported that *"ample evidence indicates that sexualisation has negative effects in a variety of domains, including cognitive functioning, physical and mental health, sexuality, and attitudes and beliefs"*. The research indicates that viewing material that is sexually objectifying is a contributing factor for body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, low self-esteem and depressive effect as well as physical health problems in high school aged girls and in young women.¹

In Australia, experts in children's health and welfare agree that premature sexualisation places children at risk of a variety of harms, including disruption to healthy psychological development.²

¹ American Psychological Association (2007) Report of the APA task force on the sexualization of girls, Washington DC, available at www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.html

² for example, see Wigg, Neil, Joe Tucci, Dorothy Scott, Jane Roberts, Rita Princi, Frank Oberklaid, Louise Newman, Bernadette McMenemy, Patricia Edgar, Freda Briggs, Steve Biddulph, Terry Aulich (2007) Letter, Sunday Age, April 16. Available from http://www.youngmedia.org.au/whatsnew/archive_2006-7.htm#apr07_02



Role of the Media

The most powerful sources of premature sexualisation are magazines and advertising which target girls. TV programs, especially music video shows, teen soap operas and reality TV shows also play a role³.

In June 2008, the Senate Standing Committee on the Environment, Communication and the Arts (SCECA) reported on an Inquiry into the Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media, with a list of 13 recommendations relating to children's television, music videos, magazines, advertising and marketing, advertising and media complaints processes and sexual health and relationships education.

Case Study - Girls' Magazines

Each month, 26% of six-year-old girls and almost 50% of ten and eleven year old girls read at least one of the most popular girls' magazines – *Barbie Magazine*, *Total Girl* and *Disney Girl*.⁴

The 2008 Senate Inquiry considered the issue of girls' magazines at length and focused exclusively on *Girlfriend* and *Total Girl*. Their report raised concerns about sexually explicit content as well as the age of readers:

"The committee considered parts of the material contained in Girlfriend magazine to be sexually explicit. A number of examples of such material were drawn from a regular sealed-section advice column, which included advice on 'oral sex' and 'anal sex' in answer to such questions as 'Can I perform oral sex if I have braces?'...A particular concern of the committee was the apparently broad spectrum of readership ages of magazines such as Girlfriend. Information supplied by Pacific Magazines in answer to a question taken on notice indicates that, although the average reader age is close to 16, around 20 per cent of Girlfriend's readership is between 11 and 12 years of age."⁵

Magazines marketed to children in the younger age groups are only scrutinised by the Classification Board (the independent regulator of magazine content) as a result of complaints from the public. According to the 2008 Senate SCECA report, the Board has reviewed the content of magazines aimed at teenage girls but did not find them to be in breach of the code.

Recommendation 6 of the report of the 2008 Senate Inquiry is focused on girls' magazines:

³ Rush, E and La Nauze, A (2006) 'Corporate Paedophilia: Sexualisation of Children in Australia.' Discussion Paper 94. The Australia Institute, Canberra. Available from <http://www.tai.org.au>

⁴ Rush, E and La Nauze, A (2006) Corporate Paedophilia

⁵ Senate Standing Committee of the Environment, Communication and the Arts (2008) Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media Environment: pages 48&51



"The committee recommends that publishers consider providing reader advice, based on the Office of Film and Literature Classification systems of classifications and consumer advice, on magazine covers indicating the presence of material that may be inappropriate for children."⁶

The South Australian Government Role

The YWCA of Adelaide supports the recommendation for a system of classification on magazine covers indicating the presence of material that may be inappropriate for children. We believe that the current classification system, under which children's magazines are classed as unrestricted publications, is insufficient to enable parents to make informed choices about what type or amount of sexual content their children will be exposed to.

The YWCA of Adelaide notes that in July 2009, the Australian Government response to the Senate report noted recommendation 6 and added that *"there would be considerable practical difficulty for publishers in implementing such a system."*⁷

Given the lack of action from the Federal Government, the YWCA of Adelaide considers that it is timely for the South Australian Government to take a national lead in challenging the sexualisation of children. The success of state based container deposit legislation and tobacco control in South Australia are successful precedents which demonstrate that industry can meet principles of social responsibility while remaining financially viable.

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The YWCA of Adelaide proposes that the South Australian Government take the lead and introduce State based legislation to protect children. The YWCA acknowledges that the National Classification Scheme is a joint enterprise of Federal, State and Territory Governments. However, the Scheme is not strictly uniform across all states and territories. For example, the South Australian Classification Council or Minister may make classification decisions despite a Commonwealth classification being in existence, and such a classification will be afforded priority over Commonwealth classifications. South Australia

⁶ Senate SCECA (2008): page 53

⁷ Australian Government (2009) Government Response: p.7. Available from:

http://www.aph.gov.au/SENATE/committee/eca_ctte/sexualisation_of_children/gov_response/gov_response.pdf



also has a unique system for classifying theatrical performances. Theatrical performances can be, amongst other things, classified as unsuitable for children by the South Australian Classification of Theatrical Performances Board.⁸

The YWCA of Adelaide advocates for the SA Government to either amend the *Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Act 1995 (SA)* or introduce new legislation, for the purpose of establishing a classification system for girls' magazines sold in South Australia. The YWCA considers that such regulatory changes would strengthen the National Classification Scheme.

The YWCA of Adelaide proposes that a "PG" type classification should be introduced for girls' magazines. The YWCA of Adelaide proposes this measure as a policy mechanism which incorporates the following interests:

- protecting children from inappropriate or offensive material
- maintaining freedom of choice on the part of adults
- reinforcing informed and assisted parental choice

Whilst other media sources of sexualised messaging remain significant policy issues, particularly advertising and music video shows, the YWCA of Adelaide believes that a focus on classification of girls' magazines is a meaningful way for the state government to provide leadership in the national debate, while acting to balance these different interests.

⁸ Classification of Theatrical Performances Act 1978 (SA)

