

Sexualisation of Children

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

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 effects
- 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

The most powerful sources of premature sexualisation are magazines and advertising which targets girls. TV programs, especially music video shows, teen soap operas and reality TV shows also play a role.³

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:

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 McMenamin, 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

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

“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

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

“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 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 the type or amount of sexual content seen by their children**.

YWCA Public Forum

Responding to the rising community concern about the early sexualisation of young girls, the YWCA held a public forum on October 22, 2009. The forum was chaired by Senator Dana Wortley, a member of the 2008 Senate Inquiry. The forum was overwhelmingly in favour of the proposed PG classification. Feedback since the forum and our online survey show strong community support to take action to protect young girls from the negative impacts of early sexualisation.

The South Australian Government Role

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 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.⁷

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

⁶ Senate SCECA (2008): page 53

⁷ Classification of Theatrical Performances Act 1978 (SA)

Whilst other media sources of sexualised messaging remain significant policy issues, particularly advertising and music video shows, these are difficult to address at a state government level and 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.