

Child protection from sexy ads gains favour

SEX AND CHILDREN - INNOCENCE LOST?

Deborah Gough, Education and families

A TOBACCO-STYLE ban may be the way to curb the exposure of children to sexual advertising and pressure, the Premier's adviser on children has said.

The chairwoman of the Victorian Children's Council, Lynne Wannan, said she was disturbed by the rise of overtly sexual content and imagery and the use of children in "come hither" poses to advertise children's fashion.

Ms Wannan's call comes after The Sunday Age reported last week on a mother's campaign to stop the sexualisation of children, which in turn sparked more than 300 responses.

Ms Wannan said the push by advertisers into the eight to 12-year-old market had been of concern because it encouraged excessive consumerism and placed additional pressure on family budgets.

She said this was akin to marketing junk food to children.

Ms Wannan said she would take the issue of child sexualisation to the council's next meeting. She expected the meeting would probably agree to ask the Premier if he would like a discussion paper on the subject.

"This is clearly a serious issue for children and for parents and it is a real worry. There is a lot of evidence that this could be harming children, and if it is, then we need to act," she said.

Governments often reacted to community feeling, Ms Wannan said, but she admitted advertising interests were powerful.

Her concerns were echoed by Child Safety Commissioner Bernie Geary, who is also on the council.

He called for the Advertising Standards Board to widen its interpretations to include how children might be affected by advertising.

He said advertising could also have the effect of legitimising pedophilic tendencies.

"They need to start thinking not only what will offend women and old people and CALD (culturally and linguistically diverse) communities) but what might be harmful to children," Mr Geary said.

He said society was losing touch with the concept that until a person turned 18 they were still a child and needed protection.

"I think it is bloody insidious that the media and advertising people are allowed to do it because it is done for a profit," Mr Geary said.

"The standards in the media and in advertising are too low and out of touch with the general community. We talk a lot about protecting children, but when it comes to the bottom line, it tends to be put to one side."

Mr Geary described billboard advertising of male sexual dysfunction products as bizarre, saying it turned a serious men's issue into a joke and presented young men with a distorted view of sex and intimacy.

Mark Jeanes, chief executive officer of the Advertising Standards Bureau, an administrative body that receives complaints, said the Advertising Standards Board (which rules on complaints) followed the self-regulating Australian Association of National Advertisers' code of ethics on sex, sexuality and nudity in advertising. He said there had recently been a shift in the board's interpretations.

An advertisement that asked "Do you want longer lasting sex?" had divided the board. The Advanced Medical Institute billboard could be seen from a classroom at Preston West Primary School until this week.

"Being privy to its discussions, I can safely say the board is becoming more and more mindful of those matters and that was evidenced by the board decision on the AMI billboard," Mr Jeanes said.

Mother of two and founder of Kids Free 2 Be Kids, Julie Gale, said she had been inundated with responses to last week's article, with support coming from across the country and as far away as the United States and France. Ms Gale said children as young as 12 had expressed their concern to her.

What do these do to an 8-year-old?

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Bratz dolls (right) were created to combat Barbie. The collection had won the Australian Girls' Toy of the Year even before its official release - movies, video games, mobile ring tones, the list goes on. Kennedy (below) is the answer to Bratz and retails for about \$10. Her website says she is "a celebrity in training".

Associate Professor Ann Sanson, Department of Pediatrics, Melbourne University:

"They might be fun to play with and children might not be consciously thinking that they have to be beautiful or sexy, but even if it's not conscious it is still likely to have an effect on children and their perceptions of what they should aspire to.

"The elongated neck and legs that is unattainable for most women, let alone little girls . . . and what a lot of hair."

Professor Frank Oberklaid, director of the Centre for Community Child Health at the Royal Children's Hospital:

"It's all there, the excessive make-up and pouty lips and the impossible features. It stresses me to see little girls wearing make-up. Exposure to it over a long period of time without context could be harmful and we need to ask ourselves is that what we want for our community?"

Lynne Wannan, chairwoman of the Victorian Children's Council:

The two dolls are similar to what has been visible, and apparently acceptable to the community, for decades. The dolls are not very different to Barbie who, while not presenting children with a normal attainable body image and lifestyle, seems to have been accepted by parents and child experts for many years.