

Advertisers heed outcry over sex and kids

Deborah Gough, Education And Families

SEXUAL imagery in advertising aimed at children may be toned down following a Melbourne mother's campaign for higher standards.

The Australian Association of National Advertisers, which sets the ethical codes for advertising, said it was concerned about the public outcry against the sexualisation of children in advertising.

The association's executive officer, Collin Segelov, said the subject had been raised this week by its board and at an industry meeting. Mr Segelov said it was a direct result of the Kids Free 2 Be Kids campaign, led by Elsternwick mother Julie Gale, which was first revealed in *The Sunday Age*.

It was apparent that the public had a problem with overt sexual messages and imagery that were easily seen by children, he said.

"On the sexualisation of children, I would say anything that is of community concern is of concern to marketers - marketers don't set out to antagonise the recipients of their messages," he said.

"The advertisers don't want to be seen as the bad guys, they don't want people to think they are the bad guys, and they will do whatever is necessary to prevent them from being painted into that corner."

He intended to raise the issue at the World Federation of Advertisers executive meeting in Canada this month. After that meeting it would be clearer whether the Australian association would work on an international, national or state code change. Mr Segelov said it was not clear whether a new clause in an existing code or a new code was needed, but he expected the industry would want the issue pursued energetically.

The association represents the interests of advertisers and marketers who collectively spend \$30 billion a year nationally.

Ms Gale said support for her campaign was strong. She said parents were often too busy to work out how and to whom they could complain. She was cautiously pleased with the association's response.

"I think it is still putting the wolf in charge of the sheep; whilst it is good to see some action, until we see what that action is it will be hard to say whether it will have any effect."

Mr Segelov said the association had already tried to create an ethical code for sexual imagery and wording in public places, but the recent outcry might mean it had to revisit the topic.

"The whole objective of the self-regulatory regime is to provide responsible advertising that is within the bounds of prevailing community standards," he said. "Those standards change to the extent that you would no longer be able to show mummies in pinnies. We want to be seen as responsible and to operate within the bounds of prevailing community standards. That might not be within every single person's belief of how life should be."

An ethics committee member of the Advertising Federation of Australia, while agreeing it would be fine to revisit the issue, warned against idolising childhood. "We often project this fantasy of innocent carefree time for children, when I don't think childhood is ever like that," committee member Jane Caro said.

"I think a child's job is to grow up, so children always want to copy what adults do."

She said billboard posters about male sexual dysfunction and other sexual topics were an issue, but parents could exacerbate the issue for children by reacting to it.

"I think it is appropriate we have times when certain things cannot be shown and maybe there is a case to be made that certain subjects shouldn't be advertised where people can't avoid seeing them - that does make sense," she said.

The Association of National Advertisers has received no complaints about sexualisation of children, but Mr Segelov conceded that many people would not know where to complain. He encouraged the public to contact the association about the issue.