

Condemning thin models can send wrong message

Deborah Gough, Education And Families

HIGHLIGHTING the controversy over skinny catwalk models may glamorise rather than discourage poor body image and eating disorders in young people.

The dilemma is one of the most complex issues facing those developing a voluntary code of conduct on body image for the Victorian Government.

Liberty Sanger, the lawyer who chairs the group, said instinct suggested that news stories condemning the fashion industry for using painfully thin models should discourage young girls and boys from unrealistic expectations about their bodies, but it may not have that effect.

"It's good to run the stories because it highlights the issue in the media, but obviously we are troubled about the potential glamorisation of those images," Ms Sanger said.

"It is a fine balance. You run stories about how bad it is that models are dying, and the photographs that are used can still, by inference, glamorise that part of the industry."

The Sunday Age can also exclusively report that the issue of advertising and children has been promoted to the top priority of the body that sets advertising codes.

Although it was due to conduct a review of its overall code of ethics, the Australian Association of National Advertisers revealed it intended to review the children's code first after a series of articles in this newspaper highlighting the harm to children of overt sexual imagery and advertising.

It will be the first time the public has been able to make submissions to the association regarding the code of ethics on advertising to children. The code is used by the Advertising Standards Board when assessing whether an advertisement should be banned or allowed.

The association's executive officer, Collin Segelov, said the process would be similar to the one used to create the food and beverage advertising and marketing communications code last year.

Mr Segelov said the industry would attempt to make all codes "future proof" by building in a condition that geared them to prevailing community standards.

"The AANA would be guided by community standards prevailing in Australia, rather than anywhere else in the world," he said.

The honorary chief executive officer of Young Media Australia, Barbara Biggins, welcomed the move to open the process to the public and the priority given to the subject but warned it would be useful only if the review took those views into account.

Ms Biggins said the food and beverage code had disappointed many who worked in the child health field.

Ms Sanger could not say what the body image group's final findings might be but said the group would submit a report with recommendations to Youth Affairs Minister James Molina in June.

Ms Sanger said the group was also looking at how to educate the public about what was a "normal" body.

She applauded a Melbourne Fashion Week initiative in which a nutritionist worked with models.

Experts speak out about sexy ads and children

TWELVE child health and wellbeing leaders say that exposing children to overt sexual imagery in the media is causing them harm, encouraging them to be sexy, and leading to a rise in child abuse.

The group of experts have called for a forum with regulators and marketers to discuss the harm done and what to do about it.

The Sunday Age has answered the call. This newspaper has invited eight prominent regulators, advertisers and child experts to a round table discussion on the topic, "Are we asking our children to be too sexy, too soon?" It is hoped that the forum, to be held next month, will look at the pitfalls of regulations and whether there is room for improvement. Several observers have also been invited.