

Innocence interrupted: move to end selling sex to children

Deborah Gough, Education and families

SEX might sell, but a Melbourne mother is fed up with it being sold to children, and she's planning to do something about it.

Julie Gale, an Elsternwick mother of children aged nine and 11, says the promotion of sex to sell products to children robs them of their innocence by encouraging them to act in a sexually aware way.

She says children are confused by constant media images about the need to be sexy.

"It is sickening. I have spoken to hundreds of parents, teachers, principals, school and social workers, and they are all worried about the effect it is having on our kids and their childhood.

"They feel powerless to stop it, but action needs to be taken."

Ms Gale has formed a group called Kids Free to Be Kids and is planning to take the call for protection of children from sexual imagery to Canberra. She's planning a forum there in August, with experts in psychiatry, child development and criminology speaking on the effects of sexualisation of children.

Ms Gale blames messages about the need to be sexual for disturbing behaviour in children.

She cited these examples:

- A website that featured year 6 girls who dressed as policewomen in knee-high boots and short skirts, biting handcuffs provocatively. The pictures were removed when the school and parents were alerted.
- Year 6 girls giving "blow jobs" to boys.
- A 12-year-old boy who felt anxious and upset because girls at his school were flirting with him, making suggestive offers and buying him presents. The boy said he was confused about how he was supposed to respond.

Ms Gale said she was first alerted to the seriousness of the issue four years ago when her children were replaying the word "sexy" in a lyric on a song on a Barbie CD.

"It was my 'a-ha' moment when I realised that this wasn't innocent fun; it was something a bit more sinister and they are losing their childhood here." On a recent trip to a department store she found underwear for young girls with "I must not tease boys" written across the backside - but with the "not" crossed out. Another pair had three dollar signs across the crotch with the words "totally worth it!" written underneath.

Experts told The Sunday Age they supported the call by social think tank the Australia Institute for a single regulator to be set up to govern how media was used to market to children.

Recently, a letter signed by 12 experts called for action on the sexualisation of children after the release of the institute's report Corporate Paedophilia, which highlighted methods used to sexually market to children under 12. Retailer David Jones has taken legal action over the report.

Child psychiatrist and director of the NSW Institute of Psychiatry Dr Louise Newman supported the forum plan and the need for reform, saying children were being told they needed to be sexual.

"The message is that they must prepare themselves as early as possible to be sexual objects."