

## **Media sex imagery 'harming children'**

*Deborah Gough, Education And Families*

TWO in every five children treated for problem sexual behaviour have no history of sexual abuse and experts believe they know why.

Problem sexual behaviour, affecting children as young as six, ranges from penetration of other children to genital exposure and public masturbation.

According to the Australian Childhood Foundation chief executive, Joe Tucci, it has long been accepted that children who abused were most often abused themselves.

But research has shown that many children with problem sexual behaviour had no history of abuse and appeared to be influenced by sexual imagery in the media. And the proportion of affected children was rising.

"I want to be clear we are not talking about normal behaviour - not doctors and nurses. It is quite serious and unacceptable behaviour," Dr Tucci said.

Children who had not been abused but had later displayed problem behaviour had all suffered a "disturbance" in their lives, often the loss of either a parent or close grandparent.

"Not all children who have the death of a parent or close grandparent display problem sexual behaviour but many of these children did, or they had some sort of disturbance in their lives," he said.

He said the children were often under stress and being asked to be "strong" or to look after younger siblings.

"So they are being told they need to be strong and they see music videos of a 'strong man', in a good suit, getting out of a sports car with women wearing very little on hanging off him. They look strong to vulnerable children," Dr Tucci said.

"The only other thing they have in common is they all watched music videos and consumed adult-type magazines," he said.

Most of the children saw nothing wrong with their behaviour, Dr Tucci said.

Seven years ago the foundation treated just 10 cases a year with problem sexual behaviour but the figure has risen to 150 a year, 90 per cent of them boys.

Dr Tucci said many children told counsellors that they looked at adult male magazines such as *Ralph* and *FHM* and then looked on computers, where they often found graphic material and pornography.

"It's not their fault; they don't have the understanding to decipher the messages that they find - and I don't think we as adults are explaining them well enough," Dr Tucci said.

Parents needed to explain adult issues in terms children could understand when they saw their children displaying an interest or being worried by them.

Andrew Fuller, a clinical psychologist and author of a new book, *Tricky Kids*, said children with problem sexual behaviour had often been exposed to overt sexual imagery.

"Kids get exposed to so much sexual material these days that they can pick up some pretty weird ideas about what is appropriate sexual behaviour," Mr Fuller said.

"They can get very confused about what a relationship is like."

He said parents had to make clear what was appropriate.

"There is a need for closer parenting in the family.

"At the risk of sounding like a 1970s feminist, this is about power. They get the whiff of what these actions produce and they feel powerful.

"If you take that away from them they can resent it, so you need to give them other ways to feel power and importance."