

Steve Biddulph - on the sexualisation of children. 12/4/07

(A psychologist specializing in families for over 25 years, Steve Biddulph is today one of the worlds best known parenting authors.)

To understand what is at stake, we have to start with the positives. Parents want their children to grow into sexuality gradually, and at their own pace, not one created artificially by those seeking to profit or exploit.

When sex goes right for young people, it is an extraordinary beautiful, connecting, intense and tender experience. The research is clear - that sexuality is happier, more successful and integrated the longer young people take to unpack it - when they proceed at their own pace. When choice is removed, by social pressure, by a selfish partner, by a desire to conform or win acceptance, its a miserable and demoralizing one. When there is no choice or control, then of course we call it by its proper name - rape.

We are seeing two kinds of assaults on children's sexuality - one is on the public billboards, television and other media sending bizarre messages that confuse and distort children's understanding of what is appropriate or normal. This is advertising directed at adults, but impacting on children by its careless placement. The second, and more recent assault, is the use of sex to sell clothes, food, and other products directly to children, even children under five, by using their vulnerabilities - fear of non acceptance, fear of being different or ridiculed. "Be sexy", these ads tell children, "and you will be loved".

Primary school and younger girls and boys are having unprecedented anxiety over how they look, their body shape and size, an obsession that previously barely crossed the minds of an earlier generation until their mid teens, if at all.

As a result of this recent trend, along with a diminishing of parental time and care with children, there have been dramatic surges in childhood depression, anxiety disorders and behaviour problems. Mental health disorders in young people have approximately doubled in western countries, in the last twenty years. In particular, much younger children are being hospitalized for eating disorders, which ten years ago were confined to late teens and young adults.

Suicide and suicide attempts, self harm, eating disorders, drug abuse, and depression now affect around 20% of teenagers at a level sufficient to require intervention, its plausible that this whole age group are being battered by forces they are not equipped to resist.

Children do not grow up well by being forced into adult understandings or experiences, in fact the opposite is true. A calm, fun and safe childhood is actually the best mental health preparation. Adolescence is the time for graduating into adulthood, when the critical skills and self sufficiency gradually develop, with good adult support. But in fact, advertising and crass distortion of values harms us all. Like the filthy air we breathe in the city streets, it takes a baby in our arms or a child holding our hand to suddenly wake up to what we have grown used to.

Advertising works by making us unhappy. With our body, our face, our clothes, our house, our car, our possessions, our partners, our friends. It's a relentless attack on our contentment. Discontent makes us spend. As adults, we are hugely influenced, or advertisers would not spend the 30 billion a year they do in Australia. How much more are our children unable to defend their mental well-being.

My reading of this - and I have spoken in my working life to 130,000 parents across the globe, is that there is a huge anger among parents. It hasn't had a channel to direct this anger, but that is changing. Julie Gale and recent articles in The Sunday Age Newspaper have tapped a nerve. The David Jones lawsuit against The Australia Institute - for merely mentioning their name in this regard - indicates a hypersensitivity and vulnerability among advertisers to boycott or criticism by child development authorities.

Parents hate advertising, they see the corporate world increasingly as their blood enemy in their efforts to raise their children.

It is bound to be an electoral issue this year, and a party willing to legislate or create independent regulatory bodies with real teeth, will be warmly welcomed by the community.