



THE ROYAL
AUSTRALIAN AND NEW ZEALAND
COLLEGE OF PSYCHIATRISTS

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists

Position Statement # 58

SEXUALISATION OF CHILDREN IN CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Definition

Sexualisation of children refers to the imposition of adult models of sexual behaviour and sexuality on to children and adolescents at developmentally inappropriate stages and in opposition to the healthy development of sexuality. It encompasses sexual objectification and representation of children in adult sexual ways and in ways that imply the child's value is dependent on conforming to a particular appearance, sexual display or behaviours. Children may also experience secondary sexualisation through exposure to sexualised advertising material and products aimed at adult consumers.

Evidence

The use of sexualised images of children and young adolescents has increased in popular media over the last ten years. The theme is present in music, fashion, children's magazines, television and video games. Advertising involving children, for instance, has been criticised for the use of child models in adult sexual poses and marketing of adult style clothing to prepubertal children. There is a growing body of evidence that premature exposure to adult sexual images and values has a negative impact on the psychological development of children particularly on self-esteem, body image and understanding of sexuality and relationships.

The American Psychological Association Taskforce into the sexualisation of girls (APA, 2007) reports on the available evidence and notes that exposure to sexualising messages contributes to girls defining their self-worth and popularity in terms of sexual attractiveness with negative impact on self-esteem. Excessive focus on appearance and a narrow definition of attractiveness has been found to contribute to the development of abnormal eating behaviours and lack of positive body image. Negative self-image is associated with depression, impaired sexual development in adolescence and poor self-protective behaviours in adolescent relationships. Sexualised themes are frequently associated with depiction of aggression, and particularly depictions of male, aggressive sexuality, and portrayal of girls and women as passive sexual objects. These may have particular impact on the development of emerging models of sexual behaviour and relationships.

Recommendations

- The mental health of children and adolescents is supported if they are able to develop age and developmentally appropriate sense of their self and their sexuality.
- Several strategies are recommended to prevent the further proliferation of sexualised images of children. These include media regulation (Rush & La Nauze, 2006) and psychoeducational approaches to provide children and adolescents with skills in media analysis and understanding of the impact of sexualised images and programs. These strategies aim to develop healthy sexual development and body-image in the face of media representations. School-based media literacy programs have been found to have a positive effect on body image concerns in girls.
- Parenting programs should also encompass approaches to supervision of children's media exposure and education of children about media representation.
- Research should be focused on understanding the short and longer term impacts of sexualisation of children and the efficacy of medial literacy programs and other targeted interventions.

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