

# Reducing the Impact of

## CHILDHOOD SEXUALISATION



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### Sources for this Summary and Extra Reading

**“It’s everywhere. The weight of evidence that we are causing irreparable damage to our children is becoming overwhelming. Our children are bombarded on a daily basis with images and concepts that they are not able to assimilate or contextualise ...” — Naomi Hazlehurst**

Our children’s wellbeing is under attack on multiple fronts, including from magazine editors, clothing retailers, celebrities, the music business, advertisers, television producers and the multi-billion dollar pornography industry.

“Parents are embattled ‘gatekeepers’ at best, who year by year watch their hold on their children compromised, eroded, out flanked, and eventually wholly loosened by their rivals in the market place” — Benjamin Barber, 2007



Kurt Brunner and Steve Stroope

“It Starts at Home”

Maggie Hamilton

“What is Happening to our Girls?” and “What is Happening to our Boys”?

Reggie Joiner

“Parenting Beyond Your Capacity”

Paul O’Rourke

“Why Satan Hates our Kids, Paul O’Rourke Ministries”

Melinda Tankard Reist

“Getting Real: Challenging the Sexualisation of Girls” Spinifex Press

Pamela Paul

“Pornified: How Pornography is Damaging our Lives”

The Family Factor

[www.TheFamilyFactor.com](http://www.TheFamilyFactor.com)

Collective Shout

[www.collectiveshout.org](http://www.collectiveshout.org)

Kids Free to be Kids

[www.kf2bk.com](http://www.kf2bk.com)

Melinda Tankard Reist and Abigail Bray (EDS)

“Big Porn INC”



## The Facts

- Australian children are being drowned in a sex-saturated culture that objectifies women and cheapens relationships.
- Australian children are concerned about body image, drugs, family conflict, suicide, personal safety, abuse, stress and alcohol.
- Pornography is bad for children, yet is more readily available as a result of the internet. Children copy what they see in magazines, online and in video games.
- Viewing of pornography affects children's sexuality, their view of women and what it means to be a man or a woman.
- Pornography is promoted as exciting and risk free.
- Advertisers are targeting children — particularly girls — with products, images and messages that promote a premature and harmful interest in sex and adulthood. These include padded bras and stilettos for babies, together with offensive slogans that objectify women.
- Medical professionals, parents and teachers are all reporting an increase in problems in young children. "We're seeing a new level of sexual assault happening in primary schools. . . . We're also seeing sexting happening from little girls [aged] eight up, who are taking photos of themselves topless and sending them around to little boys age eight or putting them on the 'net. . . . We are seeing identification with a much-sexualised kind of persona. — Maggie Hamilton

- Highly sexualised advertising is negatively impacting children and youth. The term “Corporate Paedophilia” has been coined. “Advertisers actively try to separate kids from parents with the kind of languaging, 'we're cool, you're parents are kind of idiots'. They offer gifts, they pretend friendship, etc, and most importantly they raunch up the material over a period of time. With a sexual predator, that means that a child is willing to start to do whatever, and with a corporation it means the children don't resist spending.” — Maggie Hamilton
- The level of exposure of children to porn, and the young age at which many are viewing this material – accidentally or otherwise – is cause for grave concern. Symantec’s 2009 study of children online revealed the word “porn” ranked as the fourth most popular search word for children aged 7 and younger, and was in the top 5 words googled by children under 18 (Campbell, 2010)
- The fallout from the countless sexual images seen in ads, on TV screens, posters and billboards, in MTV clips, movies, video games and sitcoms, on clothing and accessories, and on the Internet, is real and impacting. This constant stream of hyper sexualised imagery and sexual expression that boys and girls are subjected to daily lowers their inhibitions, discourages empathy towards others, and reshapes their sexual aspirations and expression often in risky, violent or unhelpful ways. Whether or not the use of sexual images and messages to market products is intended to prepare children for the consumption of porn, this is one of the most concerning outcomes. When the intense sexualised marketing to children is put under the microscope, we see that the methods corporations use to reach children are the very same techniques employed by sexual predators to

home in on unsuspecting kids, as they meticulously groom them for their own ends.

Like the sexual predator, corporations market their products to young people by pretending to be their friend. Using the same techniques as a predator, they work hard at cultivating a one-on-one relationship with our children, offering gifts and incentives, flattering them, talking in their language, and assuring kids that they understand. Like the sexual predator, corporations deliberately use sexualised content in their products and/or advertising, because they know how irresistible sexualised material can be. And, like the sexual predator, corporations actively ramp up the sexualised images and products they use, to lower kids' inhibitions around sex, to get them to do what they want.

- “The official advertising worldview is that your parents are creeps, teachers are nerds and idiots, authority figures are laughable, nobody can really understand kids except the corporate sponsor.” (Miller, PBS, undated)
- The use of minors or adults who look like children and teens in pornography is putting children at risk.
- Children know more about sex and are sexually active earlier than any other time in our history.
- By their mid teens, 100% of Australian boys and 97% of girls had viewed, and many admitted to having been influenced by, pornographic images.
- In one survey, most boys and half of the girls had been exposed to pornography by the age of 12, and a third of teenagers had lost their virginity before the legal age.

- 25% of youths had inadvertently logged on to unwanted sexually explicit material.

Premature sexualisation of children has many negative effects on developmental, physical and mental health. Some of the consequences for children, while their sense of self is still being formed, are derived from studies of late adolescents.

**These Include:**

- Anxiety about appearance
- Lower ability to concentrate
- Sleeplessness
- Eating disorders
- Low self esteem
- Depression
- Inappropriate view of sexuality and femininity
- Inability to find a partner
- Inappropriate views of sex
- Devaluing of relationships
- Objectification of women
- Disrespect of women
- Loss of self-confidence
- Sexualising of own behaviour



## What Can Parents do? Regulate Exposure

The solutions to the problem as massive and complex as the media's assault on the young have to be multiple and overlapping. Parents need to have a say about what media they expose their children to. Parents need to be proactive with all forms of media, setting clear boundaries and modelling acceptable viewing standards. Switching on to watch a specific program then switching off is a good practice. Not watching commercial television at all, or at least very selectively, also makes a huge difference. Banning all forms of media from the child's bedroom — especially during sleep time — is probably the best single protection of their mental health. Don't buy girl/gossip magazines, as most are purely marketing vehicles for make-up, clothes and toys they neither need nor benefit from.

## Spend Time with Your Children

*When Australian children were asked about the importance of having more family income compared with having more time with their parents, a clear majority would prefer more time with their parents — especially with a parent who works long hours.*

“When we play with our children today, we are earning the right to shape their values tomorrow.” — Kurt Brunner. Children are more likely to embrace the values of someone they love and enjoy than someone they don't.





## **Talk With Your Children**

Many parents feel uncertain about how to talk to their children about sexual themes. A natural reaction is to protect and shield children from unpleasant and distressing facts. However, most school-aged children are aware of media that involves sexual themes. If not acknowledged and discussed, the concerns and anxieties of children about these events can become too frightening and difficult for them to deal with.

Alternatively, children will turn to unreliable sources, such as other children and the internet.

General ideas to consider when talking with your children would be: their age, temperament and stage of development, how secure they are, how you as a family react to particular events, how exposed the child may already have been to particular images, how adequately they can discuss their feelings and emotions on a day to day basis, what the influence of their peer group is like and how this group is responding to the issue.

(Caution: we need to be careful that in addressing this issue, we are not clamping down on children's healthy sexual development. We should be encouraging children to be safe, healthy and confident about their bodies and sexual development. In my view, the sexualised wallpaper of society does not allow for this natural development to occur.)

## **Listen, Listen, Listen and then Talk, Talk, Talk**

I would advise parents to talk to their children about images they may have seen and also to ask how it made them feel or think. Just talking about these images helps to ameliorate the effect these images have on our children. Really listen to their perception of the world around them. Talk about your own views and values as a

family. Talk about how some of the images make women feel and how they lie about real-life relationships. Children are already aware of much of the content around them, so I have age appropriate discussions fairly often. A one-off discussion is not enough when they are bombarded by this issue daily.

As parents, we need to be encouraging positive language at home with regards to skills, our intellect and our bodies. Parents need to move away from self-criticism as they look in the mirror themselves. Refrain from talking about wrinkles, bottom sizes, breasts, hips etc negatively. This projects the message that getting older is something negative and to be avoided. Little ears are listening and little eyes are watching our every move to help make sense of and interpret their world.



## Self Talk

Sit with your child and work out some positive self-talk questions they can use when watching a TV show, while spending time on the internet, passing a billboard or reading an e-zine. This fosters healthy critical thinking habits.

### **Examples Are:**

How does that image make you feel about your body?

What does that show try to teach you about men/women/relationships?

How does that article get you to think about your friends?

Does that story encourage you to view people accurately?



## **Choices**

Talk to your child about the choices they make and how every choice has a consequence.

Encourage children to choose to compliment the girls and boys in their lives for their character traits, values, skills or actions. Practice with children how to recognise these in their friends and to get into the habit of speaking positively.

## **The Importance of the Family Meal**

"We have lost the art of communication. . . . The family dinner time used to be an open time to share about the day and for parents to pick up on anything wrong. That doesn't happen. They (children) sit in front of the TV with their games and their computers."

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends shared dinnertimes as often as possible as a way to strengthen families and support children's development. There are a number of important ways that shared mealtimes can benefit families according to recent research.

- Teenagers who eat meals with their families frequently are less likely to be depressed or use drugs than those who do not eat with their family as frequently. They are also less likely to be violent, have sex, and experience emotional stress. These adolescents who eat meals with their families frequently also are likely to be more highly motivated in school and have better peer relationships.
- Regular shared mealtimes can increase children's sense of belonging and stability and the entire family's feeling of group connection. Many adolescents in a large national

study reported that they want to be with their parents for most evening meals.

- Teenagers who share meals with their families on a regular basis tend to eat healthier foods than those who do not. They consume fewer high-fat, high-sugar, prepared and packaged foods, and more fruits and vegetables and other foods high in important nutrients and fiber.

One common denominator that contributes to the importance of family mealtimes is parent-child communication. Experts agree that open communication with parents is important from a child's early months through their adolescent years. Mealtimes that are shared by family members may provide a time and place for in-depth communication, relaxation, and renewing of family bonds.





## **Intergenerational Friendships and Mentoring**

Children need more than just a family that gives them unconditional acceptance and love; they need a tribe that gives them a sense of belonging and significance.

One of the best protective factors we can provide for our children is to place them in the midst of a village culture where intergenerational relationships are cultivated. If we live out that belief, we will cultivate and sustain a culture in which rites of passage and an informal mentoring is the norm, providing robust alternatives to the pattern we currently find ourselves in.

Mentoring and connectedness are essential elements of resiliency building, and they can mitigate negative and stressful experiences and enable young people to overcome adversity. They transcend ethnicity, cultural difference and socio-economic class and make a profound impact on the lives of young people who grow up under adverse conditions. They are about meeting the basic human needs for caring, belonging, respect and self-determination.

Strong social networks and connections correspond with significant increases in physical and mental health, academic achievement, and local economic development, as well as lower rates of homicide, suicide, and alcohol and drug abuse. Children have been found to be mentally and physically healthier in neighbourhoods where adults talk to each other.

Mentoring gives our children access to a lifetime of experience, story and wisdom from mentors. It also mitigates and dilutes the influence of peers and helps the children realise that there is a bigger picture and that they have a place in it.

Find real life, positive role models in your community, such as a sports coach, a teacher, a youth leader, a grandparent and so on. Role models should teach that true beauty is about skill, healthy values and inner qualities and not about outward appearances.

## **The Power of Story**

Multimedia is telling one story to our children — a story that is soul destroying and temporal. In the midst of all of this media noise, do the children hear our story?

Children need to hear our stories — stories about our life, family, church, Bible, community, and history. These stories are windows into the nature of God and humanity and our relationships to one another. Stories help us repent, heal, learn, grow and stretch towards God's love and wholeness. As children hear our stories, our community's stories and God's story, they are more likely to find their place within that story?

Simply tucking our children into bed, hugging them, turning off the light and storying together can be more therapeutic and soul transforming than any other factors.

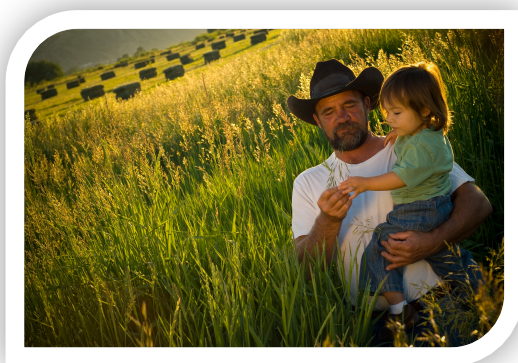
## **Outdoor Adventure**

The outdoors, whether it be the natural environment or playgrounds specifically designed for children, is the ideal context to encourage children to be themselves, to explore, to experiment, to move and make the most of the opportunities offered in a less-restricted manner. The outdoors presents obvious opportunities to move and be active, and for children to discover and engage with the natural environment, as well as the chance for open-ended activities such as sand and water play, construction and pretend play. Furthermore, the openness and space afforded by outdoor environments can provide a relatively unrestricted and spontaneous context for facilitating peer interactions.

Nature offers children emotional wellbeing, a spiritual sense of perspective, observation skills, cognitive abilities, creativity, healthy risk taking, observation skills, a balanced sense of humility, stress management, increased attention and lowered depression.

“Passion does not arrive on a videotape or on a CD. Passion is personal. Passion is lifted from the earth itself by the muddy hands of the young, it travels along grass stained sleeves to the heart. If we are going to save environmentalism and the environment, we must also save an endangered indicator species; the child in nature.” — Richard Louc, last child in the woods.

Children need time for real-life relationships, real-life adventures and experiences, such as going for a milkshake with siblings, going bike riding to a park with friends and face-to-face chats, to learn appropriate body language and social skills.



## **Crafty Girls/Handy Boys**

Running a craft group for girls or some sort of a group for boys where they can make a bit of a mess, tinker and talk are excellent ways to enhance creativity and individuality and the acquisition of life skills. Groups such as these provide a perfect opportunity for quiet concentration and contemplation, mentoring and casual chitchat. Self esteem is enhanced through creativity and the child's unique gifts are highlighted as well.

## Object to Objectification

Become involved in groups that speak out against these images and it will become apparent to your children what your values are as a family. This way, you have a reason to talk about the topic at every stage of your child's life, as they become developmentally ready. Advocacy Groups you could get involved with are Collective Shout, Australians against Child Beauty Pageants, Kids Free 2B Kids, Pigtail Pals (USA), Beauty Redefined (USA) and others.



You are  
**BEAUTIFUL!**  
(Now repeat it and BELIEVE it.)



## Teach Thankfulness

As a family, remember to be thankful for at least one thing each day. Perhaps you could write these up on a white board or sheet of paper on your fridge for a week each month? This helps children to move away from falling into a downward negative spiral.



## Service to Others Really Does Matter

Service to other helps children get a sense of the bigger picture and where they fit in that bigger picture.

Get your children involved in pursuits outside of the home that take the focus off themselves. Pursuits that involve using their skills and do not focus on outward appearances should be encouraged. This has the benefit of improving their self-worth. Young children could take garden flowers or drawings to the local retirement village.

Teenagers could attend community building projects that travel to poorer communities or poverty stricken countries, where they assist in rebuilding orphanages or help run kids camps.

Give and help those in need and become completely focused on something outside of the young person and their immediate world. You cannot teach a child to do this by words alone — it has to be by example.





## Love and Reassurance Are Key

Reassure your child that it is your job to look after their well being and that their home is a safe place. Give your children and teens plenty of hugs or choose times to spend some one-on-one time with them where you can also get a chance to chat. Boys do well talking to parents, when they are actively involved with another activity, such as bike riding, kicking a ball or playing chess.

Look for “good news” stories and great real life mentors for them to focus on. This will help your children to discover not only what to avoid, but also the goals and dreams they are aiming for.

It is up to us as parents and carers of children to turn the tide against the sexualised wallpaper of our children’s lives. We need to be pushing government, children’s department stores, toy stores and clothing stores to change this wallpaper. Please join me on my facebook page, as we join with like-minded groups. Every voice makes a difference!

