

Stop the sexual use of children in advertising

For ages, children have enjoyed dressing up and pretending to be grown-ups. But these days, it's too often a game in which the grown-ups are dressing up children for decidedly adult purposes.

Kids of all ages are being exploited sexually in advertising, the kind you see every day. It may not be pornography—it's often more subtle and may be confusing. But it's a type of abuse all the same.

Overreaction? It's easy to think the trend of portraying children and adolescents in adult poses and situations is a reflection of a sophisticated culture or freedom of expression. Of course, the standards of taste vary from person to person, from community to community. But the one thing that does not change is that sexual exploitation of children is unacceptable.

We need you to take a stand

Until more people demand more responsibility in advertising, children are still at risk. But you can remind people that children have a right to a positive and safe childhood. Just taking one or two simple steps can have a big impact.

- Write or call advertisers who sexually exploit children in their advertising or the publications that run these advertisements.
- Educate friends and colleagues about the problem.
- Talk to children exposed to this kind of advertising and address the confusion these ads may create.
- Write or call companies and discourage them from advertising in this manner.
- Support companies using healthy, non-sexual advertising. Use your consumer power!

It may seem that making childhood safe for children again is an overwhelming task. You may feel your individual efforts are small compared to the powerful influence of the media. But all it takes is one person after another, doing the right thing. Together, our voices will be heard.

To learn more about protecting children from sexual exploitation in advertising, write to:
Committee on Child Abuse & Neglect
North Carolina Pediatric Society
P.O. Box 27617
Raleigh, NC 27611



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Let kids grow up in their own time



Committee on
Child Abuse & Neglect
of the N.C. Pediatric Society

The high price of sexually exploiting children

More and more experts are making a connection between the sexual portrayal of children and adolescents in everyday media and actual sexual abuse. When children are glamorized as sexual objects, it condones the use of children in sexual contexts, which is always inappropriate. It confuses children, leading them to think that this is a good way to behave—even adults think so.

As boundaries between adult and child are blurred, standards for what is acceptable are lowered and we are all desensitized. In the most extreme cases, it serves to validate the child sexual abuser's excuse that children are asking for sex. So even if your children aren't the ones in the commercials, they can still pay the price of this offensive practice.

Indifference to this problem is taking a big toll. The number and severity of sexual abuse reports are increasing. It is estimated that at least 20 percent of women and 5-10 percent of men experienced some form of sexual abuse as children. The damage left by sexual abuse, both psychological and physical, may last through adulthood and affects all of society.

What qualifies as sexual exploitation?

By definition, advertising attempts to influence the opinions, perceptions or behavior of consumers. So it follows that exploiting children in advertising may influence consumers to think and act as if children actually are sexual objects. This kind of irresponsible advertising must not continue.

We're not talking about banning children from commercials. There are many healthy ways to portray children in advertising. And certainly, we're not advocating eliminating sexual content in media that portrays adults in control of their own sexuality—and relating to each other in a positive, mature way. However, what must be eliminated is:

- Using preadolescent girls made up to mimic adults in sexualized poses
- Invoking adult sexual themes by dressing or making up a child
- Unduly emphasizing the clothed or unclothed genitals and buttocks of children or adults made to look like children
- Confusing the true age of a child-like model in a sexualized pose or situation
- Sexualizing the nudity of a child or child-like model, whether the nudity is real or implied
- Equipping adult models with childhood props and facial expressions that create a sense of helplessness or vulnerability in a sexual context
- Sexualizing a child by association with an adult who is nude or sexualized

“Society cannot claim to abhor the sexual abuse and exploitation of children in pornography and yet allow the portrayal of children as sexualized objects in the popular press and in advertising.”

—Pornography: Women, Violence & Civil Liberties, Catherine Itzin, “Images of Children in the Media,” Michele Elliott, 1992.

Childhood is not for sale

