

A changing childhood – trends and issues impacting on childhood today

Barry Salmon

Assistant Commissioner for Children and
Young People and Child Guardian

Family Planning Queensland Conference

15 October 2009



commission for
children and young people
and child guardian

Children and Young People
Child Guardian

Sexuality education

- Historically a contentious issue
- Challenges boundaries and comfort levels but crucial for children and young people
- Requires strong leadership and advocacy
- Fundamentally about the intimacy of human relationships



commission for
children and young people
and child guardian

A rights based approach

- *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* – all children have a right to good health, to be free from sexual abuse and exploitation and to get information that is important to their health and well being
- Age appropriate sexuality education and support helps kids develop interpersonal skills and a healthy sexuality and is an important way of protecting them from harm and abuse



commission for
children and young people
and child guardian

How well young people are faring

- Young people today sexually active at a younger age
- Some are inadequately prepared
- Vulnerable to:
 - abuse and exploitation
 - unintended pregnancy
 - sexually transmitted infections
 - relationships they may not be emotionally ready for
- Trends in the data – 4th National Survey of Australian Secondary Students' Sexual Health



commission for
children and young people
and child guardian

Research & engaging with young people

- Need evidence base for advocacy and decision making, policy and practice improvements
- Need to engage with young people to get programs right
- Adults cannot presume to know what young people want or need
- Crucial we involve young people in developing solutions
- Need to recognise the complex nature of change



commission for
children and young people
and child guardian

Change and the need to be responsive

- Change can bring fantastic opportunities but can also have unforeseen effects
- Education an important tool in ameliorating any potential for harm
- Some changes are incremental – often hard to recognise impacts until too late
- Other changes are dramatic so can catch us off guard
- Need to be alert to what changes mean for children



commission for
children and young people
and child guardian

Incremental changes to childhood

In contrast to the 70s:

- Parents today generally older when first have children
- Children generally have fewer siblings and families are more mobile
- Family breakdown is more common
- There is more variation in family type – eg blended and step families and one-parent families increasing
- More mothers in the workforce
- More children in formal childcare from early age



commission for
children and young people
and child guardian

Incremental changes to childhood cont.

- Today more culturally diverse – more children with a parent born overseas
- Less religious affiliation so the church potentially has a less significant role in inculcating values & beliefs
- Electronic media embedded in children's lives eg TV, games stations, computers
- Communication technologies have sped up information sharing and narrowed social distance eg internet & mobile phones



commission for
children and young people
and child guardian

Unforeseen effects

- More instability for many children
- Fewer opportunities to develop intimate family attachments & learn about nurturing relationships
- Potentially less time for families to talk and fewer family members to turn to for advice and support
- More 'screen' interaction & less with the natural world
- Children exposed to a multiplicity of values
- Harder for parents to 'gatekeep' the messages their children are exposed to



commission for
children and young people
and child guardian

Dramatic change – Children's exposure to sexualised imagery & messages



The Pussycat Dolls – a music act cited as having video clips too raunchy for Saturday morning television

Source: Courier Mail newspaper article. *Sexy Music clips face Saturday morning ban*. 26/6/2008



commission for
children and young people
and child guardian

Billboards with sexual overtones



- The Advertising Standards Board says this billboard ad is OK because the model is 'over 18' and wearing 'attire fashionable among young women for summer'

Source: The Age newspaper article. *Privacy on parade.*
27/11/02006



commission for
children and young people
and child guardian

Sexualised messages on T-shirts for babies



- What are the values implicit in these messages?



commission for
children and young people
and child guardian

Potential effects

- Last year's Senate Inquiry into the Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media Environment heard evidence & arguments that:
 - Exposure to sexualising messages can lead girls to think of themselves in objectified terms
 - Linked sexualisation with eating disorders, low self esteem and depression in girls and women
 - Exposing children to sexualised material can lead to increase in sexism, sexual harassment & violence



commission for
children and young people
and child guardian

How can we respond?

- Important to have in place a comprehensive sexual health and relationships education program to counter negative messages
- Quality of HRE programs depends on availability of resources, access to expertise, and educator's level of comfort
- Programs must develop skills (eg in decision-making and negotiation) & explore values as well as provide facts
- Must support not usurp role of parents – needs to be a collaborative effort



commission for
children and young people
and child guardian

Dramatic technological change and the emergence of cyber bullying

- Emergence has been rapid
- Prevalence increasing
- Change has enabled bullying to move into a new realm – blurring boundaries between home and school; giving bullies greater anonymity
- Makes it harder for parents and teachers to respond



Potential for harm

- Potential for harm greater than face-to-face bullying
- ‘Disinhibiting’ effects of technology
- A moral shift in what’s OK and not OK
- Sexting
 - A sign of this moral shift
 - Symptomatic of the wider sexualisation of children



And how can we respond?

- Again a key element must be education:
 - Educating the wider community
 - Educating parents
 - Educating the kids
 - Educating the school community
- Strong linkages with HRE programs



commission for
children and young people
and child guardian

Managing future changes & unforeseen dangers

- Talk with and listen to kids
- Take their views seriously
- Research the problem so response is evidence based
- Begin education and intervention early
- Be prepared to speak up for children
- Take the lead
- Involve everyone



commission for
children and young people
and child guardian

Guided by a set of aspirational goals

- The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child:
 - reflects a vision of the child as an individual and as a member of a family and community
 - with rights and responsibilities appropriate to his or her age and stage of development
 - underscores pivotal role of parents
 - imposes a responsibility on government – in effect the whole community – to create an environment where children can grow to their full potential



commission for
children and young people
and child guardian

Queensland Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian

Promoting children's rights, interests and wellbeing

Level 17, 53 Albert Street
Brisbane Qld 4000

Ph: (07) 3211 6700
www.ccypcg.qld.gov.au



commission for
children and young people
and child guardian

Children and Young People
Child Guardian