Premature sexualisation: understanding the risks

Outcomes of the NSPCC's expert seminar series

March 2011

NSPCC
Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP.

Foreword

The premature sexualisation of children is an issue that concerns parents, politicians and policy makers alike. The NSPCC is particularly concerned about the extent to which sexualisation drives abuse or other harm to children. We are keen to ensure that responses to the issue are sensitively shaped by evidence about the nature and scale of risks to children and young people.

To help us develop policy responses to sexualisation the NSPCC ran three seminars in early 2011 to bring together academics, practitioners and policy makers with particular expertise in this area. The purpose of these events, each of which focused on a different aspect of the issue, was to share and deepen our understanding of the real risks associated with premature sexualisation, and discuss what might be done to better protect children from harm.

This paper captures the outputs of the seminars, together with input from the expert speakers and quotes from young people. From this, we have drawn out key messages, policy implications and questions for further research. These ideas and themes will inform the NSPCC's more detailed policies on this issue, and we hope they can also support the work of Government and other organisations as we all take action to tackle this important topic.

The Coalition Government are clearly keen to tackle premature sexualisation, as reflected by its inclusion in their *Programme for Government*. We were very pleased that Reg Bailey, Chief Executive of Mothers' Union who is conducting the Government's review on this issue was able to attend our events and hope that the evidence and ideas contained in this paper can inform his work.

Jon Brown

Head of Strategy and Development (Sexual Abuse)

NSPCC

Executive Summary

Early in 2011, the NSPCC ran a series of seminars on the risks associated with premature sexualisation. The events were well attended by a mix of academics, civil servants, practitioners, young people, and colleagues from across the charity sector. This document summarises the discussions at the events and draws out key messages, policy recommendations and questions for further research.

Part 1: Speakers' contributions   **Page 4**

The first part of this paper is made up of contributions from the five speakers at the events:

- **Professor Rosalind Gill** tells us about the importance of understanding both young people's ability to critique the media, and the impact it has on their self esteem; and stresses that the two are not mutually exclusive.

- **Dr Maddy Coy** writes about the impact of the sexualisation or pornification of society on young people's perceptions of gender, self esteem and 'space for action'.

- **Professor David Buckingham** writes that sexualisation is a complex topic that people understand in different ways. Many parents are not overly concerned about the impact of sexualisation on their children, but see it as part of a normal developmental process.

- **Christine Barter** discusses her research into the prevalence of violence in young people's intimate relationships, and what it shows about young people's attitudes and expectations in relationships.

- **Dr Zoë Hilton** reports on the increasingly prevalence of young people sharing sexualised images online, and the risks associated with this.

Part 2: Emerging themes from the discussions   **Page 10**

Part two captures the emerging themes from discussions at the three events. The debate largely focussed on the role of parents, schools and other services in building young people's resistance to sexualised content, rather than the role of regulation and of media providers in reducing the prevalence of this content. Key themes were:

- The importance of establishing a **clear definition of sexualisation** and identifying what sort of images are sexualising.

- The reasons **why young people engage in sexual and/or risk taking behaviour**, including the impact of peer, commercial and media pressure and the effect of low self esteem.

- **Differences in young people's** exposure to, impression of and resilience to sexualised content.

- The importance of early, age appropriate **sex and relationships education** and media literacy.
- The **lack of support** to help young people deal with violence in relationships
- The value of **parental advice and guidance** for young people.

Part 3: Key principles and policy calls   Page 15

The third and final part of this paper sets out key messages for policy makers who wish to tackle the negative effects of premature sexualisation. On the basis of the emerging themes from these seminars, the NSPCC calls on Government and other key decision makers and influencers to:

- **Define sexualisation**, based on an understanding of young people's normal sexual development.
- Ensure all young people received **high quality, age appropriate PSHE and media literacy** to enable them to become resilient and critical consumers of sexualised content and to avoid unnecessary risks.
- **Support parents** to enable them to provide advice and guidance to young people on issues related to sex, relationships and sexualisation.
- Ensure young people can access **confidential advice and support**, including peer support and counselling.
- Provide clarity about the **responsibility of business and the media** to help safeguard children.

> "So many young people find things such as sexy dancing and dressing provocatively, now completely acceptable, yet are completely unaware of some of the risks this behaviour can come with, especially when it is shown over the internet. I strongly believe this is due to the portrayal of celebrities in the media. I think many young females feel that if a celebrity can dress or act in a sexualised way in front of millions of people in the media, then it must be acceptable for them to do the same."   Abi, 17

Annex 1: Questions for further investigation
Annex 2: List of attendees

Part 1: Contributions from our speakers

Understanding the impact of sexualised images on young people

Professor Rosalind Gill, professor of social and cultural analysis, Kings College London

There is a sense that something has changed to make culture more 'pornified' or 'sexualised', but there are disagreements about what has changed, why it has changed and how shifts should be understood. There is a definitional minefield around 'sexualisation', so we are not even sure we are talking about the same thing when we use the term.

Growing concerns about 'sexualisation' can be seen in public and policy reports[i] as well as in plethora of popular books[ii]. There is a sense in much of this literature of an assumed 'weight of evidence' which included the idea that girls are 'directly sexualised' through their exposure to advertising, tween magazines and television programmes[iii]. However there is, in fact, a severe shortage of rigorous research on this emotive issue.

Polarised positions dominate the debate about sexualisation: The **psychological** tradition is a quantitative tradition concerned with content analysis and media 'effects'. It has been valuable in highlighting potential harms of sexualisation but has an unsophisticated understanding of media influence and suffers from over-reliance on "laboratory based" controlled experiments with limited ecological validity. By contrast the **media and cultural studies** tradition is a qualitative tradition based on listening to children and young people. It restores proper respect to children, regarding them as knowing, 'savvy' and 'critical' consumers but tends to downplay influence of media and to treat children as autonomous a-cultural agents. We need to go beyond this polarised set of debates and put forward an argument for a psycho-social-cultural approach that goes beyond both the problematic notion of unidirectional 'effects' and the celebration of children and young people as 'critical' and 'media-savvy' consumers.

My current research with Sue Jackson and Tina Vares, has found diversity among "tweenage" girls about their media use and their uses/interpretations of media. These girls have a sophisticated ability to criticize and deconstruct 'sexualised' images, but - importantly - this sits alongside very painful accounts of how bad such images make them feel, and the kinds of pressures they feel subject to: being able to critique an image does not mean it has no impact.

The impact of the sexualisation on young people's attitudes and relationships

Dr Maddy Coy, Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit, London Metropolitan University.

While current debate centres on 'sexualisation', some commentators suggest that the term 'pornification' may more accurately capture the dynamics that are of concern[iv]- those that celebrate the separation of sex from intimacy and portray women as embracing an 'ever-ready' sexually availability. There is potential here for girls' 'space for action' to be narrowed, with options for establishing a sense of self limited to sexualisation and few alternative anchors for self identity that offer equivalent personal and social authority[v]. Similarly, constructions of masculinity in sexualised media are almost ubiquitously linked to sexual prowess. Exploring how young people make sense of these messages in the context of their own lived experience is critical.

Recent research continues to demonstrate the prevalence of non-consensual sex in young women's lives[vi]. The revealing theme in many of these studies is the normalisation of male sexual violence through an equation of masculinity with sexual conquest. Young people's understandings of what gender means with respect to sex and relationships are therefore of central significance.

There is growing consensus about the necessity and value of media literacy for young people. If young people are to be equipped to critique sexualised/pornified popular culture, media literacy classes must be linked to discussions of consent, coercion, violence and exploitation in sexual relationships. A challenge for practitioners is how to translate what young people hear about sexual consent and autonomy into their lived experience, shifting what has been referred to as 'intellectual empowerment' into 'experiential empowerment' – the ability to resist or reject pressure and coercion[vii]. Developing, and consistently portraying, new meanings of masculinity for young men that are not based on sexual conquest is a crucial first step[viii]. Young women need to be enabled to find a sense of personal power, and relationship with their bodies, that is not based on sexualisation, but with a range of possibilities and potentials. There is much necessary work about wider gender inequalities – the socio-economic position of women, representation of women in political decision making, challenging notions of biologically driven caring roles – but sexual violence and coercion are recognised as both cause and consequence of gender inequality[ix].

Children's and parents' perceptions of sexualised goods

Professor David Buckingham, Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media at the Institute for Education.

There are significant difficulties with previous research into the issue of sexualisation, both in terms of the inconsistent definitions of 'sexualisation', and the lack of evidence with regard to its impact on children. My previous work found that UK children encounter some very diverse messages about sex in the media; and while they find some of this material valuable and enjoyable, they can also be quite critical of it[x].

Research for the Scottish Parliament[xi] about children's and parents' perceptions of 'sexualised goods' found that public outrage about sexualisation did not correspond with most parents' views: there was not much evidence that 'sexualised goods' in fact represent a major problem for parents, as compared with other matters. There was no unanimous response to any of the 'sexualised' products that were presented to parents, which revealed the difficulty of coming to agreement about the meaning of any single item.

Some parents argued that children have always wanted to 'grow up too soon' and to experiment with adult identities; although they also felt that there was new and growing pressure from commercialisation. Parents generally saw children as passing through natural stages of development towards adulthood and recognised children's rights to make their own decisions, develop their individuality and express themselves. Some saw imitating 'sexy' dance styles and similar behaviour as innocuous, natural fun, and devoid of adult sexual connotations, whilst others found the same activities distasteful.

The debate about sexualised goods raised different concerns in relation to daughters as compared with sons. Although none of the parents felt their own daughters were becoming 'too sexual too soon', girls were thought to put themselves at risk if they appeared older than they were or dressed in sexualised ways. Boys' consumption and developing sexual identities were generally viewed in a far more relaxed way.

Young people rejected the idea that they were passive victims of the marketing of sexualised goods; and this claim was to a large extent supported by their extensive knowledge of marketing techniques and the examples they provided of their active choices and careful judgments about products. Young people indicated that their knowledge about how to 'read' products such as clothing and accessories developed as they grew older, and was informed by peer culture as they entered wider social settings (such as high school). However, they also expected adults to provide guidance.

Young people's choices in relation to sexualised goods reflected peer group norms, to do with inclusion and exclusion, and with feelings of comfort and confidence. It was generally considered normative not to display too much of the body or to draw attention to oneself through hair, make-up and accessories. Apparent 'failures' of taste or style were typically seen to be characteristic of other people, who were often referred to in derogatory terms relating to social class (such as 'chav').

Young people are aware of risks of appearing older through the use of sexualised products and generally having personal appearances misread. The perceived risks ranged from paedophilia to general risks about reputation and misjudgements; and these risks relate far more to girls than to boys.

Both parents and children argued that they needed opportunities to discuss these matters. The debate on sexualisation has often been conducted in very sensationalised and moralistic terms, which can make it difficult for children in particular to come to terms with the range of messages they are bound to encounter. Parents also felt they needed some support in their efforts to deal with this issue – perhaps through the provision of parents' forums in schools.

In conclusion, 'sexualisation' is a complex topic, which is not amenable to simple explanations. People define 'sexualisation' in different ways, and there is considerable diversity in terms of how they perceive the potentially sexual connotations of products. In general, children recognise and understand these issues in different ways from adults. Some parents were angry about particular products – especially those with potential risks for physical health such as high heels and underwired bras - and wanted to see 'something done' about them; but they realised that this did not translate easily into practical recommendations. They strongly rejected the idea that regulation was necessary in order to protect them, and argued that they should have the right to make their own decisions (and mistakes). Ultimately both parents and children tended to conclude that it was their own responsibility to take action on sexualised products, if they so chose – although they recognised that they were not wholly free to make their own choices and decisions.

"A future generation that are going to have grown immune to the problems associated with the sexualisation of children and young people, and therefore normalised it. In my opinion this will result in the greater prevalence of the issues that are linked to this; teen pregnancy, psychological problems, STI's and low self worth."   Niketa, 18

Attitudes and behaviour in teenage intimate relationships
Christine Barter, Centre for Family Policy and Child Welfare, Bristol University

Our research into young people's experiences of violence in their intimate relationships clearly demonstrates the very high levels of violence that some girls experience from their male partners. A third of girls reported some form of sexual violence and a quarter experienced physical violence, with many reporting controlling behaviours from their partners. The very detrimental impact of such violence on the welfare of girls is clear. In contrast although boys did report experiencing violence from a partner, only a minority reported any detrimental impact.

Some boys in the interviews showed very negative attitudes to girls, often objectifying them. This was especially prevalent in their attitudes towards pressuring girls into sexual contact and their lack of awareness regarding the impact of this on their female partners. For example, in one group interview with three boys, when they discussed their sexually coercive 'tactics' the other boys in the group responded with admiration. It was clear that some boys predominantly viewed girls as primarily sexual objects, and that sexual coercion was seen as normal and acceptable. Little regard was held for the girls' feelings. In other interviews boys were either unsure or unaware if their behaviour constituted sexual pressure. The pressure on boys from peers and the media to portray a dominating sexual persona is also an issue.

In contrast, for girls a disembodied and passive sexuality predominated where sexual pleasure was mostly absent in their discussions. Many girls stated that the sexual aspects of their relationships primarily consisted of attempting to resist the pressure they experienced from male partners. They found this aspect of their relationships hard to negotiate and worried that their partners would finish the relationship if they confronted them about their behaviour. These girls derived a great deal of peer status from having a boyfriend – a key protective factor would be to ensure girls were able to gain self-esteem from other aspects of their lives.

The need for more positive role models for girls was raised, as was the issue of what adolescents want, especially regarding confidentiality, and what professionals can offer. Young people seem to want control over disclosures and services which were non-stigmatising and not primarily viewed as child protection. Both guidance for parents and peer support schemes were discussed as productive avenues to follow.

The risks of online sexualised images of young people

Dr Zoë Hilton, Head of child protection, Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre

The Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) Centre has been concerned by a growing trend by young people to take and share indecent photos, not only of themselves, but also of friends and partners on mobile phones. The taking of such images is often due to young people taking risks and pushing boundaries as they become more sexually and socially aware. With the prevalence of mobile phones with cameras, images can be shared easily between friends. It can be difficult to distinguish between self-taken indecent images resulting from grooming or facilitation by adult offenders who have a sexual interest in children, from the images that result from children and young people simply pushing boundaries and experimenting with their friends.

There is evidence that self taken images can lead to children being at increased risk. Beatbullying highlighted that 38% of 11-17 year olds have received a sexually explicit or distressing text or email, with 70% admitting they knew the sender. CEOP is aware of a number of cases where the images that were sent by young people, intended only for boyfriends or girlfriends have been circulated far more widely and led to bullying. In some extreme cases, images sent in this way have ended up on paedophile chat sites and forums.

A number of popular online platforms and environments are relatively sexualised and provide and promote ways for children to share private personal details and sexual pictures of themselves. Some of these spaces are not well established and can be difficult to engage directly to enable them to become safer by design. Education programmes become increasingly significant in this context. CEOP have made efforts to tackle this issue through their education programmes and wider awareness raising activity, including "Exposed"[1]; a ten minute film aimed at 11-16 year olds, encouraging them to think about their actions and how these may affect others and their lives in future.

Finally, it is difficult to provide any conclusive analysis about the impact of broader social changes and sexualisation on levels and likelihood of sexual abuse. CEOP remains cautious about this link given the scarcity of research in this area and what we known about the determined nature of offender behaviour. However, it is the case that some online environments provide particular opportunities for offenders to target and access vulnerable children and young people.

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[1] Together with lessons plans and accompanying activities, the film is available free of charge at www.thinkuknow.co.uk/teachers.

Part 2: Emerging themes from the discussions

This section of the report captures the emerging themes from discussions at the three NSPCC seminars. The debate largely focussed on the role of parents, schools and other services in building young people's resistance to sexualisation and supporting them to reduce risks. The role of regulation and of media providers was barely discussed.

Understanding sexualisation

There is no clear, shared agreed definition of sexualisation. The current lack of accepted working definitions of 'sexualisation' is problematic, and a common understanding of what it means would be desirable. Language can be used to create emotive responses and does not help us to differentiate between what may be harmful to children and young people, and what may be sexual and perhaps even offensive but does not cause harm. The term 'objectification' is also contentious. Sexualisation is often linked to commercialisation and globalisation, but the differences, similarities and interrelationships between these phenomena are not properly understood.

Young people often do not see the clothes they wear or the language they use as sexualised, even though adults perceive it this way. Young people often use words like 'pimp' and 'whore', but their meaning is complex and dynamic, and the young people may not be aware of the original meanings of these words.

Studies have shown that there is a marked increase in the volume of sexualised images prevalent in popular culture, and that they are more sexually explicit than ever before.[xii]

It is important to identify what sorts of images are 'sexualising'. Perceptions of what images are sexualised, offensive or harmful differ. Not all sexual or sexist images in the media will have a sexualising impact on young people. It is important to identify what sorts of images, if any, have a real impact on young people's perceptions and behaviours. We must also understand what normal, age appropriate sexual development looks like in order to identify what behaviours or attitudes we should be concerned about.

Risks associated with sexualised images

Self generated sexualised images of young people can be used in maltreatment or victimisation. There are two clear ways in which young people's sexual images of themselves can cause harm: First, the prevalence and accessibility of these images can make it

easier for adult perpetrators to target, groom and potentially abuse young people. Second, these images provide material which other young people can use to bully or humiliate others.

There isn't clear evidence that sexualised images of children drive more adults to abuse children, but the internet makes it easier for sex offenders to operate: there is evidence that sex offenders target large numbers of young people, looking for those who are vulnerable, who they then entice into a more 'private' space online. Following this, the speed of escalation of their grooming activity can be alarming. Once one self generated image of a young person is on the internet, it can be used as a reason to blackmail or threaten that person in to further sexual activity.

The drivers of sexualised behaviour

We need to understand why young people engage in risk taking behaviour. Many young people willingly upload explicit images of themselves and some may perceive this as empowering and exciting, and so would resist any claim that they are being 'objectified'. It is important to understand why young people do this, and whether they knowingly engage in risk taking behaviour, or engage in this behaviour without knowing about the potential long term consequences.

It is also important to distinguish between young people's sexualised behaviour, and the technology they use to create, share or access images. Technology increases the risks associated with young people's sexualised behaviour, but it does not necessarily explain or account for this behaviour.

A survey carried out in America found that 22% of teen girls have electronically sent or posted images of themselves nude or semi-nude.[xiii]

There are links between sexualised behaviour, sexual violence and self esteem. Girls in particular seem to associate sexualised behaviour, and being in a relationship with the attainment of status, particularly if they have an older partner. Girls who have high self esteem, or who get their status from different sources, such as education, hobbies or employment, are less likely to be victims of sexual violence. It is important to build young people's self esteem, so that they are less likely to engage in risky behaviour to validate their sense of self-worth.

Peer, commercial and media pressure are important factors in encouraging young people to behave in sexual ways and engage in sexual acts. Young people may perceive

sexualised behaviour as 'cool' and this is reinforced by some advertising and some sections of the media. Such perceptions are very difficult for adults who have contact with these young people to challenge.

Research has shown that more than a quarter of young people are sexually active before they reach 16[xiv]. Call data from ChildLine shows that more than 15 per cent of all calls about peer pressure are related to sex. Some girls spoke of peer pressure, sometimes from other girls, to begin having sex as young as 12 and that they use drugs and alcohol to conquer their inhibitions.

The young people present at the seminar reported that they experienced peer pressure to be attractive, to grow up quickly, to wear sexualised clothes, and to be sexually active. In their quest to seek peer approval, some young people may behave, dress or speak in a way which they do not perceive to be sexualised, but which adults view as sexualised and inappropriate for their age.

Whilst young people can equate some sexual behaviour with being 'cool' they are also quick to judge those who openly or excessively engage in sexual acts. Young people can exhibit double standards, judging the sexualised behaviour of boys and girls in different ways. The line between what is and isn't acceptable to them is blurred and changes frequently.

It is important to understand the link between sexualised media, including pornography, and young people's behaviour in their intimate peer relationships: more robust evidence is needed to understand the relationship between young people's exposure to pornography and sexualised media; their perceptions of sex; their behaviour in relationships and their attitudes towards sex.

A 2008 survey of 14-17 year olds found that 27 per cent of boys were accessing adult pornography every week, with five per cent viewing it every day.[xv]

A study of 9-19 year olds found that a quarter of respondents had received unsolicited pornographic junk mail or instant messages, whilst almost one in eight had visited pornographic websites showing violent images.[xvi]

It was suggested that some young people turn to porn because they want to find out about sex, and therefore their understanding is then shaped by unrealistic portrayals of relationships. Young men may not knowingly abuse their girlfriends, or recognise their behaviour as abusive or understand the negative consequences that it has on their partners. Young men and

women can have different understandings of rape, consent and violence. However young men who do coerce girlfriends into sex should not necessarily be demonised or wholeheartedly condemned as perpetrators of abuse, since their intent is largely not malicious, and they, like girls, are affected by portrayals of sex and gender in the media and the attitudes and expectations of their communities and peers.

Some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged young people lack experience of respectful relationships and don't know how to create such relationships themselves. It is important for parents, carers and other adults to model respectful relationships. Messages about the unacceptability of domestic violence in adult relationships do not appear to be getting through to younger generations.

Understanding differences

Young people will be sexualised in different ways. We know that all young people are different, and thus that their exposure to, impression of, and resilience to, sexualised content is likely to be very different, so too, is their propensity to engage in risk taking behaviour. It is important to understand why young people engage in this behaviour, and what it might reflect about their 'off-line' lives.

In order to arrive at an informed response to sexualisation, which reflects the complexity of the issues involved, we need to better understand the way in which individual differences affect how children are exposed to, interpret and respond to sexualised content. We need to look at how the impact of sexualisation is mediated by factors such as the age, gender and ethnicity of the child, and by culture, community and peers.

"The main problem is the media, I think more restrictions on what children and young people are shown and how they are portrayed in the media would help by changing how young people think they should be seen and therefore how they would act."   Ale, 17

Support for young people

Early, age appropriate Sex and Relationships Education is valued by young people.
There is good evidence that early and age appropriate Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) delays the onset of sexual activity and reduces risk taking sexual activity, and it was suggested that it would also have an impact on other sexualised behaviour.

Young people reported that good SRE is very helpful, but too often they get too little, too late. They reported that it is not valued because there is too much focus in schools on academic subjects and exams. The risks associated with sharing images or talking to people online are often not dealt with until secondary school, when young people can get sexual advances online from the age of 9 or 10. SRE needs to start early, but should be age appropriate by not telling young people too much too soon.

The young people at the seminar felt that SRE is too often focussed on the risks of sex, rather than how to develop healthy relationships. SRE must be based in the reality of young people's lives – helping them to understand and negotiate situations they might face, not just understanding facts about sex and relationships. Young people also need to be supported to develop resilience and self esteem, not just to learn the 'facts of life'. This cannot be done through isolated lessons; there must be a pervasive culture in schools to support young people's emotional development and promote respect.

The question of who is best placed to deliver effective SRE was discussed and a range of options considered such as well trained teachers or specialist visitors to schools. Young people sometimes prefer to discuss issues with teachers or counsellors that they don't otherwise have regular contact with to avoid embarrassment.

Schools and other services (such as youth workers and foster carers) play a particularly important role in supporting those young people who cannot talk to their parents because they have problematic relationships or because they are separated from their parents and in custody or in the care system.

"There is way too much in society, and the media, that decreases the innocence of children and young people. They are shown on a daily basis, things beyond their age such as in music videos, magazines, TV programmes, movies and then the internet. This then makes them feel it is fine to act, dress or behave in these ways, especially if they want to be accepted or looked upon favourably." Kyle, 20

We need to support young people to be critical consumers of the media. It is important to help young people to interpret the sexualised media they are exposed to, and understand the consequences of their actions. Many young people are media literate, but even when they recognise that the images they see are not realistic portrayals of 'real' life, they still say that these images make them feel inadequate and pressurised.

Peers play an important role in supporting young people. Young people can be more resilient to this pressure if they have a more diverse friendship group and trusted friends, and higher self esteem. Peer support can be very helpful to young people who want to discuss and understand their experiences.

Parental advice and guidance can be very helpful to young people Parents have an important role to play in educating and protecting young people, but seem to feel disempowered, both by not understanding new technology and by being uncomfortable talking about sex. Young people appreciate being able to talk about issues like sex and peer pressure with their parents. Parents should be encouraged and supported to talk to their children about these issues from an early age, as appropriate.

The reasons parents and children don't always talk about these issues vary, and include parents being uncomfortable about their children growing up, or fearing that they or their children will be judged if they know too much about sex. Conversations between parents and young people about sex and relationships are most likely to take place and be effective if parents and children have good relationships and talk honestly - if parents and children don't feel able to have open and honest conversations with one another about other subjects, they are unlikely to be able to talk about sexuality and sexual behaviour.

Effective parental controls are an important tool to reduce online risk taking behaviour and exposure to pornographic content.

In a survey for Safer Internet Day, 53% of young people said they didn't always tell their parents the truth about what they did online.[xvii]

There is insufficient support to help young people deal with violence in relationships. Anecdotal evidence was cited to show that professionals are often unaware of the issue of sexual violence in young people's peer relationships, inattentive to any indicators that might suggest it is an issue and ill equipped to deal with it. Practitioners working with young people need to be more alert to issues such as teen relationship abuse, and able to discuss these issues sensitively. It was suggested that professionals can struggle to challenge young people's attitudes because they don't want to jeopardise otherwise positive relationships. There is a strong case for developing more peer advice or support, since many young people are more comfortable discussing these issues with peers than with adults.

Part 3: Key principles and policy calls

On the basis of the information and insights discussed during the seminar series, the NSPCC has developed the following key principles and policy calls which will inform more detailed policies on this issue developed over the coming months.

Key principles

Responses to the issue of sexualisation should be based on an assessment of risk and a proper understanding of young people's development, rather than the issue of morality.

Responses should adopt a co-ordinated, evidence-based approach involving children and young people, parents, social care and health professionals and industry.

Premature sexualisation should be seen as part of a broader public health issue, and a factor which contributes to other problems such as sexual abuse, and risky sexual behaviour.

On the basis of the emerging themes from these seminars, the NSPCC calls on Government and other key decision makers and influencers to:

- Develop a more widely agreed **understanding and definition of key terms** such as 'sexualisation', 'objectification' and what it means 'to be sexualised', based on understanding when a child or young person is exhibiting behaviour which can be considered developmentally predictable, and when are they behaving in a way which suggests they have been sexualised. Without these, we cannot adequately pin down the true extent and impact of the issue

- Develop ways to counteract the messages children and young people receive, and to support them to avoid risks associated with sexualised behaviour. This should be done through **Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE),** which is delivered by specially trained professionals and integrated across the curriculum. Education and awareness programmes have been successful in educating children about risks posed by others, but we need to consider how we address young people's own risk-taking behaviour in this context. Sex and relationships education should begin early in life and include age appropriate discussions about relationships, privacy, peer violence and pornography.

- Consider how schools and other services for young people can help young people develop the **capabilities and characteristics** that make them resilient to pressures and risks. Young people need to have sources, other than their sexuality, from which they can

derive their self esteem. They may need support to identify where these sources and opportunities lie. Young men need help to understand the impact of their sexualised violence and controlling behaviour on their girlfriends; young women need to be given the tools to resist any physical, sexual or emotional pressure put on them by their boyfriends.

- Deliver **e-safety and media literacy programmes** that give children and young people the skills to process and understand the messages that they receive from the media, and the potential impact they may have on their own feelings and self esteem.

- Provide **advice and support for parents** to help them to discuss sexualised behaviour, language and images, including pornography, with their children, and to support their children in their intimate relationships.

- Ensure children and young people have access to **confidential advice and support,** including specialist support, to help them prevent and deal with violence in intimate relationships. Young people need to know that their relationships are being taken seriously, and teenage partner violence recognised as a significant child welfare problem.

- Acknowledge young people's help-seeking strategies, which favour peers, in intervention programmes aimed at reducing teenage partner violence and other forms of maltreatment and victimisation. **Expand peer support and counselling schemes**, which are established in a number of UK schools but tend to focus only on bullying.

- Provide clarity about the **responsibility of industry** to safeguard children, and the steps businesses can take to ensure the safety of children within their sphere of influence. It is the responsibility of businesses to be sensitive to the wider wellbeing of children and not define them solely as consumers. For example, manufacturers, retailers and publishers should make gender neutral toys and books available for those young children and parents who want them, and goods should be marketed in an age appropriate way.

- Encourage **media providers and regulators** to consider the implications of sexualised messages and images and how they might limit children's exposure to those which are the most potentially damaging. For example, internet service providers should automatically block pornography sites at source. The impact of the media on the lives of children and young people should become a standard part of professional training in journalism and media studies.

Annex 1: Questions for further research

Very little robust evidence exists to enable us to understand the relationships between sexualised images in society, young people's behaviour, and its consequences. The NSPCC seminars brought together the latest evidence and insights into the issue, but also generated many questions that are still to be answered. Some of these are below.

Questions about individual differences

- What makes some young people susceptible to pressure to have sex, and others not?
- What factors make young people more at risk of, or resilient to, the impact of sexualisation?
- Are vulnerable young people more at risk?
- What is the relationship between online and offline vulnerability?
- How is the impact of sexualised content mediated by age, gender, ethnicity etc?
- How do communities, families and peers mediate the effect of sexualised content?
- When does sexualisation start and how does it change with age?
- Does society's treatment of infants (eg. "pinkficiation") encourage sexual stereotypes?

Questions about the impact of sexualisation and the drivers of young people's behaviour

- To what extent do sexualised images in society lead to violence in young people's relationships? What are the causal pathways?
- Why do young people take and share sexualised images? To what extent do young people want to engage in risk taking behaviour, as opposed to not understanding the risks?
- How does pornography shape young people's perceptions of sex and relationships, and how does this affect their behaviour?
- What does it mean for tween and teenage girls' to use names like 'slut' and 'whore' online?
- How do girls' online 'sexualised' self-presentations relate to their offline 'real' relationships? Are they empowered? Or are they more vulnerable?
- What is the impact of sexualisation on young people's mental health?

Questions about how to respond to the issue

- How could we reduce the scale and nature of sexualised images in society? What role could the media, industry, regulators and wider society play?
- Could education about the risks of sexualised behaviour reduce the risks to young people?
- How do we help parents to deal with the issues, manage risks and support young people, particularly the most 'hard to reach' parents?
- How can we avoid 'moral panic' and champion sex-positive attitudes in which children and young people grow up as confident sexual subjects who enjoy their sexuality and are less likely to be victims of abuse or exploitation?

Annex 2: Attendees

Speakers

Dr Zoë Hilton	Child Exploitation and Online Protection centre
Professor Rosalind Gill	King's College London
Dr Maddy Coy	London Metropolitan University
Dr David Buckingham	Institute for Education
Dr Christine Barter	University of Bristol

Young People

Abi Humphreys

Ale Garcia

Kyle Colton

Enoch Chinimberi

Seb Pagden-Ratcliffe

Niketa Sanderson

Daisy Prout

Tania Shaw

Delegates

Agnes Nairn	University of Bath
Camille Warrington	University of Bedfordshire
Carlene Firmin	Barnardo's
Chris Richards	Institute of Education
Christine Humphrey	Department of Health
Diana Porter	Action for Children
Elly Farmer	Centre for Social Justice/NSPCC
Feona Attwood	Sheffield Hallam University
Jan Macvarish	University of Kent
Jenny Clifton	Office of Children's Commissioner
John Hubbard	Department for Education
Julie Bentley	Family Planning Association
Laura Blazey	Barnardo's
Lauren Seager Smith	Anti Bullying Alliance/NCB
Lucy Emmerson	Sex Education Forum
Reg Bailey	Mothers' Union/ Government Sexualisation Review team
Samantha Callan	Centre for Social Justice
Shaun Kelly	Action for Children
Tink Palmer	Marie Collins Foundation
Victoria Saunders	Department for Education

NSPCC staff

Jon Brown

Rebecca Einhorn

Celia Hall

Claire Lilley

Sally Knock

Tom Narducci

Trish O'Donnell

[i] Eg. Corporate Paedophilia (Australia Institute, 2006); APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2007); Scottish Office report on children and sexualization (2009) ; British Home Office report on the Sexualization of Girls (2010)

[ii] Eg The Lolita Effect: Media Sexualization of Young Girls and Five Keys to Fixing It (Durham, 2009); So Sexy, So Soon:The New Sexualized Childhood and What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids (Levin & Kilbourne, 2009); Getting Real:Challenging the Sexualisation Girls (Reist & Hazlehurst, 2010)

[iii] 'there is both empirical research and clinical evidence that premature sexualisation is harmful' (Papadopoulos, 2010).

[iv] Dines, G (2010) *Pornland: How Porn has Hijacked Our Sexuality* Boston: Beacon Press

Paul, P. (2005) *Pornified: How Pornography Is Transforming Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families* New York: Times Books

[v] Coy, M. (2009) Milkshakes, lady lumps and growing up to want boobies: how the sexualisation of popular culture limits girls' horizons *Child Abuse Review* 18 (6) 372-383

[vi] Burman, M & Cartmel, F (2005) *Young People's Attitudes to Gendered Violence* Glasgow: University of Glasgow http://www.healthscotland.com/uploads/documents/GenderedViolence.pdf

Firmin, C (2010) *Female Voice in Violence Project: A study into the impact of serious youth violence on women and girls*, London: ROTA

[vii] Holland, J, Ramazanoglu, C, Sharpe, S & Thomson, R (1998) *The Male in the Head: Young People, Heterosexuality and Power* London: The Tufnell Press

[viii] Coy, M., Lee, K., Roach, C. & Kelly, L (2010) *A Missing Link? An Exploratory Study of Connections between Teenage Pregnancy and Non-Consensual Sex* Child & Woman Abuse Studies Unit, London Metropolitan University

[ix] United Nations (2006) *Secretary-General's In-depth Study on Violence Against Women* A/61/122/Add.1 http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N06/419/74/PDF/N0641974.pdf

[x] Professor Buckingham's earlier work is reported in a book 'Young People, Sex and the Media', by David Buckingham and Sara Bragg (Palgrave, 2004); and in a report, 'Young People, Media and Personal Relationships' that can be downloaded from http://www.asa.org.uk/Resource-Centre/Reports-and-surveys.aspx.

[xi] The full report of Professor Buckingham's work for the Scottish Parliament , which was conducted with Sara Bragg of the Open University, Rebekah Willett of the Institute of Education, and Rachel Russell of Glasgow Caledonian University, can be found at: http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/s3/committees/equal/reports-10/eor10-02.htm.

[xii] Gill, R (2009) *Beyond the sexualisation of culture Thesis: An intersectional analysis of 'sixpacks' 'midriffs' and 'hot lesbians' in advertising.*

[xiii] Sex and Tech Survey, American National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancies 2008

[xiv] Wellings, K et al (2001) *Sexual Behaviour in Briain: early heterosexual experience.* Lancet 358: 1843-50

[xv] Sex education survey, YouGov 2008

[xvi] Livingstone, Bober et al (2005) *Internet Literacy among children and young people findings from the Go Online Project*

[xvii] Kidscape survey for safer internet day, February 2011

About the NSPCC

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) aims to end cruelty to children in the UK by fighting for their rights, listening to them, helping them and making them safe.

We share our experience with governments and organisations working with children so together we improve the protection of children and we challenge those who will not learn and change. We campaign for better laws and we educate and inform the public to improve understanding about child abuse.

Our services include the NSPCC Helpline, for adults worried about a child, and ChildLine, the UK's free, confidential helpline for children and young people.

NSPCC
Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP.