



One woman is saying no to our increasingly sexualised culture, reports **Tamara Hunter**

Social commentator Melinda Tankard Reist is used to being called a wussie, Prude, purveyor of moral panic, harmless naysayer, anti-sex — Tankard Reist has fielded these and worse insults in the course of her decade-long campaign against the sexualisation of children.

Her personal favourite is being accused of wanting to put women in head to toe banes. “But you know, I don’t actually pay much heed to the criticism to be honest,” says Tankard Reist, the Canberra mother of three daughters aged 8, 13 and 18. “I stopped Googling my name probably 10 years ago. I just prefer to stay focused and get on with the job.”

And her job, self-agreed though it may be, is a massive one — battling the exponentially expanding effects of an increasingly sexualised culture. Emerging figures show an alarming rise in body image issues, self-harm, depression, low self-esteem, and risky and inappropriate sexual behaviour among ever-younger children, particularly girls.

Stories abound of boys demanding sexual favours in primary school playgrounds, and primary-aged girls wearing “shag buns” representing different sexual acts.

To the mind of Tankard Reist, and others who have contributed to her latest book, *Getting Real* — Challenging the Sexualisation of Girls, there is no doubt that what she calls the “perennialisation of our culture” is to blame.

The American Psychological Association backs her up, publishing a report in 2007 stating that the premature sexualisation of girls contributes to impaired cognitive performance, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, self-harm, and problems with sexuality, physical and mental health.

Tankard Reist describes the sexualisation of children as the allowing of adult sexual concepts and themes to be imposed on children. She says it affects both boys and girls, but girls are particularly vulnerable because of the focus on body image. She acknowledges that not all children experience the

same serious effects, but is worried for those who do.

“Children are no longer allowed to be just kids and enjoy their childhood. Childhood has become commercialised, so you see little girls thinking that they need to imitate older girls, older women, and they’re getting this message that to be thin, hot and sexy.”

“So there are two kinds of sexualisation. There’s sexualisation through the messages that girls get from the media

and popular culture, but then there’s also the more deliberate targeting of children and using children in advertising in suggestive ways, so where marketers and advertisers and corporations are seeing children as appropriate for conveying suggestive sorts of messages.”

Tankard Reist argues that everywhere children look, from billboards and magazines to television and the internet, they are faced with these kinds of images and messages.

“And then there’s the music they listen to, and the merchandising targeted at an increasingly younger audience — clothes, personal grooming products, toys and technology.

### ‘Little girls are getting this message that to be acceptable they need to be thin, hot and sexy.’

MELINDA TANKARD REIST

“The music videos that little girls are seeing at the moment — they’re singing along to Lily Allen talking about the wet patch in the middle of the bed,” she says.

“I hear little girls singing Lady Gaga songs, and then of course they’ve heard the Passion Dolls and Britney Spears. So they’re getting messages that say:

“They’re also sold objects of grooming and cosmetics for little girls.”

“It’s at every level. There’s a game being played online by little girls called Miss Bimbo, and 10-year-old girls are playing that game. The whole aim in that game is to advance by having breast enhancements, by attracting boys in the Bimbo Club, and making yourself sexually appealing. And that’s a game that very little girls are getting access to and often the parents have no idea of what they’re playing.

“Where are they NOT getting these messages? I suppose that my point is, that it’s everywhere. So little girls come to think that their value is in their looks, it’s in their

bodies, and we’re seeing now a rise in eating disorders in younger and younger girls. Eight-year-old girls are being admitted to hospital with eating disorders.”

She says it’s not enough to argue that parents should simply say no and not buy their pre-teen or teenage or even young teen daughters the G-string, the beehive shoes, the child-sized French maid Halloween outfit and the girls’ magazines containing graphic descriptions of sexual acts and advice on how to please boys.

She counters that parents cannot control everything their children see once they walk out of the house, and that it is up to regulators to take a more active role.

She also points to the steady erosion of traditional support systems for girls, with increased working hours, more fragmented families and busier lives, saying girls now rely largely on their peers for support.

Tankard Reist is not alone in her concern about the effects of this shift in the culture.

An increasing groundswell of others, including health professionals, parents, academics, writers, and politicians are equally worried.

Getting Real is a collection of essays by a diverse collection of vocal critics of child sexualisation, including authors Maggie Hamilton and Steve Biddulph, child psychiatrist Louise Newman, and others including academics, feminists, ethicists, psychologists, and concerned parents-turned-activists.

Former Play School presenter Norm Huddlestone, who now advocates on issues of child protection and parenting, contributes a hard-hitting preface attacking those who dispute or

minimise the existence and impact of sexualisation of children. “We have to wake up and smell the coffee,” she writes. “It’s everywhere. And 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, understand or contextualise, even if they have parents or carers who might try to ‘explain’.”

The pieces in *Getting Real* are far from prosaic.

They pull no punches, cataloguing graphic examples of the sexually charged fare readily available to children, detailing their impact, dismantling the “hazy” arguments of those who put down opponents of sexualisation as upright spreaders of moral panic, and arguing strongly not only for improved regulation, but for parents and others who are worried to be vocal in their concerns.

As comedy writer and founder of Kids Free 2B Kids, Julie Gale, writes, those who regulate the content of advertising are motivated by complaints.

Complaints by Tankard Reist and others, for example, saw the banning in Australia of a Japanese computer game which invited players to simulate the rape of a mother and her two young daughters.

The book says complaints by Gale’s KFCB led to some teenage-girl magazines ceasing the advertising of mobile phone wallpapers with sexualised messages.

Gale provides a how-to for those who want to make complaints, writing that people should not underestimate the power of their own voices.

While some of its arguments may be hard to stomach, *Getting Real* just might be the book which changes the minds of some managers.

For others, it will be the cause for some serious soul searching about the current state of girlhood — and even more so, a call to action.

**Getting Real, Edited by Melinda Tankard Reist, \$34.95, Spinifex Press**