

The potential effectiveness of the Bailey Review

Therese Wallin, June 2011

Matters concerning family life have traditionally been considered to be outside the ambit of government. Yet, with the realisation that such affairs have significant effects on other areas of life, such an approach is now largely a part of the past. In recent years, the issue of the potentially harmful effects of the sexualisation and commercialisation of children has attracted much attention, drawing concern from parents as well as Whitehall.

This has prompted the Secretary of State for Education to appoint Reg Bailey, Chief Executive of the Mother's Union, to lead an independent review into the matter. The so-called 'Bailey Review' is the result of an investigation that has not only focused on alarmed parents, but has also talked to children, young people and relevant organisations.

The review puts forth several recommendations, including the removal of billboards and magazines displaying provocative images, beyond the immediate reach and sight of children. Implementing an age rating for music videos and facilitating parents' ability to block material from online sources, are amongst other proposals. Moreover, retailers are requested to ensure that their products and services, including clothes, are appropriate for the age range of their targeted users.

Extending beyond the display of provocative images and specific products, there has also been a trend for businesses to use children to sell and market their products; the Bailey Review suggests putting an end to such strategies to stop the phenomenon of peer-to-peer marketing.

Children's minister Sarah Teather stressed that the proposed measures are a response to the wish of many parents for support in bringing up their children.¹ Indeed, the report highlights the need for businesses and industries to pay more attention to parents' concerns and to ensure that clear and simple complaints procedures are available. Consequently, the review invites regulators across various industries to work together in launching a single website where parents can report any program, or the like, that they find to be inappropriate.² (Notably, slightly prior to the release of the Bailey Review, members of the British Retail Consortium agreed to stricter guidelines in relation to children's' products.³ The prevailing view is that the timely release of the new guidelines was an attempt by retailers to escape criticism, in light of the review's findings.⁴)

¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-13661543>

² "Letting Children be Children – Report of an Independent Review of the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood", Department for Education, available at <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/CM%208078>

³ "Responsible Retailing: BRC Children's Wear Guidelines, available at http://www.brc.org.uk/brc_show_document.asp?id=4236&moid=7404

⁴ (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/retailers-ban-sexy-underwear-for-children-under-12-2293487.html>)

Prime Minister David Cameron has welcomed the review's recommendations, and has subsequently announced that he will organise a meeting in October with relevant parties in order to monitor and report on the progress of the implementation of the guidelines.⁵

On a wider level, responses to the review have been generally positive. Justine Roberts, co-founder of Mumsnet, for example, welcomed the report and stressed that the concerns which it seeks to address are not related to any desire to glorify childhood. She also noted that the review acknowledges and targets a concern felt by parents and non-parents alike about the adaptation of products to children.⁶

One of the big issues raised in response to the Review was in relation to products that are considered to promote damaging gender roles. Specifically, where did parental control and influence fit into the equation? Claude Knights, director of the children's charity Kidscape, for example, stressed the importance of parental responsibility, arguing that it is parents who ultimately enable children to acquire such items.⁷

However, although parents play a significant and sometimes underestimated role, there are domains where parental control simply cannot reach. Such spheres include the public domain, where parental authority cannot be exercised in the same manner as in the privacy of the home. Parents cannot control what is broadcast on television or what images are displayed on billboards. Therefore, it is in these areas that the recommendations of the Bailey Review may be most valuable.⁸ Thomas Sutcliffe, writing in the *Independent*, noted that whilst the Bailey report stresses the importance of adapting society to be more childhood and family friendly, the real struggle and objective should be to make it more *human* friendly. Children, he argued, are not the only ones who struggle in a society where sexualisation infiltrates most parts.⁹

To only focus on the role of parents, businesses and the media does however fail to see the bigger picture. Children do not strive to dress in provocative clothes or be exposed to material that is not appropriate for their age. Often, they simply imitate what they see around them and what they perceive to be normal. Hence, although the report may be a good initial step, the issue of why our society is so obsessed with sexualising just about everything must be addressed. To promote sound gender roles and integrity across society is crucial. Children get confused when they are on the one hand encouraged to dress or eat a certain way, whilst on the other hand, told that they should actually *not* engage in such behaviours. The review does confirm that this is not only a concern of adults who have some type of glorified version of childhood, children have reported feeling pressured. As such, any form of follow-up on the progress of the 'state of our society' should not only concern relevant 'adults' but also continued research into the feeling and perceptions of children.

⁵ <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/statements-and-articles/2011/06/letter-to-reg-bailey-following-his-review-of-the-commercialisation-and-sexualisation-of-childhood-64386>

⁶ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/lads-mags-should-be-covered-up-says-review-2293859.html>

⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-13661543>

⁸ <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/leading-articles/leading-article-parents-not-ministers-bear-ultimate-responsibility-2293912.html>

⁹ <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/columnists/thomas-sutcliffe/tom-sutcliffe-wed-all-benefit-from-a-bit-of-desexualisation-2293919.html>