Harmful media material and what should be done about it is an ongoing source of concern for parents, educators and governments. Contradictory findings generated by academic, industry and policy research into harmful media material often achieve little more than an increase in community concern about the media and its impact on children. New ABA research explores how children define and understand harmful media materials and their awareness of media regulation.

What children think about the media

The ABA has released a research study that explores how children define and understand harmful media materials and their awareness of media regulation.

'There is already a large body of research which explores media influence from an adult and parental perspective, but this study in effect gives children a voice in the policy debate,' said Professor David Flint, ABA Chairman. 'This study gives young people the opportunity to discuss their parents' concerns in relation to media harm, and their own engagement with the media.'

The report, *Children's Views about Media Harm*, is a case study of children and young teenagers aged from ten to fifteen years from the western Sydney area. It was designed and conducted jointly by the ABA and the University of Western Sydney Nepean.

Elements of the study

The fifty children who participated in the study were asked to discuss their experiences and opinions about the influence and regulation of television and Internet activities.

Many of the children claimed that it was younger children and/or children of the opposite sex who were vulnerable to media harm. The older children considered themselves capable of controlling their own viewing, especially when they had exclusive access to a television. In managing their own media use, the children were very aware of film classifications and television program advice, the study found.

It was reported as widespread practice for parents to establish household rules about screen media use in an effort to protect children from potential harm. The rules varied greatly, depending upon who was present and in charge at the time.

The children acknowledged that their parents were concerned about portrayals of sex, violence and coarse language in the media. While they understood such concerns were for their welfare, they also generally imagined themselves to be 'emancipated' users of media and considered parental fears to be vastly ex-

aggerated in relation to the potential threat of media harm.

The children believed that the high impact of drama was offset by the knowledge that it was 'not real', whereas the impact of documentary, news and current affairs programs was intensified by the fact that the events 'really happened'.
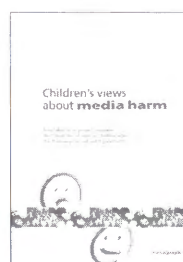
Feeling scared after watching horror or supernatural themes was the most concrete evidence cited by the children to suggest the existence of harm caused by the media. However they were reluctant to describe this as 'harm' because often it was also 'fun'. Many decided that horror movies were thrilling for most children but difficult for some to handle, particularly younger children.

The children presented risks and dangers in the real world as the forms of harm most relevant to them. These in-

cluded the hazards of using alcohol, drugs, of unwanted pregnancy, sexual harassment, and school bullying. Screen depictions of these themes had a particular potency for the children.

The children did not assume, as many adults do, that technological change means more risks for children. Nor did they assume that increased regulation of their media activities would provide the protection many adults look for—the ways and means of circumventing adult control are many and varied.

Overall the children appeared to be protected from continual exposure to harmful media materials. Such protection came about through the combination of their own inclinations, the nature and range of programs broadcast by the mainstream media, and the competing demands on their time from other sources—school, friends and domestic responsibilities.