

Time to end sexism in our schools

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Editorial

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REVELATIONS by the Commissioner for Children and Young People, Helen Connolly, about the levels of sexism and gender stereotyping in our schools are disturbing, to say the least.

After interviewing hundreds of South Australian schoolchildren aged between 11 and 19, Ms Connolly's office came to the conclusion that the problem is rampant in many classrooms.

Boys and girls both reported name-calling in the playground, using the type of sexist and homophobic language most of us had hoped went out of circulation 30 years ago.

Children also reported feeling as though they were encouraged to conform to gender stereotypes, and girls

felt constant pressure to take part in sexting.

As well, sexism was considered a normal part of school culture and was not generally reported due to a belief that nothing could or would be done about it.

The report should send a shiver up the spine of all parents, and force educators to take a fresh look at how these issues are dealt with in our schools.

There's no doubt that society has come a long way in combating sexism since the 1970s, when Page 3 girls were

commonplace, nearly all senior executive roles were male, and mothers who chose to remain in full-time work were frowned upon.

But Ms Connolly's report

leaves us in little doubt there is still plenty of work to be done.

Schools need to shoulder a fair majority of this workload, and the report's recommendations seem reasonably straightforward, that is that schools should: **ENSURE** their policies specifically address sexism, sexual harassment and gender-based bullying; **PROVIDE** ongoing teacher training in these areas, and; **REVIEW** their reporting and incident-resolution procedures.

As Associate Professor Kerry Bissaker, from the Flinders College of Education, Psychology and Social Work said: "Teachers, from early childhood to secondary education, need to have confidence to use their knowledge and awareness of these issues to help make classrooms a more inclusive place."

But the behaviour of children usually mirrors what they see from their parents and society as a whole, so we must all play a role to end the often unconscious sexism, stereotyping and gender-based bullying.