

## [The paradox of paternalism](#) [1]

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Two stories from the UK point up some troubling choices. First, the government wants shops to stop selling 'inappropriate' clothes to pre-teens. It's worried about the 'sexualisation' of young girls. Second, there are calls for a 'proper watershed' on TV following some very sexy talent-show routines.

I believe in personal freedom, and think that people should be able to buy whatever clothes they like, for themselves or their family, and watch whatever TV they want at any time they choose. But while I believe that mature minds can handle freedom, I am not so sure that child minds can. Human beings have a protracted childhood in which we learn from adults how best to choose and to conduct ourselves. It is long and difficult process, and we don't always get it right.

So there is a case for some protections on children. We might decriminalise drugs (another story in the news), for example, but would we really want to allow children to buy drugs, or even for them to see drugs being traded? Again, I would like to see prostitution decriminalised, but would I like to see brothels next door to schools? No, not really. And as for TV ? well, parents know how hard it is to keep a constant eye on what kids are watching, so a watershed is quite a popular idea.

That's paternalist, but children need a bit of paternalism. But paternalism is best delivered within families, and by self-control in the media, rather than from governments and regulators. If politicians are worried about the sexualisation of our children, they should perhaps first reflect on how the state has intruded into the family, and undermined family culture and responsibility. Then butt out and let ordinary decent people decide what is best for their own children.

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