

The Impact of Pornography on Children and Young People

OUR POSITION:

Bravehearts believes that there must be a holistic approach to lessening the impact of pornography on children and young people.

- **Bravehearts support developmentally appropriate sex education for schools**
- **Bravehearts recommends that as part of a holistic approach to cyber-safety, prevention messages and online support.**
- **Age verification measures to inhibit child access to pornography.**
- **Australian authorities should enforce Australian laws against the distribution of child sexual abuse material by adult pornography sites.**
- **More research into the prevalence of Australian children making and selling sexual content.**
- **There is a need for coordinated action between law enforcement, the financial sector, the technology sector and regulatory bodies.**

Background

Children and young people access the internet for a wide variety of reasons. As children become more active online, the risk of exposure to inappropriate material increases. The most prevalent types of this content include:

- Pornographic materials
- Unmonitored chat rooms, where conversations lack supervision and inappropriate remarks are not filtered
- Sexist content
- Content featuring profanity or offensive language
- Websites that promote criminal activities, terrorism, racism, eating disorders, or suicide
- Images, videos, or games depicting violence or cruelty
- Gambling websites

Research on online exposure to pornography has made a distinction between consensual and active participation in access and unwanted, accidental exposure. Concerns about exposure to inappropriate material online are driven by both the relative lack of regulation of online content and the ease of access to a wide range of material considered inappropriate for children.

Exposure to Pornography and Inappropriate Material

Children may inadvertently encounter pornography or inappropriate content, or it may be shared with them directly by peers or adults. Additionally, we also know that it is typical for young people to be inquisitive about sexual topics and relationships, which may drive them to seek information online (Our Watch, 2020). This engagement with the material may also stem from feelings of concern or embarrassment about discussing sex and relationships with their parents or guardians.

Children and adolescents may seek out or view pornography online for various reasons, including gaining knowledge about sex

and sexual identity, seeking sexual arousal and enjoyment, innate curiosity, defying rules, attempting to shock their peers, or responding to pressure from friends or relationships.

Among young people who had viewed pornography, 50.1% of young men and 40.3% of young women stated that the first time they were exposed to pornographic material, they had purposefully searched it. While 46.2% of young men and 55.7% of young women revealed that their initial exposure occurred by chance (Crabbe, Flood, & Adams, 2024).

In an Australian study (Crabbe, Flood, & Adams, 2024), it was found that among all young people who had been exposed to online pornography:

- The average age of 'first porn exposure' was 13.2 years for boys and young men and 14.1 years for girls and young women
- By age of 10, 5.7% of young men and 4.4% of young women reported viewing pornography
- By age of 12, 25.2% of young men and 14.9% of young women reported viewing pornography
- By age 14, 52.2% of young men and 32.5% of young women reported viewing pornography

Impact of Pornography and Inappropriate Material

Sexual behaviours, attitudes, violence and coercive sexual behaviours

For many young people, their initial encounters with pornography occur prior to their first sexual and romantic experiences. The portrayals of sexuality in pornography, which are often unsafe, unrealistic, degrading and sexist, may inadvertently shape their understanding of sexual relationships. Engaging with pornography is linked to increased sexual preoccupation and a greater propensity for risky sexual behaviours, which may lead to less permissive sexual conduct, sexual aggression and more favourable views on sexual coercion and the objectification of women.

Mainstream pornography produces and distributes explicit sexual content through images and videos, frequently associated with violence against women and practices that degrade and objectify them. Online pornography is the most consumed type of pornography, playing a crucial role in shaping societal views on gender and sexuality. Recently, there has been a marked increase in pornography consumption, especially among young people.

Research has examined the link between the consumption of pornography and antisocial attitudes, especially those believed to be related to sexual violence, including the acceptance of rape myths, negative attitudes towards women, misogynistic views, and the acceptance of interpersonal violence (Loutzenhiser, Arrighi & Rosenfeld, 2024). The overall conclusion from these studies is that more frequent engagement with pornography is linked to a heightened acceptance of attitudes that support sexual violence.

Research is varied but suggests that there is a significant relationship between frequent use of pornography and sexual assault perpetration (Marshall, Miller & Bouffard, 2021). A research study involving in the United States indicated a significant correlation between frequent pornography consumption and an increased likelihood of engaging in both verbal and physical coercive sexual behaviours (Bhuptani, et.al., 2023).

Various elements contribute to the occurrence of harmful sexual behaviour in children, with exposure to pornography being a primary factor. Data reveals that approximately one-third of boys in Australia were first exposed to pornography between the ages of 9 and 11, and nearly two-thirds encountered it for the first time between 12 and 14 years old (Bernstein et al., 2023, McKibbin, Green, et al., 2024, McKibbin, Humphreys, et al., 2024). The dramatic surge in instances of peer-to-peer child sexual abuse in Australia within a short period can likely be attributed to the unprecedented accessibility of pornography through the internet

Risky sexual behaviours

Research has found that there is a reduced likelihood of utilising contraception, particularly because of the infrequent depiction of contraception in pornography; failing to promote healthy sexual practices, pregnancy prevention, or the avoidance of sexually transmitted diseases (Landripet, Koletić & Štulhofer, 2025).

General wellbeing

Research has established links between adolescents' use of pornography and decreased social integration and caregiver bonding, as well as increased conduct problems, delinquency and depressive symptoms (Vertongen, Chamberlain & van Ommen, 2022). A robust study in Ireland looked at the impact of pornography use on young people (Nolan & Smyth, 2024). The study found notable associations between the use of online pornography and different dimensions of wellbeing, particularly in young men. Those who engaged with online pornography reported lower satisfaction with life, more symptoms of depression, and a less favourable self-image compared to those who did not use it. Moreover, both men and women who consumed pornography were found to exhibit higher aggression levels and a greater tendency to utilise negative strategies for coping with stress.

Bravehearts Position

Bravehearts believes that there must be a holistic approach to lessening the impact of pornography on children and young people.

- Bravehearts support developmentally appropriate sex education for schools, inclusive of positive and healthy relationships, consent issues and awareness of the online environment. This includes structured, consistent and thorough curriculum-based prevention-focussed teaching of personal safety and internet safety within our school environments. Sexuality education is viewed as a way to mitigate the effects of inadequate information and counteract certain tendencies that may be learned from pornography. As such, we advocate for the inclusion of frank discussions about pornography in school-based respectful relationships and sex education programs to address its impact on sexuality and sexual behaviour.
- Bravehearts recommends that as part of a holistic approach to cyber-safety, prevention messages and online assistance must be made available to those who have concerns about their own thoughts or actions. It is our position that this may provide additional assistance in combating the negative and potentially desensitising impacts of exposure to online pornography and/or child exploitation material. There is a currently an unmet need for services

for boys and men concerned about their excessive and/or deviant pornography consumption, and the potential overlap with sexual feelings or behaviour towards children. The government should consider the funding and establishment of such a service as well as workforce development to ensure that mental health practitioners are equipped to work with such clients.

- Age verification measures to inhibit child access to pornography.
- Australian authorities should enforce Australian laws against the distribution of child sexual abuse material by adult pornography sites, including where actors are adults but implied to be children, where pornography sites have failed to verify the age of young-looking actors, and where pornography includes incest and child abuse- related themes. This includes the proactive detection and removal of illegal pornographic content including sadistic and violent material, and bestiality content, to reduce sexual offending against children. With exceptions for illegal content such as child sexual abuse material, explicit content is largely unregulated and widely available online. Many popular social media sites do not distinguish between explicit and non-explicit content. Regulation of the availability of online pornography may reduce its public health impacts including the child protection risks posed by excessive pornography exposure.
- More research into the prevalence of Australian children making and selling sexual content to adults is necessary to ascertain the full scope of this problem, and identify prevention, disruption and education opportunities.
- There is a need for coordinated action between law enforcement, the financial sector, the technology sector and regulatory bodies, such as the eSafety Commissioner, to ensure a comprehensive response to children selling sexual content online.

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