
STATEMENT OF RESEARCH RELATING TO PORNOGRAPHY HARMS TO CHILDREN

The harms of pornography to children and young people are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. Messages that children and young people learn from pornography, shape themselves and the culture we live in. [Worldwide](#), pornography is now being framed as a [Public Health Crisis](#) by many governments, health, violence prevention and advocacy organisations. Given there is significant evidence indicating that pornography is linked to negative mental health outcomes for young people, sexist attitudes, sexual aggression and violence, child-on-child sexual abuse, and high risk sexual behaviours, this issue has not received adequate public attention.

This statement of research is endorsed by child youth advocates, anti-violence workers and key academics, including Dr Gail Dines, Founder of [Culture Reframed](#), Dr Michael Flood, Dr Caroline Norma, Dr Heather Brunskell-Evans, Dr Meagan Tyler and others.

Areas of pornography's impact on children and young people include:

- Poor mental health
- Sexism and objectification
- Sexual aggression and violence
- Child-on-child sexual abuse
- Shaping sexual behaviours

Rates of exposure

Trends in children and young people accessing online pornography show an increase.

- In 2011, it was reported that over two in five (44%) Australian 9-16 year olds had seen sexual images in the past 12 months. This is much greater than the 25-country average of 23%. ([Green et al. 2011](#))
- Between 2008 and 2011, exposure to porn among boys under the age of 13 jumped from 14% to 49%. Boys' daily use more than doubled. ([Sun et al. 2016](#))
- In 2016, a study of 1565 18-19-year-old Italian students ([Pizzol et al. 2015](#)), 4 out of 5 stated they consumed pornography. Almost 22 per cent (21.9%) reported that it became habitual, 10% stated that it reduced their sexual interest towards potential real-life partners, and 9.1% reported a kind of addiction.
- In 2017, a Swedish study reported that nearly all respondents (98%) had watched pornography, although to different extents. Eleven per cent were found to be frequent users (watched pornography one or more times per day), 69 per cent average users (at least once a month up to several times a week, but less than once per day), and 20 per cent infrequent users (less than once a month). ([Donevan and Mattebo 2017](#))
- In 2006, 35 per cent of Dutch children aged 8 to 12 had had a negative Internet experience in the home, involving an encounter with pornography. ([Soeters and van Schaik 2006](#))
- Well over two-thirds of 15-17-year-old adolescents have seen porn websites when they did not intend to access them, with 45% being 'very' or 'somewhat' upset by it. ([Kaiser Family Foundation 2001](#))

For the purposes of the following research, adolescents are defined as primarily between the ages of 13-18. The rise in rates of child-on-child sexual abuse indicates younger children are inadvertently exposed to pornography.

Poor mental health

In a research review by [Owens et al.](#) (2012), the authors stated that:

The structural deficits in brain maturation of adolescents, and theories such as the picture-superiority effect, offer insights into the ways adolescents may be disproportionately vulnerable to negative consequences when exposed to sexually explicit material.

Whilst the literature varies in its ability to show if pornography directly causes mental health issues or instead, conditions are correlational (existed prior to viewing), or a combination of both, studies indicate that porn users experience:

- higher incidence of depressive symptoms
- lower degrees of social integration
- decreased emotional bonding with caregivers
- increases in conduct problems
- higher levels of delinquent behaviour

Research suggests links between mental health issues and problematic porn use, such as low self-esteem and depressive traits ([Doornwaard et al. 2016](#)), and impacts to academic performance ([Beyens et al. 2014](#)). Almost 22 per cent (21.9%) of young people report habitual use ([Pizzol et al. 2015](#)), 9 – 11% report frequent use or a kind of addiction, and a further 10% indicate that pornography reduces sexual interest towards potential real-life partners ([Donevan and Mattebo 2017](#)). The Swedish authors stated, *it is striking that one-third of frequent users admitted they watch pornography more than they want to. Since adolescents' brains are still in their development phase, young people may be especially vulnerable to problematic pornography use.* The adolescent brain is highly impressionable and vulnerable to forming addictions ([Chein et al. 2011](#); [Crews et al. 2007](#)).

Studies also indicate that pornography impacts self-image; for girls, this relates to feelings of physical inferiority, and for boys, fear of not measuring up, with both virility and performance. ([Owens et al. 2012](#), [Sun et al. 2016](#)).

In addition, adult cohort studies have identified that pornography use and associated sexual arousal patterns have been found to interfere with decision making ([Laier et al. 2014](#)); is linked to diminishing working-memory ([Laier et al. 2013](#)); and decreased ability to delay gratification ([Negash et al. 2016](#)). Adult users of pornographic material also report greater depressive symptoms, poorer quality of life, more mental- and physical-health diminished days, and lower health status than compared to nonusers. ([Weaver et al. 2011](#))

Sexism and objectification

The relationship between pornography, sexual coercion, abuse and sexting was explored in a large European survey of 4,564 young people aged 14-17 ([Stanley et al. 2016](#)). The authors of this study argued that pornography is both underpinned by and perpetuates gender inequality, and that boys who regularly watched online pornography were significantly more likely to hold negative gender attitudes.

Other studies show that sexual arousal to online pornography by adolescents leads to sexist attitudes and notions that women are sex objects ([Peter and Valkenburg 2007](#), [Hald et al. 2013](#)) These findings are consistent with a review of 20 years of research that found pornography use was associated with more permissive sexual attitudes and tended to be linked with stronger gender-stereotypical sexual beliefs. ([Peter and Valkenburg, 2016](#))

Sexual aggression and violence

Consistently, findings link the viewing of violent pornography to increased tendencies for sexually aggressive behaviour ([Owens et al. 2012](#), [Sun et al. 2016](#)).

- there is a clear association between regular viewing of online pornography and perpetration of sexual coercion and abuse by boys. ([Stanley et al. 2016](#))
- both regularly watching pornography and sending or receiving sexual images or messages were associated with increased probability of being a perpetrator of sexual coercion. ([Stanley et al. 2016](#))

In a 2017 mixed-gender Swedish study of 946 students ([Donevan and Mattebo 2017](#)), frequent users watched hard core and violent pornography to a higher extent, were more likely to have engaged in a wider range of sexual activities, fantasised about trying sexual activities seen in hard core pornography, and showed signs of sexual preoccupation and problematic pornography use.

Rather than relying on a single research paper to draw conclusions, a meta-analysis synthesises data from a range of studies and looks for common and consistent findings. A meta-analysis is the “gold star” of research papers. [Wright et al. \(2016\)](#), carried out a Meta-Analysis of Pornography Consumption and Actual Acts of Sexual Aggression in General Population Studies. Their findings stated that:

“the accumulated data leave little doubt that, on the average, individuals who consume pornography more frequently are more likely to hold attitudes conducive to sexual aggression and engage in actual acts of sexual aggression than individuals who do not consume pornography or who consume pornography less frequently.”

Child-on-child sexual abuse

Freely available online pornography is shaping the sexual conditioning of increasing numbers of young people. Australian research findings ([Etheredge, 2015, citing Lemon, 2014](#)), highlight that 75% of 7-11-year-old boys and 67% of 7-11-year-old girls in treatment for Problem Sexualised Behaviours (PSBs) reported early sexualisation through online pornography.

Between 2013 and 2016, police figures in the UK show a rise of child-on-child sexual offences by almost 80% ([Barnado's, 2016](#)). Australian practitioner, [Russell Pratt](#) says:

One thing seems clear: pornography provides a “how to” manual, showing every possible angle of what goes where and who can do what to whom, as well as providing sexual stimulation and shaping patterns of sexual arousal. When coupled with other risk factors present in the young person's life, pairing the “how to” with the sexual stimulation provided by pornography both equips and primes youth to undertake more advanced sexual practices earlier than they otherwise might or earlier than those who have not accessed pornography, simply because they have just that – a template for what to do, based on the graphic nature of pornography.

Shaping sexual behaviours

Exposure to sexually explicit Internet material directly predicts adolescents' willingness to engage in casual sex ([van Oosten et al. 2016](#)). A review of the research also identified that it is connected to higher levels of permissive sexual attitudes, sexual preoccupation and earlier sexual experimentation ([Owens et al. 2012](#)), including younger ages for first oral sex and sexual intercourse ([Kraus and Russell, 2008](#)).

The ways in which pornography is influencing young people's sexual experiences is reflected in research by [Marston and Lewis](#) (2014). Their qualitative, longitudinal study of 130 men and women aged 16-18 from diverse social backgrounds in the UK, found a normalisation of painful, risky, coercive heterosexual anal sex. Interviewees frequently cited pornography as the explanation for anal sex, a practice they expected to be painful for young women but pleasurable for young men. Participants described an expectation that young men would persuade or coerce a reluctant female partner.

Amongst college students, research has also demonstrated that higher frequency porn viewing correlates with an increased number of sexual partners and higher incidence of hooking up ([Braithwaite et al. 2015](#)).

In addition to these studies, another meta-analysis asked the question: *Is sexual content in new media linked to sexual risk behaviour in young people?* ([Smith et al. 2016](#)). Exposure to sexually explicit websites was correlated with condomless sexual intercourse; and sexting was correlated with ever having had sexual intercourse, recent sexual activity, alcohol and other drug use before sexual intercourse, and multiple sexual partners. The authors stated:

"Cross-sectional studies show a strong association between self-reported exposure to sexual content in new media and sexual behaviours in young people."

These studies identify significant areas that require action to prevent harms in children and young people's health, mental-health, physical safety, and wellbeing, and as a part of broader societal effects to prevent violence against women.

Additional research links may be found at http://pornharmskids.org.au/journal_articles

ACADEMICS, CHILD YOUTH ADVOCATES, ANTI-VIOLENCE WORKERS AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS ARE WELCOME TO ADD COMMENT TO THIS STATEMENT OF RESEARCH AND PROVIDE ENDORSEMENT AT <http://www.pornharmskids.org.au/statement>

BY ADDING YOUR NAME, YOU ARE AGREEING WITH THIS STATEMENT

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