



Online pornography: Effects on children & young people

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

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Families Framework research domain: **Life stages and transitions**



SUMMARY

There is a lot of discussion about the possible effects of online pornography on children and young people and the messages pornography generates about gender, equality and sexuality. In 2016, the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) was engaged by the Department of Social Services to review what the available research evidence tells us about the issue.¹

KEY MESSAGES

- Pornography exists within a broader sociocultural context in which stereotypes about gender, sexism, sexual objectification and violence-supportive attitudes are also at play.
- Nearly half of children between the ages of 9–16 experience regular exposure to sexual images.
- Young males are more likely than females to deliberately seek out pornography and to do so frequently.
- Pornography use can shape sexual practices and is associated with unsafe sexual health practices such as not using condoms and unsafe anal and vaginal sex.
- Pornography may strengthen attitudes supportive of sexual violence and violence against women.
- The best approach for parents, caregivers and teachers responding to children's exposure to pornography is to encourage open communication, discussion and critical thinking on the part of children, while educating themselves about the internet and social media.
- Parents and caregivers are less likely to be intimidated by online risks if they are informed and take an active role in their children's digital lives.

¹ The content in this Research Snapshot has been taken from Quadara, A., El-Murr, A., & Latham, J. (2017). *The effects of pornography on children and young people: An evidence scan*. Melbourne, Australian Institute of Family Studies. Available at <aifs.gov.au/publications/effects-pornography-children-and-young-people>.



Social contexts of pornography

Any discussion of pornography and its effects on children and young people needs to acknowledge that pornography and its consumption is embedded within a broader sociocultural context. This includes:

- Online technologies, platforms and practices in general, and more specifically how children and young people interact with the online environment. Being online and connected is a fundamental part of children and young people's everyday lives and relationships
- The range of online risks children and young people experience, for example the dynamics and prevalence of cyberbullying, sexting, exploitative relationships and connections online
- Social scripts and discourses about men, women and sex, such as "once aroused, men cannot control themselves", "women say no when they mean yes", "women often play hard to get", "it's men's role to pursue women"
- The underlying factors that enable sexual violence and violence against women, such as rigid stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, gendered inequality regarding decision-making and resources in private and public life, male peer relationships that condone aggression, and minimising, excusing and rationalising violence against women

Exposure to pornography

In Australia, just under half (44%) of children aged 9–16 surveyed had encountered sexual images in the last month. Of these, 16% had seen images of someone having sex and 17% of someone's genitals.

Younger children (those aged 9–12) are particularly likely to be distressed or upset by pornography.

Parents tend to overestimate exposure to pornography for younger children and underestimate the extent of exposure for older children.

The extent and frequency of viewing pornography differs by gender, with males more likely to deliberately seek out pornography and to do so frequently.

Attitudes and responses to exposure also vary by gender, with females having more negative views and responses such as shock or distress compared to males, particularly in older teens, who are more likely to experience pornography as amusing, arousing or exciting.

The effects of exposure

In the absence of other information, pornography can be the main source of a young person's sex education.

The use of pornography by adolescents is associated with stronger permissive sexual attitudes (e.g., premarital sex, casual sex). There is some evidence that exposure to pornography can increase the likelihood of earlier first-time sexual experience, particularly for those adolescents who consume pornography more frequently.

Pornography can influence a young person's expectations about sex, for example what young men expect their partners to do and vice versa. It can shape sexual practices, with studies finding that young people may try performing common sexual acts seen in dominant hetero pornography such as:

- anal intercourse;
- facial ejaculation;
- sex with multiple partners; and
- deep fellatio.

Pornography is also associated with unsafe sexual health practices such as not using condoms and unsafe anal and vaginal sex.

Gaps between expectations and reality can produce "sexual uncertainty" about sexual beliefs and values and may also be related to sexual dissatisfaction, anxiety and fear. The content of pornography may reinforce double standards of an active male sexuality and passive female receptacle.

Both male and female consumers of pornography had increased levels of self-objectification and body surveillance.

Adolescent pornography use is associated with stronger beliefs in gender stereotypes, particularly for males. Male adolescents who view pornography frequently are more likely to view women as sex objects and to hold sexist attitudes such as women "leading men on".

Pornography may strengthen attitudes supportive of sexual violence and violence against women. There is evidence of an association between consuming pornography and perpetrating sexual harassment for boys.

Adolescents who consumed violent pornography were six times more likely to be sexually aggressive compared to those who viewed non-violent pornography or no pornography.

Sexual preoccupation, compulsive consumption and "addiction" can be associated with the frequency of viewing pornography and also the purposes of using

pornography (e.g., as a way of relieving negative states). While some of the effects of viewing pornography, such as more permissive attitudes and beliefs about sex, knowledge about sexual practice and sexual practices themselves may not be *inherently* problematic, the most dominant, popular and accessible pornography contains messages and behaviours about sex, gender, power and pleasure that are *deeply* problematic. In particular, the physical aggression (slapping, choking, gagging, hair pulling) and verbal aggression such as name calling, that is predominantly done by men to their female partners.

Responding to online pornography exposure and other risks

Exposure to explicit online content may cause children and young people to develop different “sexual literacies” to previous generations. Australian Government and non-government services have taken steps to reduce children and young people’s exposure to online risks—including pornography—and enact harm minimisation strategies. Three key types of intervention have been identified:

- legal and regulatory avenues to existing legislation regarding online pornography and online behaviour such as sexting and the sharing of explicit images;
- education for children and young people (e.g., critical media and digital literacy, respectful relationships, sexuality and sexual health); and
- education and resources for teachers and parents about how they can support safe, respectful relationships for children and young people both online and IRL (in real life).

The following advice is useful for parents, caregivers and teachers.

Open communication

It is important for parents and caregivers to be able to initiate open conversations about their child’s online experiences. Schools too can play an important role in assisting children and young people to make sense of their exposure to online pornography in healthy ways.

Critical thinking

Young people should be encouraged to question pornography, asking: “Seeing porn might seem normal. But what does porn say? Who makes it and why? And what does it all mean for you?” (Reality & Risk Project, 2016).

Young people are not just passive consumers of pornography. Critical thinking helps viewers to reflect on the messages contained in online pornography. It fosters discussion while respecting the agency of the young people involved.

Arming children and young people with tools to engage critically with media is important to their understanding of the differences between online pornography and their offline sexual relationships.

Digital literacy

Parents and caregivers are encouraged to educate themselves about the internet and social media, in order to be aware of the current online dangers and opportunities facing their children. Parents and caregivers are less likely to be intimidated by online risks if they are informed and take an active role in their children’s digital lives.

“You can teach your child strategies about how to deal with offensive material, but be vigilant, especially if your child is prone to taking risks or is emotionally or psychologically vulnerable”.

The Office of the e-Safety Commissioner



01 Encourage your child to talk if they have seen something online that has upset them.

02 Let them know that if they report viewing inappropriate content they won’t be punished or have their access to the internet taken away.

03 Educate them so that if they are sent something inappropriate online they know not to respond.

Mediation

Parental controls are essential to harm-minimisation strategies. The Office of the e-Safety Commissioner (2016) cautions parents and caregivers: “You can teach your child strategies about how to deal with offensive material, but be vigilant, especially if your child is prone to taking risks or is emotionally or psychologically vulnerable”.

Support

Support for children and young people who have been exposed to online pornography is extremely important to their ability to process their experience in healthy ways. In *What can I do if my child sees content that's offensive?*, the Office of the Children's e-Safety Commissioner (2016) advises:

- Encourage your child to talk if they have seen something online that has upset them.
- Let them know that if they report viewing inappropriate content they won't be punished or have their access to the internet taken away.
- Educate them so that if they are sent something inappropriate online they know not to respond.



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Further reading

For a complete list of available research see “Appendix 1: Evidence library” in Armstrong, A. Quadara, A., El-Murr, A., & Latham, J. (2017). *The effects of pornography on children and young people: An evidence scan*. Melbourne, Australian Institute of Family Studies

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