

Harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the Internet

That the following matter be referred to the Environment and Communications References Committee for inquiry and report by the first sitting day in December 2016:

Harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the Internet, with particular reference to:

- trends of online consumption of pornography by children and their impact on the development of healthy and respectful relationships;
- current methods taken towards harm minimisation in other jurisdictions, and the effectiveness of those methods;
- the identification of any measures with the potential for implementation in Australia; and
- any other related matters

Who we are

The South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault (SECASA) provides sexual assault and family violence services in Victoria within the Mornington Peninsula, Frankston, Bayside, Port Phillip, Stonnington, Glen Eira and Kingston local government areas. We also work in the Greater Dandenong, Casey and Cardinia growth corridor.

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Introduction

“Before the invention of the Internet, children and young people curious about sexual terms, phrases or the act itself were likely to talk to each other, or older siblings about it; these days they ‘Google it’. Even phrases which seem, on the face of it, innocent can lead children towards websites hosting adult content. Research also shows that young people are prone to seeking out sexual material, to discuss with friends or for their own sexual gratification.” (The Lucy Faithfull Foundation)

“Exposure to pornography is routine among children and young people, with a range of notable and often troubling effects. Particularly among younger children, exposure to pornography may be disturbing or upsetting. Exposure to pornography helps to sustain young people’s adherence to sexist and unhealthy notions of sex and relationships. And, especially among boys and young men who are frequent consumers of pornography, including of more violent materials, consumption intensifies attitudes supportive of sexual coercion and increases their likelihood of perpetrating assault. While children and young people are sexual beings and deserve age-appropriate materials on sex and sexuality, pornography is a poor, and indeed dangerous, sex educator.” (Flood, 2009b)

Viewing too much pornography can change the way young people look at the world and at relationships. Young people think it's OK because adults look at it. But young people have little understanding of what's normal in a relationship for instance that women should always be OK with rough sex or that people are always in the mood for sex, or that people don't want to talk and get to know each other before they have sex.

Porn does not show what to do if someone says no apart from force them to having sex. Porn does not teach about relationships, its focus is only on sex, not making love. Porn gives a distorted view of the way people look. Much of the porn seen online today is Gonzo or what's known as 'industrial sex' which is physically hard on bodies, particularly young bodies.

Prevalence

A study by Bryant indicated that by the age of 15 years, 92% of boys had looked at or read Playboy, with average age of first exposure reported to be 11 years. Similarly, in regard to X-rated films, 92% of 13 to 15 years-olds reported that they had seen such a film. (Bryant, 1989)

Effects on Young People

Effects of accidental viewing of pornography

Accidental viewing of pornography, particularly by younger children, can be disturbing and upsetting.

"I can't get this awful video out of my mind?"

I'm about to get a pig and I was watching YouTube videos about how to care for them and I clicked on one that sounded OK and all of a sudden there were all these horrible images. It was so fast I didn't have time to look away or anything... and now I feel like crying and it's making me think about not getting a pig because of it. I don't know what to do :-(" (13 year old girl) (From SECASA online outreach program)

Effects on brain chemistry

There is evidence that compulsive viewing of pornography, particularly in adolescents, changes the brain chemistry.

"Although the key elements of hypofrontal syndromes—impulsivity, compulsivity, emotional lability, impaired judgment—are well described, much of the process is still unknown... Addressing hypofrontality, Fowler et al. noted, "studies of addicts show reduced cellular activity in the orbitofrontal cortex, a brain area...[relied upon]...to make strategic, rather than impulsive, decisions. Patients with traumatic injuries to this area of the brain display problems—aggressiveness, poor judgment of future consequences, inability to inhibit inappropriate responses that are similar to those observed in substance abusers."

"A recent study supports growing evidence that compulsive sexuality can indeed be addictive. In 2007, a VBM study out of Germany... concludes for the first time that a sexual compulsion can cause physical, anatomic change in the brain, the hallmark of brain addiction. A preliminary study showed frontal dysfunction specifically in patients unable to control their sexual behavior. This study used diffusion MRI to evaluate function of nerve transmission through white matter. It demonstrated abnormality in the superior frontal region, an area associated with compulsivity." (Hilton & Watts, 2011)

Effects on males view of sexuality and relationships

We believe that pornography can have a profound effect on young male's view of sexuality and relationship norms.

"...numerous studies on pornography have been conducted among young adults aged 18 to 25, with many focused on the potential link between pornography and sexual violence. Across these studies, there is consistent and reliable evidence that exposure to pornography is related to male sexual aggression against women. This association is strongest for violent pornography and still reliable for nonviolent pornography, particularly when used frequently." (Flood, 2009)

"The research suggests that individuals who are high in risk characteristics, such as hostility toward women, are more likely to choose to be exposed to sexually violent pornography and to be aroused sexually by it. Not only are they more likely to be exposed to such media but when they are exposed, they are likely to be changed by such exposure, such as changes in attitudes about the acceptance of violence against women." (Malamuth & Huppert, 2005)

"Regular consumption of pornography, and particularly violent pornography, is a risk factor for boys' and young men's perpetration of sexual assault. More generally, pornography may help to teach young people sexist and unhealthy notions of sex and relationships." (Flood, 2009)

"Five studies among Swedish young people find that young men who are regular consumers of pornography are more likely to have had anal intercourse with a girl, and to have tried to perform acts they have seen in pornography, and that girls who have seen pornography also are more likely to have anal intercourse (Haggstrom-Nordin et al., 2005; Johansson and Hammarén, 2007; Rogala and Tyden, 2003; Tyden et al., 2001; Tyden and Rogala, 2004)." (Flood, 2009b)

A mother rang SECASA because her 12 year old son had told her that his friends had shown him pornography on their phones. He was totally unprepared for what he saw but felt compelled to participate in this group activity. He came home and hid. After a lot of coaxing, he told his mother what had happened. She asked what she could do for him to stop the images he said he 'couldn't get out of his head'.

Effects on females view of sexuality and relationships

"It is well documented that sexual media, particularly sexualised representations of girls and women, can encourage girls and young women to see themselves primarily in sexual terms, to equate their worth and appeal with narrow standards of physical attractiveness, and to see themselves as sexual objects—to focus on others' sexual interest in and judgment of them rather than their own desires and interests" (Flood, 2009b)

Girls have reported to SECASA cyber outreach that they feel that their boyfriends are cheating on them when they watch porn. They feel inadequate and do not understand why he wants to look at porn instead of be with a real girl. It gives young people an introduction to adult sexual relationships when they might not be emotionally prepared for it. They find this confusing and feel pressured to acquiesce so 'he will like me'.

"I am 13 and I did "sexting" online..?"

Well since I was about 11....I did sexting..and can't quit! I DONT give out nude pictures !!!!! But I like say "sex" words and like stuff that happens in sex.... it gets my vagina going and my head happy... What is wrong with me?!?!?!?! I just "sext" online whenever I can ...and when Im alone..what is my vagina doing during this time?" (13 year old girl) (SECASA online outreach program)

Problem sexual behaviour and sexually abusive behaviour

SECASA's AWARE program provides assessment and treatment of sexually abusive behaviour (SAB) and problem sexual behaviour (PSB) in children and young people, whilst providing support to their parents and carers in the southern region of Melbourne, Victoria.

We work with a number of age groups:

- Children under 10 years (PSB);
- Children and young people 10-14 years (SAB or PSB)
- Children and young people 10--14 years (SAB), under the provisions of the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 for Therapeutic Treatment Order (TTO);
- Young people 15--17 years (SAB).

The experience of SECASA's AWARE program is that the vast majority of young men and children who attend AWARE have been exposed to pornography at a young age. This exposure, coupled with trauma and/or other problems of living and connecting, lead the individual to engage in watching pornography and engaging in self-soothing behaviours such as masturbation. Often they do not have much else in their life so porn becomes the thing that takes over. It is hard for a young man to masturbate if he is playing basketball or a sport with friends of family, but most of the clients we see have nothing else in their life.

When they first attend the AWARE program, access to the internet and porn is a key feature to control and have in a safety plan. This is often a starting point and a factor in treatment that is covered extensively. We have clients that watch the Japanese animation Hentai, or other child based animation pornography such as 'My little pony'. Children and youth often act out what they see on vulnerable others. Unfortunate, the material they are looking at can escalate to more violent and bizarre porn scripts. The range of things that they can look at is endless.

In a submission to the Victorian the Royal Commission into Family Violence, Etheredge & Lemon stated that;

- Intra-family (within family) sexual violence or sibling on sibling sexual violence is the most common assault pattern of children being treated for Problem Sexual Behaviours (PSB) identified in 2014 Australian research.
- Australian research reveals that online pornography is regularly accessed by children treated for PSB each year in Victoria
- Australian research findings highlight that 75% of 7-11 year old boys and 67% of 7-11 year old girls in treatment for PSB reported early sexualisation through online pornography.
- Freely available online pornography is shaping the sexual conditioning of increasing numbers of young people.

(Etheredge & Lemon, 2015)

"Over the past decade, we have seen a growing trend of younger children engaging in problem sexual and sexually abusive behaviours generally aimed at younger children – in other words, children sexually assaulting children. As well as a rise in the rate of such sexual abuse and the children committing the behaviours being younger, anecdotal evidence from agencies engaged with these youth suggests that the abusive behaviours also include more episodes of anal and oral penetration – both the staple fodder of pornography. Pornography is providing too many 10-year-olds with the mechanical knowledge to anally, orally and/or vaginally penetrate younger siblings, cousins and acquaintances." (Australian Psychological Society 2015)

Impact on respectful relationships

In a respectful relationship, sexual or not, each party has the right to say no to anything they don't feel comfortable doing. People who are told no must learn to accept rejection as a part of life and not over react if they do not get their own way.

The key message is 'if you really care about someone you will not want them to do something they don't want to do just to please you, particularly something that puts them at risk'.

"Because of the laws around the need for porn to be consensual, films containing extreme violence have perfunctory scenes tacked on the beginning. A girl confesses to having a rape fantasy, for example, or expresses a desire to be dominated. What follows, however, inevitably goes way beyond the realms of erotic fantasy..."

I witnessed just under an hour of total subjugation of a woman who, at the end of it, was barely conscious and had to have her head held up by her hair by one of the men for the parting shot. This video alone had clocked up half a million viewers, 86 per cent of whom had clicked the 'like' button." (dailymail.co.uk, 2016)

When young people complain about not wanting to watch pornography, they are often told they are prudes or made fun of.

What can we do

There is a lot of research currently that explores the neurobiology process connected with viewing pornography. It is a key feature in the assessment and treatment process for SECASA's AWARE program. We ask what the client looks at, how often and how many times they masturbate to these images.

Treatment works on educating them that pornography is an industry, about the thought viruses watching it is creating and how these work to corrupt their minds. We work towards getting them to create scripts that are healthy, satisfying and achievable.

It skews the thinking in most of the clients that we see. It is a starting point for the construction of Safety Plans and positive healthy reconditioning.

"Rather than trying to ban pornography, we should be seeking to minimise children's exposure to pornography, both accidental and deliberate; minimise the harmful effects of exposure among children when it does occur; and minimise exposure to violent pornography among children and adults alike. The second report by the Australia Institute proposed a strategy with three components: schools-based education, a national system of Internet filtering, and a more responsible online adult industry (Flood & Hamilton 2003)."

SECASA believes that a range of strategies based on education which promotes healthy, respectful relationships and empowers young people with the tools to question the messages delivered by the pornography industry is the most effective way to ameliorate the effects of pornography on young people.

Education should strive;

- To enable young people to critically analyse messages from pornography
- To help young people understand that pornography does not reflect reality
- To facilitate discussion about definitions of pornography
- To enable young people to develop the skills to resist pressure to engage in unwanted sexual activities
- To promote a positive view of sex and relationships which includes mutuality, pleasure, and the importance of negotiating and using contraception and having safer sex (Brook et al, 2009)

“...what is being done to ‘porn-proof’ our kids? There is particular concern for young people who have been subjected to trauma and sub-optimal home and school experiences, who often have already been exposed to large amounts of pornography and not a lot of sound sex education.”
Australian Psychological Society (2015).

Quality sex education

Firstly, we must engage these youth in quality relationally-based sex education. We know that good, practical sex education is a protective factor against sexual exploitation and being a victim of sexual abuse. We also know that without it youth relationships, both sexual and non-sexual, are heavily influenced by the pornography script. Young people need more than the usual sex education that provides information on ‘mechanics’, reproduction and sexually transmitted diseases. It is up to adults to give them this with no laughs, no shame and no lies. We must work on a school-based strategy in regards to the provision of such sex education.

Training for those working with vulnerable youth

Secondly, we should continue to work individually with young people to ensure they have access to quality information about sex, particularly young people outside of mainstream systems such as school and family-based care situations. Some youth, due to background factors, are too traumatised to do this work in groups. It is vital that quality ongoing training in this area is provided to social workers, psychologists, child protection practitioners, youth justice and disability practitioners, residential care staff, therapeutic staff and others working with vulnerable youth, specifically around the issues of sexual exploitation, sexual abuse, client-to-client assault and managing risk situations. This training has been occurring now for a number of years and has been provided to thousands of staff across the sector by specialist practitioners, social workers and psychologists within the child protection system.

Working with parents

Finally, parents can be encouraged to assist young people to ‘decode’ pornography through attention to a couple of vital tasks. Parents need to model respectful, loving relationships – with partners, friends and the children themselves. Nothing will assist young people more than a healthy familial relationship that allows them to measure what they see in ‘porn world’ up against what they see in the real world they are immersed in. If young people are exposed to gender inequality, family violence, taboos about discussing sexual and relationship matters, or a harsh and unyielding parenting regime, then the relationships portrayed in pornography may not look that comic, sad or alien to them. The other duty for parents is to get over the embarrassment and talk with children about sex and relationships. Nature abhors a vacuum, and if parents create one then pornography is just waiting to fill it. (Australian Psychological Society 2015)

The Devil makes work for idle hands

Keeping young people with full and active social lives in the real world with good family and social connections will help give them develop a more balanced view of relationships and reduce the opportunities for unsupervised access to illicit material.

What can industry do?

More responsibility needs to be taken by the online pornography industry to police access to their websites. Having them contribute to the financial costs associated with the inappropriate viewing of pornography should be explored by government.

It would helpful for there to be ‘childsafe’ phones or devices with limited or easy to limit capabilities hardwired into the BIOS or system itself so that it cannot be disabled.

Kudos to Google for the development of the childsafe search engine 'Kiddle', launched this year.

Other related matters

Increased online vulnerability

It is our opinion that the following behaviours can make children more vulnerable online.

- Engaging in unhealthy risk taking behaviours
- Not recognising danger
- Being afraid/unable to tell
- Trusted adults being unprepared or over reacting to a disclosure
- Having few alternative social activities

There are already many society overlays that encourage an air of secrecy when talking about sex and bodies, particularly between adults and children. If the child sees disturbing images, particularly if they have been accessing a site illegally, they are less likely to debrief or voice their concerns to a trusted adult.

Assisting children in gaining access to prohibited material, particularly sexualised material, is common when grooming a child for sexual exploitation. The people who do this know that young people are curious about bodies and sex. By using pornography as a part of the grooming process they are more able to keep a victim silent because of the fear of repercussions both from authorities and from their parents.

(Names changed) *"My name is Jayden, I'm 15. Me and my friend Drew do rap songs. This guy on chat said he could get us a record deal.*

We checked out his website and it all looked legit so we sent him our info and one of our songs. He seemed really cool and we chatted every day. He was really easy to talk to about anything, including stuff we could never talk to our parents about.

We became really good friends and he was just always there to talk to if we ever had any problems or just wanted to hang out.

He even showed us how to get free porn but made us swear not to tell anyone 'cause, if our parents knew they'd take our computers and phones away.

Well, long story short I just found out Drew sent him some pics of himself that he probably shouldn't have. Now he wants Drew to go on web cam and do stuff he doesn't want to do.

Drew made me swear not to tell because if we tell our parents they'll kill us and will never let us on the computer again.

If we tell the police the guy said we'd both go to jail because of the porn and those pics Drew sent. Because of the stuff we sent him with our songs, this guy says he knows where we live and will come around and get us or hurt our families if Drew doesn't go on cam soon.

Please help, we don't know what to do. Will we go to jail if we tell?" (SECASA online outreach program)

Legal issues – Child pornography

Much of the pornography that is readily available on the internet may be breaching Australian law.

CRIMINAL CODE ACT 1995 - 473.1 Definitions

"child abuse material " means:

- (a) material that depicts a person, or a representation of a person, who:
 - (i) is, or appears to be, under 18 years of age; and

(ii) is, or appears to be, a victim of torture, cruelty or physical abuse;

and does this in a way that reasonable persons would regard as being, in all the circumstances, offensive; or

(b) material that describes a person who:

(i) is, **or is implied to be, under 18 years of age**; and

(ii) is, or is implied to be, a victim of torture, cruelty or physical abuse;

and does this in a way that reasonable persons would regard as being, in all the circumstances, offensive.

"child pornography material " means:

(a) material that depicts a person, or a representation of a person, who is, **or appears to be, under 18 years of age** and who:

(i) is engaged in, or appears to be engaged in, a sexual pose or sexual activity (whether or not in the presence of other persons); or

(ii) is in the presence of a person who is engaged in, or appears to be engaged in, a sexual pose or sexual activity;

and does this in a way that reasonable persons would regard as being, in all the circumstances, offensive; or

(b) material the dominant characteristic of which is the depiction, for a sexual purpose, of:

(i) a sexual organ or the anal region of a person who is, **or appears to be, under 18 years of age**; or

(ii) a representation of such a sexual organ or anal region; or

(iii) the breasts, or a representation of the breasts, of a female person who is, **or appears to be, under 18 years of age**;

in a way that reasonable persons would regard as being, in all the circumstances, offensive; or

(c) material that describes a person who is, **or is implied to be, under 18 years of age** and who:

(i) is engaged in, or is implied to be engaged in, a sexual pose or sexual activity (whether or not in the presence of other persons); or

(ii) is in the presence of a person who is engaged in, or is implied to be engaged in, a sexual pose or sexual activity;

and does this in a way that reasonable persons would regard as being, in all the circumstances, offensive; or

(d) material that describes:

(i) a sexual organ or the anal region of a person who is, **or is implied to be, under 18 years of age**; or

(ii) the breasts of a female person who is, **or is implied to be, under 18 years of age**;

and does this in a way that reasonable persons would regard as being, in all the circumstances, offensive.

474.19 Using a carriage service for child pornography material

(1) A person is guilty of an offence if:

(a) the person:

(i) accesses material; or

(ii) causes material to be transmitted to himself or herself; or

(iii) transmits, makes available, publishes, distributes, advertises or promotes material; or

- (iv) solicits material; and
- (aa) the person does so using a carriage service; and**
- (b) the material is child pornography material.**

There is a large amount of pornographic material easily available on sites such as _____ and _____ in which the people appear to be under 18 years. In fact the use of Asian models and the practices of shaving body hair may be specifically designed to make the people look prepubescent.

Legal issues – viewing pornography

The Office of Film and Literature Classification specifically makes it illegal for children to be viewing pornography.

Children and young people under 18 years cannot purchase or view R- and X-rated films and videos and publications that are 'Category 1 restricted' or 'Category 2 restricted', and neither children nor adults can view 'Refused Classification' materials.

This has had the unintended effect of hindering the creation of 'anti-porn' initiatives. SECASA has been consulted by educators about what initiatives young people could create to help other young people see pornography in a different light. We have had to advise them that "Encouraging a child to view pornographic magazines, websites, videos is also sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse is a crime."

Our schools program has suggested stringent guidelines be created for those overseeing this kind of project. They must ensure that students work does not use inappropriate content eg naked or sexualised pictures as this may also be considered child pornography and subject to legal repercussions or be seen to promote sexting. Staff would also need to stress to students that they are not to do their research on real pornography as, according to the legislation, exposing children to pornography is child abuse. As mandated reporters teachers would then need to report this to the authorities.

Parental controls

Parents, carers and workers tasked with caring for children often feel powerless and frustrated that they cannot stop children accessing inappropriate material. Net filters work on specific machines, Telstra controls will work on specific phones but as soon as children walk out the door, they have access to free unfiltered wifi and whatever material they choose to look at or download and share with their friends.

"No amount of filtering is going to stop someone from accessing information they really want to..."
Parent (SECASA online outreach program)

"I asked a friend what I could do to stop my child accessing porn. He sent me this..."

Turn on parental controls in OS X, or the equivalent in Win 7. This will prevent any accidental access to inappropriate sites. The next step after that is to install a keyword level net filter such as Net Nanny that will block any conceivable way of writing the word "proxy" and use an alternate DNS such as Open DNS to block it there as well. Finally you'd go about blocking it a host level and redirecting any proxy he has used to 127.0.0.1

I have enough trouble coping with Facebook." Parent (SECASA online outreach program)

Conclusion

We think that the real answer to this is that it is up to everyone to participate online. What is it about the internet that seems to make us all take a back seat, expecting 'someone' to fix things for us? The internet belongs to no one and to everyone. It is therefore up to all of us to take an active interest and an active part in making it the best place it can be.

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