

Submission to the Inquiry into age verification for online wagering and online pornography

To the Committee Secretary, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs:

My name is Melissa Stephens, I am the Programs Coordinator for BUZ Nurture Works, an organisation that delivers social and emotional wellbeing programs in schools across Western Australia.

Over the last two years I have been invited to schools to speak to young people about cyber-safety. While schools are concerned about online bullying, it is clear to me that the greater issue is online explicit material and a young person's easy access to pornography. Many children are seeing images they do not want to see, this is coming to their devices via messaging or popping up as ads. Furthermore, children are exposed to images and material that is changing their beliefs around intimacy and relationships. The impact is rolling on into their relational life. We must address ways to control the images that children are exposed to on a regular basis. As a mother of two teenagers I constantly have conversations with them about the material that crosses their path and the need to consider what they expose themselves to. This is not enough; we need filters that block this abhorrent material.

When I recently visited a school, several students spoke openly about the 'bots' that message them via their social media accounts with links to pornography. Their disgust was obvious, yet they admitted they often click the links because they are curious. Others spoke of ads popping up on their computer and their fear that they had clicked 'the wrong thing'. What was clear to me was this; young people are being targeted with online porn, even when they aren't searching for it!

The age verification is a consideration; however, I think we must look to other countries who choose to filter the content available and begin blocking many of these free sites. Research shows pornography is addictive and damaging to the brain. We have seen an increase in young people needing Viagra as exposure to pornography is causing impotence. We have seen an increase in sexual injuries and I often wonder if the increase in violence towards women is also related. We must do more to control the online pornography that is available. As a member of the community who has worked with young people and their families, I am happy to meet with parliamentary members and inform you of the digital behaviours of young people. I have researched, written papers and talked to countless young people about their experiences. I also deliver digital parenting workshops and listen to heart-breaking stories from parents who feel powerless. I am yearning for change!

Please feel free to contact me for further information.

Your sincerely,

Melissa Stephens.