



**Commissioner for Children and Young People**  
Western Australia

Committee Secretary  
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600  
Submitted Online

Dear Secretary

**Submission to Inquiry – Harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the Internet**

Under the *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006 (WA) (the Act)* my statutory functions include advocating for children and young people, and monitoring and reviewing written laws, draft laws, policies, practices and services affecting the wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia. I must give priority to, and have special regard to, the interests and needs of Aboriginal children and young people and those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason.

The Act also states that 'In performing a function under this Act the Commissioner or any other person must regard the best interests of children and young people as the paramount consideration.' The role of the Commissioner is independent and reports directly to the WA Parliament.

In the context of the above I attach my response to the terms of reference of the Inquiry.

Yours sincerely

COLIN PETTIT  
Commissioner for Children and Young People WA

24 February 2016



## **Submission to the Senate Environment and Communications References Committee**

*Inquiry into the harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the internet, with particular reference to:*

- (a) Trends of online consumption of pornography by children and their impact on development of healthy and respectful relationships;*
- (b) Current methods taken towards harm minimisation in other jurisdictions, and the effectiveness of those methods;*
- (c) The identification of any measures with the potential for implementation in Australia; and*
- (d) Any other related matters*

## **Summary**

- Children and young people are exposed to and access pornography via the internet, among other means. Boys are more likely to have accessed pornography, as are older young people.
- Children and young people should be given opportunities to contribute to this inquiry, and their views should be given serious and appropriate consideration.
- Consideration and conclusions should be grounded in the available empirical evidence.
- The research evidence shows correlations between use of pornography and certain behaviours, as outlined above, but does not demonstrate causative links.
- The focus on pornography as a source of harm ignores the wider context of society and sexualisation which frame attitudes towards others, particularly towards girls and women.
- The primary tools to address harm minimisation would be education on healthy and respectful relationships, and resilience building for children and young people.

The literature on children and young people<sup>1</sup> and pornography on the internet is extensive and wide in scope, expressing a considerable range of views on the effects of pornography on children and young people.

## **Pornography and internet pornography**

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<sup>1</sup> The terms of reference refer to 'children', which has been presumed to refer to all people under 18 years of age. The practice of the Commissioner's office is to distinguish 'children' (0 to 12 years old) from 'young people' (13 to 17 years old).



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For the purpose of this submission, 'pornography' is taken to mean sexually explicit visual or written material. This may range from nudity or other similar material (generally termed 'soft-core') through to depictions of explicit actual sex, and in some cases beyond that into the realm of fetishism, violence or other extremes.

This submission does not comment on the production or use of child pornography and other child exploitation material, or the use of pornography to groom children for sexual abuse. While these issues present a serious risk of harm to a child or young person they are beyond the scope of this Inquiry.

The wide scope of material that could be classed as pornography presents somewhat of a problem for analysing research and in making any definitive statements on its effects. In the 2011 Rapid Evidence Assessment carried out for the Children's Commissioner for England, the researchers pointed out that although it was known that children and young people were exposed to and/or accessing pornography, the studies generally were not specific about how they had defined 'pornography'. Some studies used a broad descriptor which may have encompassed non-pornographic websites, such as art or sexual health sites. Others appear to have inferred that if a certain 'type' of pornography was available on the internet, it necessarily followed that children and young people were accessing it.<sup>2</sup> What studies had been done (with young adults or adults) showed a wide range of rates of exposure to violent sexual content,<sup>3</sup> and so determining exactly what children and young people may see on the internet is unclear.

The evidence assessment did conclude that a significant proportion of children and young people are exposed to or access pornography, both online and offline, and exposure was more prevalent than deliberate access. The likelihood of exposure increased with age, and young men and boys were more likely to be exposed to and access pornography than young women and girls.

The particular issues with internet pornography as opposed to other mediums are the ease with which material can be obtained, and the extent and content of pornography available. There are legal restrictions on the availability of DVD and printed pornography, which is restricted to people 18 or older and can only be sold in certain circumstances, and on the content of this material; for example, video

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<sup>2</sup> Horvarth M, Alys L, Massey K, Pina A, Scally M and Adler J 2011, "*Basically...porn is everywhere*": A rapid evidence assessment on the Effect that Access and Exposure to Pornography has on Children and Young People, Children's Commissioner for England, p.28.

<sup>3</sup> Horvarth M, Alys L, Massey K, Pina A, Scally M and Adler J 2011, "*Basically...porn is everywhere*": A rapid evidence assessment on the Effect that Access and Exposure to Pornography has on Children and Young People, Children's Commissioner for England, pp.28-29.



material which shows sexual violence or purposeful demeaning of any person is not permitted.<sup>4</sup>

By contrast, there is a much wider range of sexually explicit material that can be found on the internet, and the type of content is not controlled by any classificatory scheme. Flood and Hamilton list examples of the types of material which could be found on the internet, some of which would be considered 'Refused Classification' under the Australian classification scheme.<sup>5</sup>

Further, this material is generally available with little or no control over who is accessing the material. Only around one-third of sites with sexually explicit content actually notify the user of that content, and in many cases require the user only to tick a box stating they are 18 or older.<sup>6</sup> A few (only around 3 per cent) use age-verification software which requires a credit card number or other 'adult' identification.<sup>7</sup>

In short, there are few barriers to easy access to sexually explicit material on the internet. However, there is no clear indication of the types or content of material being accessed by children and young people.

### **Trends of access to pornography by children and young people**

Children and young people may encounter internet pornography inadvertently, or they may seek it out deliberately. Inadvertent exposure can occur when a child or young person mistypes an address into a search engine and is directed to a pornographic site; if they click on a link in an email purporting to be of another site; or if they are sent an unsolicited image. This is distinct from accessing pornography, where a child or young person deliberately searches for sexually explicit material.

Research suggests that children and young people deliberately seek out pornography for a number of reasons, including curiosity, interest in sexual and reproductive health, interest in information which may help their relationships, and sexual stimulation.<sup>8 9</sup> Some research with young people suggests that some young

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<sup>4</sup> *Guidelines to the Classification of Films 2012, Part 2.*

<sup>5</sup> Flood M and Hamilton C 2003, *Youth and Pornography in Australia: Evidence on the extent of exposure and likely effects*, The Australia Institute, pp.26-29.

<sup>6</sup> Flood M and Hamilton C 2003, *Youth and Pornography in Australia: Evidence on the extent of exposure and likely effects*, The Australia Institute, p.9.

<sup>7</sup> Flood M and Hamilton C 2003, *Youth and Pornography in Australia: Evidence on the extent of exposure and likely effects*, The Australia Institute, p.9.

<sup>8</sup> Flood M 2009, 'Youth, Sex, and the Internet', *Counselling, Psychotherapy, and Health*, vol 5 (1), pp.131-147.

<sup>9</sup> Horvarth M, Alys L, Massey K, Pina A, Scally M and Adler J 2011, "*Basically...porn is everywhere*": A rapid evidence assessment on the Effect that Access and Exposure



males are subject to peer pressure which links masculinity to interest in pornography.<sup>10 11</sup>

One Australian study of 16 and 17 year olds found that 84 per cent of boys and 60 per cent of girls had ever been inadvertently exposed to sex sites, while 38 per cent of boys and 2 per cent of girls had deliberately sought out internet sex sites. The frequency of boys seeking sex sites was much higher than that of girls.<sup>12</sup>

Research published in 2006 indicated that 92.5 per cent of boys and 61.3 per cent of girls surveyed (ages 13 to 16 years) had some exposure to pornography online, although it was not specified how 'pornography' was defined, or whether exposure was inadvertent or deliberate.<sup>13</sup> In addition, this research cited an Australian study in 2001 which reported that 47 per cent of young people surveyed (aged 11 to 17 years) had been exposed to something they found 'offensive or disgusting', such as violence, pornography or nudity.<sup>14</sup>

Another study found in 2010 that overall 44 per cent of respondents had seen 'obviously sexual' images<sup>15</sup> either online or offline. The highest percentage of these was on websites, at 28 per cent for respondents of all ages, with television, film and DVD at 22 per cent of respondents. Around 12 per cent had seen images in magazines or books.<sup>16</sup> Nudity was the most commonly seen sexual image, at 24 per cent of responses; six per cent of responses said they had seen images, videos or movies that show sex in a violent way. This was generally higher than the European

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*to Pornography has on Children and Young People*, Children's Commissioner for England, p.26.

<sup>10</sup> Zero Tolerance 2014, *"He's the stud and she's the slut": Young people's attitudes to pornography, sex and relationships report*, Zero Tolerance, p.18.

<sup>11</sup> Horvarth M, Alys L, Massey K, Pina A, Scally M and Adler J 2011, *"Basically...porn is everywhere": A rapid evidence assessment on the Effect that Access and Exposure to Pornography has on Children and Young People*, Children's Commissioner for England, p.26.

<sup>12</sup> Flood M and Hamilton C 2003, *Youth and Pornography in Australia: Evidence on the extent of exposure and likely effects*, The Australia Institute, p.19.

<sup>13</sup> Fleming M, Greentree, S, Cocotti-Muller D, Elias K and Morrison S 2006, "Safety in Cyberspace: Adolescents' Safety and Exposure Online", *Youth Society* 2006, 38, p.139.

<sup>14</sup> Fleming M, Greentree, S, Cocotti-Muller D, Elias K and Morrison S 2006, "Safety in Cyberspace: Adolescents' Safety and Exposure Online", *Youth Society* 2006, 38, p.145.

<sup>15</sup> Defined as images 'showing people naked or people having sex'.

<sup>16</sup> Green L, Brady D, Olafsson K, Hartley J and Lumby C 2012, *Risks and Safety for Australian children on the internet: Full findings from the AU Kinds Online Survey of 9-16 year olds and their parents*, Arc centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation, pp.28-29.





averages reported in the EU Kids Online survey.<sup>17</sup> This research also found that of the 28 per cent who had seen sexual images online, only around one third (36 per cent), and one tenth of children overall, had been 'bothered' by the experience.<sup>18</sup>

In terms of overall trends, the lack of recent and longitudinal studies make it difficult to provide definitive statements on rates and changes. It can be stated that children and young people in Australia are exposed to and access pornography via the internet, boys are considerably more likely than girls to deliberately seek out pornography, and older young people are more likely to have been exposed to pornography than younger children. It is not clear at what age children and young people are accessing pornography, nor the type of pornography in question.

### **The Effects of Pornography**

Although there has been some research into the effects of pornography on children and young people, there are considerable arguments over the extent to which pornography influences particular sexual behaviours and attitudes.

In 2011 the Children's Commissioner for England published a Rapid Evidence Assessment on the effects of access and exposure to pornography on children and young people, in which the Deputy Children's Commissioner for England stated,

'While this report has shed considerable light on this complex and important issue, there is no doubt that much more work needs to be done before definitive statements can be made about causal links between the use of pornography and perpetrators going on to commit sexual abuse or exploitation.'<sup>19</sup>

That report provides a useful summary of the research available at that time, and the conclusions which had been advanced from that evidence.

Research has shown correlations between access and exposure to pornography and greater sexual permissiveness, acceptance of casual sex, engagement in risky sexual behaviour (such as early engagement in sex or unprotected sex), sexually aggressive

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<sup>17</sup> Green L, Brady D, Olafsson K, Hartley J and Lumby C 2012, *Risks and Safety for Australian children on the internet: Full findings from the AU Kids Online Survey of 9–16 year olds and their parents*, Arc centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation, pp.28-29.

<sup>18</sup> Green L, Brady D, Olafsson K, Hartley J and Lumby C 2012, *Risks and Safety for Australian children on the internet: Full findings from the AU Kids Online Survey of 9–16 year olds and their parents*, Arc centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation, pp.30-31.

<sup>19</sup> Horvarth M, Alys L, Massey K, Pina A, Scally M and Adler J 2011, "*Basically...porn is everywhere*": A rapid evidence assessment on the Effect that Access and Exposure to Pornography has on Children and Young People, Children's Commissioner for England, p.4.



behaviour, and in some cases links to less progressive gender roles.<sup>20</sup> However, this report notes that these links are all correlative, and that there has not been demonstrated evidence of a causal role for pornography in any or all of these areas.

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Some of the behaviours which correlate with pornography use, such as greater permissiveness, a more accepting attitude towards casual sex, or risky sexual behaviour, may increase the risk of harms such as STIs or unplanned pregnancy. However, as has been noted this relationship is only correlative, and not causative, and consequently a causative link between these harms and pornography cannot be established. The 2013 National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health surveys a representative sample of Australian school students in years 10, 11 and 12 (16 to 18 years old), and is conducted every five years. It is of interest to note that between 2008 and 2013, the percentage of Year 12 students who had had sexual intercourse decreased from 56 per cent to 50 per cent, the percentage of Year 10 students who had had sexual intercourse decreased from 27 per cent to 23 per cent, and those who had experienced any form of sexual activity decreased from 78 per cent to 70 per cent.<sup>22 23</sup>

Flood states that studies on older populations (young adults) show that there is evidence of a relationship between pornography and male sexual aggression towards women. This link is strongest with violent pornography, but is still reliable for non-violent pornography. Other studies with adults have shown that high-frequency users of pornography and users of violent pornography are more likely than others to consider rape or sexual harassment of a woman if they knew they could get away with it. There is some evidence of a circular relationship between use of sexually violent media and men who are at high risk of sexual aggression, as men

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<sup>20</sup> Horvarth M, Alys L, Massey K, Pina A, Scally M and Adler J 2011, "*Basically...porn is everywhere*": A rapid evidence assessment on the Effect that Access and Exposure to Pornography has on Children and Young People, Children's Commissioner for England, pp.35-36, 40.

<sup>21</sup> Horvarth M, Alys L, Massey K, Pina A, Scally M and Adler J 2011, "*Basically...porn is everywhere*": A rapid evidence assessment on the Effect that Access and Exposure to Pornography has on Children and Young People, Children's Commissioner for England, pp.35-36, 40, 62.

<sup>22</sup> Smith A, Agius P, Mitchell A, Barrett C and Pitts M 2009, *Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2008: Results of the 4<sup>th</sup> National Survey of Australian Secondary Students, HIV/AIDS and Sexual Health*, Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, p.26.

<sup>23</sup> Mitchell A, Patrick K, Weywood W, Blackman P and Pitts M 2014, *National Survey of Australia Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2013*, Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, p.27.



who are in this category are more likely to seek out sexually violent media, and be aroused and influenced by that media.<sup>24</sup>

This attitude has to some extent been reflected in adolescent and older boys. A Canadian study referred to a correlation between frequent consumption of pornography and agreement with an idea that it was acceptable to force a girl to have sex. An American study of exposure to R and X rated films for boys and girls showed a correlation between greater exposure and stronger acceptance of sexual harassment, and an Italian study showed some associations between pornography use and sexual harassment of a peer or forcing someone into sex.<sup>25</sup>

Overall, the body of evidence demonstrates correlations between the use of pornography and a number of behaviours, including greater sexual permissiveness and a greater likelihood of acceptance of sexual harassment. However, the evidence does not demonstrate causal links between pornography and these behaviours.

### **Pornography and harm in a wider context**

In examining the potential harm of internet pornography to children and young people, it must be recalled that it exists within a wider context of society, and certainly is not the sole or even the main influence on children and young people.

The research conducted by Green did not assume that exposure to risk necessarily led to harm. It was pointed out that children and young people respond differently to risk and challenging experiences in an individual way, and that for most children and young people there was a low risk that engaging in a risky online activity could lead to harm.<sup>26</sup>

As stated earlier, both the Children's Commissioner for England and Flood's work show only a correlative, rather than a causative, relationship between pornography use and the behaviours of children and young people. The purpose in emphasising this is not to present an argument that pornography is not a possible cause of certain behaviour, but rather to note that other factors may come into play, and focussing only on the impact of pornography on healthy and respectful relationships

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<sup>24</sup> Flood M 2009, 'The Harms of Pornography Exposure Among Children and Young People', *Child Abuse Review*, Vol 18, 2009, p.392.

<sup>25</sup> Flood M 2009, 'The Harms of Pornography Exposure Among Children and Young People', *Child Abuse Review*, Vol 18, 2009, p.393.

<sup>26</sup> Green L, Brady D, Olafsson K, Hartley J and Lumby C 2012, *Risks and Safety for Australian children on the internet: Full findings from the AU Kinds Online Survey of 9–16 year olds and their parents*, Arc centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation, pp.12-13. It is relevant to this argument that risky online activity was not confined to sexual images online, but also included bullying and other user-generated content, meeting online contacts, sending and receiving sexual messages, and misuse of personal data.





may be ignoring a wider context of sexualisation and attitudes in the community reinforced by media, news reporting, and other issues.<sup>27</sup>

Certainly there are arguments that pornography is more sexist and hostile towards women than much other media content.<sup>28</sup> However, there is also concern that sexualised media in general can encourage girls and young women to view themselves primarily in sexual terms.<sup>29</sup> The Commissioner for Children and Young People has previously examined the issue of sexualisation of children, developing a literature review,<sup>30</sup> an issues paper<sup>31</sup> and a guide for parents and the community on sexualisation.<sup>32</sup> The literature review summarised a number of studies, which variously claimed that sexualisation of children and young people might affect self-esteem, affect aspects of emotional development, impact mental and physical health and wellbeing, affect concepts of femininity and sexuality and gender and sexual roles, and contribute to or provoke sexual harassment or sexualised violence in schools and workplaces.<sup>33</sup> The parallels with the suggested harms of pornography are interesting and highly relevant.

Thus, the focus on pornography in this remit sets aside a wider social context which feeds and influences attitudes to relationships. In the interests of contributing fully to the debate on the wellbeing of children and young people, it would be appropriate for the inquiry to consider broader issues, such as the sexualisation of women and girls, and how male role models (particularly those in sport or with a strong media presence) contribute to or challenge the issues of sexualisation.

### **The voices of children and young people**

The critical source of information in this context is the voice of children and young people. It is an underlying principle of the work of the Commissioner for Children

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<sup>27</sup> Flood M 2009, 'The Harms of Pornography Exposure Among Children and Young People', *Child Abuse Review*, Vol 18, 2009, p.385.

<sup>28</sup> Flood M 2009, 'The Harms of Pornography Exposure Among Children and Young People', *Child Abuse Review*, Vol 18, 2009, p.387.

<sup>29</sup> Flood M 2009, 'The Harms of Pornography Exposure Among Children and Young People', *Child Abuse Review*, Vol 18, 2009, p.391.

<sup>30</sup> Commissioner for Children and Young People 2012, *Literature review: The sexualisation of children*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA. (Provide as attachment)

<sup>31</sup> Commissioner for Children and Young People 2012, *Sexualisation of children*, Issues Paper 9, Commissioner for Children and Young People. (Provide as attachment)

<sup>32</sup> Commissioner for Children and Young People 2012, *Sexualisation of children and its impact on their wellbeing: A guide for parents, members of the community, media, advertisers and retailers*, Commissioner for Children and Young People. (Provide as attachment)

<sup>33</sup> Commissioner for Children and Young People 2012, *Sexualisation of children*, Issues Paper 9, Commissioner for Children and Young People, pp.1-2.



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and Young People that children and young people should be able to have a say on matters that affect them and their views and opinions valued and given due weight.

Relatively little of the research has actually involved the views of children and young people in any detail. Green's research with Australian children and young people asked only if they had seen images or content which bothered them; that is 'made you feel uncomfortable, upset or that you shouldn't have seen it',<sup>34</sup> but did not ask why the material made children and young people feel this way, or talk about the wider implications.

The Children's Commissioner of England's report refers to a workshop carried out with young people, and several relevant quotes are interspersed through the report. The researchers summarise the workshop with young people as follows:

'There were marked differences between the [gender-specific] groups despite them being asked the same questions. The young men moved very quickly to discussing genres or pornography they were familiar with from website categories, whereas the young women covered a far wider range of images that may or may not be considered pornographic. The young men emphasised the "need for" and "benefits of" pornography to themselves and other young men, whereas the young women focused on the detrimental effects of pornography on young women both in relation to their body image and in sexual interactions.'<sup>35</sup>

One of the report's findings is particularly relevant to this aspect of the discussion:

"Finding 12: There is still much we do not understand about young people's feelings towards and perceptions of pornography

We know that a large number of people involved with children and young people (including parents, guardians, educators and carers) are concerned about their exposure to pornography and sexually explicit materials, and how this exposure may impact on their attitudes and behaviours and lead to potential conformity to the sexual stereotypes presented in this material (Bailey, 2011; Flood, 2009; Independent Parliamentary Inquiry into Online Child Protection, 2012). *However, we do not yet have a clear picture of how young people themselves feel about pornography and pornographic materials, and what it is that they perceive when watching these materials* (Mulholland,

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<sup>34</sup> Green L, Brady D, Olafsson K, Hartley J and Lumby C 2012, *Risks and Safety for Australian children on the internet: Full findings from the AU Kinds Online Survey of 9–16 year olds and their parents*, Arc centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation, p.8.

<sup>35</sup> Horvarth M, Alys L, Massey K, Pina A, Scally M and Adler J 2011, "*Basically...porn is everywhere*": A rapid evidence assessment on the Effect that Access and Exposure to Pornography has on Children and Young People, Children's Commissioner for England, p.19.



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in press; Varnhagen, 2006). Some researchers maintain (Attwood, 2002, 2011; Bale, 2011; Chronaki, 2013) that we do not know how children feel about pornography because of a skewed/negative/moralistic viewpoint when asking them questions about their use and access to it, and when assessing their answers. There are also other factors, such as sexuality and sexual identity, that are largely ignored in present research (Billinghurst, 2009; Chronaki, 2013)."<sup>36</sup> (emphasis added)

There are several observations from the National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health which have relevance to this area. The survey invited commentary from young people on the sexuality education they received in schools. The results varied, as would be expected, with some students feeling their education had been useful, but others noting a lack of useful information. An ongoing thread in the comments was while the biological aspects of sex were generally covered, there was less emphasis on consent, decision making and relationships, which was felt by respondents to be particularly important.<sup>37</sup>

Information from children and young people themselves is vital in establishing effective strategies to address matters which might be affecting their lives and wellbeing. It is therefore recommended that the Inquiry should consult widely with children and young people, to ascertain their views on the development of healthy and respectful relationships, and how these may be influenced by such areas as the availability of pornography, sex education in schools, sexualisation as a tool of advertising, and media in general.

Consultation with children and young people is a fundamental principle of the Commissioner's work in advocating for the wellbeing of children and young people in WA. The office has produced guidelines for effective consultation strategies involving children and young people, which are available through the Commissioner's website at <http://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au/content.aspx?cID=741>

## **Harm minimisation methods**

This Inquiry asks also about the methods used towards harm minimisation in other jurisdictions, and the effectiveness of those methods.

The Inquiry may wish to consider a recommendation regarding sexual education in schools, and the inclusion of information on respect, consent, and relationships as well as sexual health and wellbeing. The Western Australian program *Growing and*

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<sup>36</sup> Horvarth M, Alys L, Massey K, Pina A, Scally M and Adler J 2011, "*Basically...porn is everywhere*": A rapid evidence assessment on the Effect that Access and Exposure to Pornography has on Children and Young People, Children's Commissioner for England, p.44.

<sup>37</sup> Mitchell A, Patrick K, Weywood W, Blackman P and Pitts M 2014, *National Survey of Australia Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2013*, Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, pp.72-75.



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*Developing Healthy Relationships* includes components on relationship and respect, and may be instructive in framing this recommendation.<sup>38</sup>

Filtering of internet content has been tried in Australia. In 2007 the Federal Government launched the NetAlert package as a response to concerns about the potential harm of material available on the internet. This package included information on internet safety strategies, free internet content filtering programs for home computers, and advice on how to make complaints about prohibited content.<sup>39</sup> NetAlert's funding concluded in 2010 and was not renewed. There was no study of the effectiveness of the NetAlert program in terms of preventing access to inappropriate material. It should be noted that filtering was only one aspect of this program.

In the UK, 'family-friendly' network level filtering has been provided by Internet Service Providers (ISPs) since 2013. The filter was originally implemented for all new customers, and extended to existing customers through 2014, on an 'unavoidable choice' basis; that is, the customer had to choose to implement or opt out of the filter. Ofcom carried out a number of reports on the progress of the implementation of filters, finding that as of June 2015 between 6 per cent and 40 per cent (depending on the ISP) of customers had taken up some level of filtering.<sup>40</sup> While the filter was generally regarded as effective by users,<sup>41</sup> it was only one of several technological tools used, and one of four broad strategies used to restrict access to certain online content, including technological tools, regular discussions with children, rules and restrictions, and online supervision.<sup>42</sup> As such, although the tool itself was provided by the ISP, the onus for using the filter and the extent to which it was used remained with the parents.

Although we need to know more about this area, the Commissioner would recommend the most appropriate harm minimisation methods to pursue as education around respectful relationships, and resilience building for children and young people. Both these methods would contribute not only to wellbeing in regard to pornography, but also serve as useful life skills for children and young people. At an individual/household level, parents and carers may wish to example filtering and

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<sup>38</sup> Department of Health WA, *growing and developing healthy relationships*, [website], <https://gdhr.wa.gov.au/home>

<sup>39</sup> Australian Government 2007, *NetAlert Protecting Australian Families Online*, Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts and the Commonwealth of Australia.

<sup>40</sup> Ofcom 2015, *Ofcom report on internet safety measures: Strategies of parental protection for children online*, Ofcom, p.5.

<sup>41</sup> Ofcom 2015, *Ofcom report on internet safety measures: Strategies of parental protection for children online*, Ofcom, pp.83-84.

<sup>42</sup> Ofcom 2015, *Ofcom report on internet safety measures: Strategies of parental protection for children online*, Ofcom, p.78.



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'clean-feed' tools which are available in the marketplace, should they feel this is appropriate.

In summary:

- Children and young people are exposed to and access pornography via the internet, among other means. Boys are more likely to have accessed pornography, as are older young people.
- Children and young people should be given opportunities to contribute to this inquiry, and their views should be given serious and appropriate consideration.
- Consideration and conclusions should be grounded in the available empirical evidence.
- The research evidence shows correlations between use of pornography and certain behaviours, as outlined above, but does not demonstrate causative links.
- The focus on pornography as a source of harm ignores the wider context of society and sexualisation which frame attitudes towards others, particularly towards girls and women.
- The primary tools to address harm minimisation would be education on healthy and respectful relationships, and resilience building for children and young people.

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COLIN PETTIT

Commissioner for Children and Young People WA

24 February 2016

Attachments:

1. Commissioner for Children and Young People 2012, *Literature Review: the Sexualisation of Children*, Commissioner for Children and Young People.
2. Commissioner for Children and Young People 2012, *Sexualisation of children*, Issues Paper 9, Commissioner for Children and Young People.
3. Commissioner for Children and Young People 2012, *Sexualisation of children and its impact on their wellbeing: a guide for parents, members of the community, media, advertisers, and retailers*, Commissioner for Children and Young People.