

The Alannah  
and Madeline  
**Foundation**



Keeping children safe from violence

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

The Alannah and Madeline  
Foundation

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### The Alannah and Madeline Foundation

The Alannah and Madeline Foundation welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Senate Inquiry into the harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the internet.

The Alannah and Madeline Foundation is the leading national not-for-profit organisation protecting children from violence. Our vision is that all children will live in a safe and supportive environment. The Foundation was founded by Walter Mikac in memory of his children, Alannah and Madeline Mikac, aged 6 and 3, who were tragically killed with their mother and 32 others at Port Arthur, Tasmania, on 28 April 1996. The Foundation was established in 1997, a year after the Port Arthur mass shooting.

The Foundation's key objectives are to care for children who have experienced or witnessed serious violence; reduce the incidence of bullying, cyberbullying and other cyber risks and through the National Centre Against Bullying (NCAB), a peak body of experts working to advise and inform the Australian community on the issue of childhood bullying and the creation of safe schools and communities.

Our programs are in one third of all Australian schools, and one third of all Australian public libraries (reaching all 1,500 within the next three years) and we support 9,000 children in refuges or foster homes across Australia every year.

The Alannah and Madeline Foundation's vision is that every child will live in a safe and supportive environment. We know that when children experience violence, whether directly or through witnessing violence it can have a devastating effect on their future. Our goal is to create a caring and safe Australia where all children are safe from violence, whether at home, at school or in the broader community. Reducing the risk of harm to children from viewing pornography is one of The Alannah and Madeline Foundation's goals.

The Alannah and Madeline Foundation provides care for children who have experienced violence, develop and deliver evidence-based and externally evaluated programs to prevent violence and advocate for change. We propose a broad spectrum of responses to harms produced by the tranche of Internet pornography to which children and youth are exposed.

## 1. Introduction

Intensifying debate over pornography and its consumption by children and youth has led to one writer calling it 'a public health crisis' that '... is changing society – and the change is not good' (Coulson, 2016). Not all writers take this view; however there is no doubt that the cultural landscape has changed and continues to change. From the late twentieth century there has been a proliferation of sexual imagery and media and children now move in a "hypermediated" environment in which pictures and words have unprecedented cultural influence' (Flood & Hamilton, Youth and Pornography in Australia - evidence on the extent of exposure and likely effects, 2003).

## 2. Defining pornography

What is pornography? It is not easy to define and there is presently no agreed definition. A general definition is 'sexually explicit media that are primarily intended to sexually arouse the audience'. Sexually explicit representations include images of female or male nudity or semi-nudity, implied sexual activity and actual sexual activity' (Flood M. , 2007).

The terms pornography/pornographic shift in meaning from what is considered erotic to that which is regarded as obscene: one is socially acceptable and primarily associated with aesthetic and artistic representations that, while they may stimulate a physical response, can nonetheless be spoken of socially.

Obscene depictions historically have not been considered socially acceptable; if images and portrayals contravene sexual norms they may be considered obscene and prohibited by the courts; however, if a representation or behaviour once considered obscene becomes so widespread that taboos against it weaken, it moves 'first into the category of the pornographic, then of the erotic' (Slade, 2000).

Erotic/obscene categorisations are to some degree dependent on class, gender and personal preference; measurements also differ; some studies conflate sexuality and violence, but much sexual representation does not contain violence and is not therefore inherently aggressive.

Typical X-rated pornographic scenarios comprise 'kissing, sexual touching, masturbation, fellatio, vaginal intercourse, anal intercourse and cunnilingus. Typical practices depicted also include 'double penetration' (where two men simultaneously have vaginal and anal intercourse with the one woman), one woman kneeling between two or more men and practising fellatio on each in turn, and one woman engaged simultaneously in vaginal or anal intercourse with one man or two men and fellatio with a second or third man. 'Two additional sexual practices have become staples in pornography. It is standard practice in heterosexual pornography for the male partner to withdraw from intercourse or fellatio before orgasm to ejaculate onto the body or face of his female partner. Male-female anal intercourse is a second, almost mandatory, inclusion in pornographic depictions of heterosexual sex.' (Flood & Hamilton, Youth and Pornography in Australia - evidence on the extent of exposure and likely effects, 2003). These scenarios, which would have been judged obscene 50 years ago now are part of 'mainstream' pornographic experience.

The depictions above should be distinguished from tropes of sexual violence, subordination and degradation which are common in stories and images and expressed in derogatory and discriminatory language (Flood & Hamilton, Youth and Pornography in Australia - evidence on the extent of exposure and likely effects, 2003), such as depictions of non-consenting sexual acts, including 'upskirting', rape and sexual torture. It is not possible to discern on rape-focused websites whether the depictions are actual or staged.

Victims are tied and shown screaming or expressing pain. A study of 31 websites used language like 'rape', 'torture', 'abuse' and 'pain' and were accessible free and without the necessity of age verification (Flood & Hamilton, 2003). One can also view and images of non-mainstream sexual practices involving defecation and urination, bestiality, coprophilia, fisting, sadomasochism and various extreme fetishes like sex involving amputees (Gloudeman, 2014, Flood, 2003).

Another pornographic genre, 'death porn', is also available on the internet: some of it for free viewing. Films such as *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) contain graphic sexual violence and other violence and the genuine deaths of six animals on screen. While actors were not actually killed, some films of this genre are reputed to depict the deaths of some of the participants. We watch a gratuitous amount of violent deaths on TV without being emotionally affected, or play violent games, where the objective is to kill as many people as we can. Death has become commodified, like pornography: 'It's all the visuals without the love, the trust, the grief and the person. Just as pornography is the commodity of sex without love, so our present grasp of death (via TV, video games, etc.) is death without person and without grief' (Wilde, 2013).

Therefore, the word pornography is itself a charged concept and is at best fragmented; it adopts many forms and genres; it draws on and affects complex responses to gender and sexuality and conveys a multitude of messages, which themselves reach back to the dawn of history. At one end of the spectrum, pornography engages, interests, titillates; at the other, it degrades and humiliates human bodies and loses sight of their beauty, preciousness or value.

### 3. Trends of online consumption of pornography by children and their impact on the development of healthy and respectful relationships

#### 3.1 Trends

Justin Coulson reports that approximately 30 per cent of internet traffic is pornography (Coulson, 2016) and expresses concern that teenagers and younger children have ready access to increasingly hard-core pornography (Crabbe, 2010). Thousands of such sites exist and can be accessed with very basic search criteria and while there are measures in place to prevent under 18 year olds from viewing X-rated video content, no such measures pertain to internet content. It is estimated that the pornography industry has an annual profit of US \$ 24.9 billion (Crabbe, 2010)

Young people are more able to engage with pornography than ever before, both by choice and inadvertently. Many pop-ups, 'mousetrapping' spam, manipulated web addresses and search engines give young people access to a profusion of images, many of them graphic and are part of an aggressive marketing approach by the industry (Crabbe, 2010). A child can type in sexual words into a search engine and literally millions of sites will appear. They then have free access to pornography which is not limited through age-related barriers. Three quarters of commercial pornographic websites display explicit content on their first page. Most allow viewers a 'free preview' with graphic images and filmic material. (Flood M. , Pornography, violence and popular debate, 2013).

A national Australian survey of 20,000 individuals aged between 16 and 59 years found that 'pornography consumption is more common among young men, with close to half of males aged between 16 and 29 using pornography' (Flood, 2010, 165) consumption that can now be considered normalised. A study released by the Australian Psychological Society showed that the viewing of internet pornography is happening at an increasingly early age. Of young people,

young heterosexual males aged between 12 and 17 ‘the most frequent consumers’ (Pratt, 2015, Flood, 2010). Pratt (2015) cites one study that shows 12.2 years as being the average age for young people’s first exposure to pornography and another that showed ‘93 per cent of males and 62 per cent of females ... reported exposure to pornography prior to age 18, the majority [was] between the ages of 14 and 17’.

A study conducted by Sabina et al. (2000) examined types of content and reported there was ‘significant exposure to violent images, paraphilic sexual activity and child abuse images, in which the viewing was probably a criminal act. From a survey of college students reporting on content they had viewed before the age of 18, 93 per cent of boys and 62 per cent of girls reported having viewed pornography. Of those who had viewed pornography, approximately 39 per cent of boys and 23 per cent of girls viewed material involving bondage, 32 per cent of boys and 18 per cent of girls viewed sexual activity between people and animals, 23 per cent of boys and 16 per cent of girls viewed sexual activity involving urine or faeces, 18 per cent of boys and 10 per cent of girls viewed material depicting rape or sexual violence, and 15 per cent of boys and 9 per cent of girls viewed sexual pictures of children’ (Sabina, 2008).

Concern over this youthful exposure has given rise to large-scale studies in USA, Holland and other European countries, Australia, Taiwan and elsewhere (Wright, 2014). ‘A significant proportion of children and young people are exposed to or access pornography’, but ‘exposure is more prevalent than access’; these findings being consistent across studies and countries. Flood cites studies from Australia, Cambodia, Canada, Denmark and Norway, Italy, Iceland, Sweden and Taiwan to show that large numbers of young people, particularly boys, are exposed to sexually explicit media (2009, 286). Choice and inadvertent exposure may also cross over; intention and expectation of searchers on the internet are not always clear – perhaps not even to themselves.

## 4. Impacts

### 4.1 Recognised effects, impacts and harms

Despite the considerable controversy in the literature, some of which is indicated below and despite few studies being longitudinal, reputable researchers and bodies have pointed to a range of discernible effects (Flood, Flood and Hamilton, Crabbe, Green, et al., Lim, et al., Livingstone, Smith [APS] etc.) of pornography exposure.

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) states that young people’s viewing of ‘pornography ... plays a significant role in shaping social norms in relation to sexuality’ and ‘impacts directly’ on the way children and young people view intimate relationships, sexual understanding and experiences and the acceptance of violence (APS, 2105).

- One of the chief harms of pornography is that young people experience it before they are developmentally ready to understand or deal with it and will affect development of young people’s sexual attitudes, expectations and beliefs. They also gain information (largely erroneous) about human bodily shape and size.
- Pornography viewing takes place within a limited formal sexuality education and substitutes for it – an informal and undesirable sex education.
- Pornography viewing shapes how young people think they should look and perform during actual sexual intercourse (Alexey et al., 2009; Häggström-Nordin et al., 2006,

Livingstone, 2015, Flood, 2016). This may have a detrimental impact on sexual attitudes and behaviours and on relationships more generally (Bryant, 2009).

- The Australian Psychological Society claims that changes in body image and understanding of sexual practices are due to consumption of pornography, for example genital depilation, oral sex not being regarded as sex, growing rates of anal sex amongst adult and teenage heterosexual couples (9 per cent of 2000 Victorian secondary school students in Years 10-12). Other effects include for example, extra-vaginal ejaculation, deep fellatio, and group sex.
- The Australian Psychological Society (APS) argues that viewing highly sexualised content or violent pornographic material has many risks for children's psychological development and mental health, by potentially skewing their views of normality and acceptable behaviour at a crucial time of development (APS, 2105).
- The Victorian Government's educational resource Building Respectful Relationships shows that internet pornography adversely affects the way children and young people view intimate relationships, sexual understanding and experiences.

There are various risky behaviours congruent with the viewing of pornography:

- Unprotected sex – condom use is not typically used in vaginal intercourse.
- Higher rates of chlamydia (Flood, 2010).
- Non-relational or context-free sex – e.g. sex with strangers or groups of strangers (Wright, 2014).

Pornography viewing also seems to have impact on the development of:

- More permissive sexual attitudes – greater acceptance of pre, extra- and non-marital sexual relations and recreational sex (Flood M. , Young Men Using Porn, 2010).
- More aggressive sexual behaviour towards women.
- Sexual objectification of understandings of and behaviours towards girls and women through depictions of women as role inferiors to men (e.g. students, clerical workers or housewives c.f. business/professional men).
- Less progressive gender role attitudes for males and females/sexual stereotyping of gender and sexuality.
- Sexually harassing attitudes in middle adolescence for males.
- Greater prevalence of anal sex among heterosexuals, with an apparent understanding among young men that 'this is normal and desirable for women (even though young women in ... Swedish studies did not enjoy it and did not want to do it again') (Flood M. , Young Men Using Porn, 2010).
- Earlier oral and penetrative sexual experience for males and females (Flood, 2016, Wright, 2014).
- False beliefs about male sexual readiness and penis size (Brod, 1988).

A major harm stemming from undiluted pornography viewing – even pornography that is not explicitly violent – that is not mediated or analysed in a formal way, is that it divorces sex 'from intimacy, loving affection and human connection; women are essentially nymphomaniacs who want sex from all men and enjoy anything men do to them; and women ... can be turned on with force' (Bryant, 2009). Pornography is not the only reason for male to female violence and abuse and can be a predictor of it.

While addiction to pornography is not listed as an addictive disorder in the American Pediatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (ADSM, 5<sup>th</sup> edition), many believe its existence. Some consumers of pornography use it in ways that are obsessive, compulsive and have damaging consequences for themselves or others (Flood M. , Young Men Using Porn, 2010). Brain studies have shown that pornography viewing is associated with brain changes 'similar to those observed in addiction' and that 'adolescents take longer than adults to recover from [these change]' possibly due to the younger age of exposure to the material (Lim, 2016).

Most concerning is pornography as 'rape training' (Flood M. , Young Men Using Porn, 2010). A number of studies have been conducted among young people aged 18-25 and have been consistent in showing that consumption of pornography is related to male sexual aggression against women with the association strongest for violent pornography but still reliable for non-violent pornography (Flood, 2003; Flood, 2010). Males are desensitised to sexual violence, 'eroding their empathy for victims of violence and informing more callous attitudes towards female rape victims' Flood, 2010, 175). 95 percent of examples depict women being subject to acts such as choking, gagging or spanking (Wright, 2014)

'...pornography is a vehicle through which cultural norms are transmitted and embedded in our social, sexual and personal relations, strongly influencing what sort of behaviour we consider appropriate and the types of relationships we consider healthy' (APS, 2105).

#### 4.2 Caveats

It is fairly clear that children and young people experience pornography in a variety of different contexts but less clear exactly what this comprises. Both exposure and access increase with age and children and young people are also exposed to and access offline pornography (Horvath, 2013).

However, a recent study (Lim, 2016) sounds a note of warning about the way evidence is collected about the negative effects of pornography as discussed above. This is largely through 'personal anecdote or surveys with subjective measures'. The authors cite difficulties with: providing conclusive findings; ethical problems about asking adolescents about pornography and getting parental consent; establishing a control group due to the ubiquity of pornography viewing in our society; lack of objective measures for determining the impact of pornography on sexual and relational wellbeing and difficulty in establishing a relationship between pornography viewing and outcomes (Lim, 2016). A recent report commissioned by eNASCO (the European NGO Alliance for Child Safety Online) has indicated cause and effect cannot be determined.

Livingston's review of the literature (2015) shows that much of the research has been conducted in the US, with some known about European children and less about the rest of the world. Her criticism of the research is that most is 'cross-sectional – in other words it is informative about a particular point in time (i.e. rather than longitudinal studies), usually through a survey or qualitative interviews ... [which makes] it difficult to examine cause and effect claims as they play out over time, within a child's life and/or within a culture' (Livingston, 2015).

Livingstone (2015) makes the point that young people at risk offline are also more at risk online but that while sexual activity on and offline during adolescence is linked to negative outcomes, but that it is unclear whether this applies only to at-risk subgroups. According to the literature,



‘the 9-12 age range seems to mark an important stage in beginning riskier online behaviour’ (Livingston, 2015). Children whose backgrounds lack stable and caring relationships and role models. This group of young people is also more apt to be absent from school and have behavioural issues that prevent the development of supportive relationships with their teachers. They are more likely to seek information on sex and relations from the internet and to lack the skills to be able to evaluate the material viewed.

McKee et.al (2010) make the same point about a possible confusion in causality made in the argument: consumption of pornography and sexual adventurousness might not be connected in this direction, that causality might run the other way or both. This work also questions assumptions about good (‘vanilla’ i.e. heterosexual, vaginal penetration, within a committed relationship) sex and that this heteronormativity essentially pathologises a number of other practices which are not listed as unhealthy by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) (e.g. anal sex, group sex or sadomasochism).

The impacts of pornography on the sexual and relational attitudes and practices are therefore quite difficult to determine in people below adult age because of the ethical difficulties associated with research.

#### 5. Current methods taken towards harm minimisation in other jurisdictions, and the effectiveness of those methods

Harm reduction emerged in the 1980s as a public health response to HIV and injecting drug use, recognising that zero tolerance approaches were ineffective and possibly opened users to further harm. Harm minimisation strategies are built on the three pillars of: demand reduction, supply reduction and harm reduction. The National Drug Strategy report highlights that approaches require the cooperation, collaboration and participation of a diverse range of sectors. It is therefore important to recognise the range of sectors and develop close links with them. (Commonwealth, 2011).

The viewing of online content, however, is not the same as indulging in banned substances or even unhealthy ones, which can also be treated through means such as diversionary policies, mandatory treatment, policing and penalties. While there are those who regard harm minimisation to issues such as drug or pornography use as a ‘counsel of despair’ (Muehlenberg, 2014), it is not to be confused with legalisation or permissiveness.

A harm reduction approach to pornography use by young people must be preceded by acknowledgement of the wide literature pointing to the harms of pornography viewing by children and young people as discussed above and within the context of a generally accepted definition.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines sexual health as a state of physical, mental and social wellbeing in relation to sexuality. It requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence (WHO, 2016). This positive approach to sexuality is reflected in various National and State policies in Australia.

Canada has instituted a test of obscenity and indecency in law – the ‘risk of harm’ test. “‘Harm’ has been interpreted by judges to mean many different sorts of things - harm to society, to morals, to women, to the constitutional values of equality (Valverde, 1999). Despite differing views on the meanings enfolded by ‘risk of harm’, it is not meant to be interpreted from any particular standpoint. Ottawa Charter for Health

Promotion Whole-school (or 'health promoting schools') approach places great emphasis on learning and teaching in sexuality (Victoria, 2014).

While some governments (e.g. Victoria) have put legal frameworks around the sending of sexual messages via mobile phone (sexting), we also know that girls are under greater pressure to send them and harsher judgements are made on them when the images are shared to other audiences. A recent ruling in the UK banned depicting behaviours, including spanking, fisting, face-sitting and female ejaculation (Lim, 2016).

Schools have a key role to play (see recommendations below).

## 6. The identification of any measures with the potential for implementation in Australia

As shown above, although evidence is somewhat patchy, there is wide agreement that there are indeed harms associated with intentional pornography consumption. A whole-of-society response is called for with international cooperation to limit the transmission of pornography via Internet Service Providers. A wide group of stakeholders including doctors, parents, schools and industry partners have a crucial role to play in minimising the negative effects of internet pornography on adolescents.

The Victorian Education Department (DET) has a number of initiatives which recognise the necessity for schools, parents and other bodies to work in partnership to shape a holistic approach to teaching about pornography within sexuality education (Victoria, 2014). DET endorses a whole-school approach to this and other initiatives, by which we mean similar to those taken by eSmart Schools developed by The Alannah and Madeline Foundation and endorsed by DET for implementation in all Victorian Government Schools plus 300 low SES Catholic and Independent Schools. There is also the National Safe Schools Framework or a recently released a whole-of-community framework to prevent violence against women and children developed by Our Watch, the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) and Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety's (ANROWS).

## 7. Recommendations

The starting point would be the minimisation of involuntary exposure to pornography. The second consideration being a minimisation of children's consumption of violent pornography showing non-consensual sexual acts (e.g. rape, bestiality, images of children).

However, recognising the ready availability and high degree of acceptance of pornography among young people, it is problematic to rely on approaches which rely on restricting exposure to it.

**The Alannah and Madeline Foundation recommends a societal response encompassing:**

### 1. A National Definition

Engage in collaborative discussions to develop a national and generally accepted definition of pornography.

### 2. Further research

Support longitudinal research to demonstrate the full extent of exposure to pornography over time.

### 3. Education

Provide age-appropriate sexuality and relationship education early on in curricula, ideally 'before young children begin to get interested in sexuality and continuing through adolescence', taking

account of children's developmental stages and needs but encouraging moral and ethical growth as well as resilience.

- 3.1 Curricula to include emotions, sexual identify, dynamics of healthy and unhealthy relationships.
- 3.2 Include pornography education in the school curriculum to teach young people to 'read' pornography critically and to make safe choices about what they watch.
  - 3.2.1 Develop media literacy to deconstruct narratives and recognise underlying messages (including commercial interests).
  - 3.2.2 As part of an agenda of respect ('self-respect, self-protect'), Educate students about the rights and responsibilities of sexual relationships.
  - 3.2.3 Include gender equality education (positioning pornography as degrading to women).
  - 3.2.4 These approaches would help young people to understand and critically evaluate pornographic material to mitigate the harm of material they do watch by developing a more evaluative view of the material and understand its fictional nature.
- 3.3 Provide teachers with professional learning about the risks of pornography (in the same way as students are educated about sex and drug risks).
- 3.4 Equip paediatricians and general practitioners to discuss with parents how and why to prevent or limit pornography exposure for both children and parents.

#### 4. Support for families

Recognise that children frequently use the internet unsupervised on individual digital devices and that constant supervision is not always possible. The parental/carer role is nevertheless vital and could be supported by:

- 4.1 A campaign and resources to promote parental understanding of digital devices, the internet, its uses and ready availability and the availability of undesirable content, contact and conduct.
- 4.2 Internet proficiency for parents should be supported by governments with resources and tuition made available through community and schools. (Some not-for-profits have ready-made applications of this type e.g. *The Alannah and Madeline Foundation's eSmart Digital Licence*).
- 4.3 Publication of family guidelines / resources /scripts to enable discussion with to children on:
  - 4.3.1 Gendered double standards.
  - 4.3.2 Encountering pornography (using age-appropriate language) online.
  - 4.3.3 Young people's rights and responsibilities on (and off) line.
  - 4.3.4 Negotiation and agreement with their children over computer/internet use.

#### 5. Content filtering

Content filtering and age verification technologies.

## 6. Provision of technology responses

Technology providers develop instant online help functions for children who have been exposed to pornographic material. These might include automatically generated messages and links to support organisations, intended to help alleviate the young viewer's negative emotions (Van Royen, 2016).

Provision of new devices with:

- 6.1 Easy-to-understand safety advice and information for adult and younger users. This could be presented in several formats to cater for those not yet familiar with the particular technology.
- 6.2 Safety packages installed and set to a high level.

## 7. Regulation

Changes to the regulatory system for sexual content on the internet hosted in Australia and/or overseas:

- 7.1 Mandatory blocking of pornography by Australian ISPs.
- 7.2 Adults could opt out of mandatory filtering.

## 8. Legislation

Ban the depiction of certain behaviours.

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