

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications

Answers to Senate Estimates Questions on Notice

Additional Estimates Spill-over hearing March 2017

Communications Portfolio

Office of the Children's eSafety Commissioner

Question No: 294

Office of the Children's eSafety Commissioner

Hansard Ref: Page 44, 24/03/2017

Topic: Access to Pornography online – Impact on children

Senator Reynolds, Linda asked:

CHAIR asked: That would be very interesting for all of the committee. I have just got a couple of quick questions. What we will do is go through to quarter to one and reduce lunch slightly so we can keep on time. Commissioner, my question relates to an inquiry that this committee's references committee did, and finished recently, into harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the internet. The committee's report stated that it found insufficient evidence of causality between access to online pornography and harm to children and young people, or not enough to warrant any immediate response. The Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia has written to the committee, to you and also to the minister. They quite clearly challenge that assertion and say that there are a lot of studies now that indicate that online pornography is a significant risk to children's online engagement. In fact, studies demonstrate that Australian children are most worried about that and also about cyberbullying. I am happy for you to take this on notice—I do not want to spring this one on you—and come back, because the committee would be interested to know whether there is any additional evidence and what your assessment is of the research on the impact of online pornography on children.

Ms Inman-Grant: I would love to provide you with additional information on notice. We will defer the policy questions to the department, as there is an interagency paper that is being table. We do have materials on our website, specifically on our iParent portal, for parents who want to protect their children from seeing inappropriate content unwittingly and to help them develop resilience. We try to provide very balanced guidance in terms of technology playing a role, but not an entire role, in addressing this issue. Early and constant engagement with children in their digital lives is very important in any aspect in terms of keeping them safe online.

Answer:

The Office of the Children's eSafety Commissioner (OCeSC) has not undertaken its own detailed assessment of available research into the impacts of pornography on children. However, the OCeSC note that the Senate Inquiry highlighted the need for Australian contextual research and gaps in existing research, for example, how children access pornography and the types of material accessed.

The OCeSC understand there is a body of research being conducted in Australia and overseas on this issue. The online safety consultative working group which the OCeSC oversees will be analysing and assessing this body of research and will make recommendations to Government based on these findings. The OCeSC will develop relevant resources to address any potential risks. In June 2016, the OCeSC commissioned a survey of 2,400 parents with children aged 8-17. The research showed that 60% of parents said their child is exposed to risks from being online. The potential for exposure to inappropriate content (including sexual/pornographic content, coarse language, violent and racist content) was cited as the top risk by these parents.