

January 2025

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Submission in response to  
the Inquiry into impacts of  
harmful pornography on  
mental, emotional and  
physical health

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Teach Us Consent

# TEACH US \* CONSENT

## About Teach Us Consent:

Teach Us Consent is a youth-led, registered Australian charity committed to pioneering consent education to foster healthy relationships and reduce sexual violence among young people.

Established in 2021, the organisation launched a petition calling for more holistic and earlier consent education in Australia, as well as a platform for people to share anonymous testimonies of sexual assault. After gathering 44,000 testimonies and 6,600 personal stories, consent education was mandated in the national curriculum. Teach Us Consent continues to advocate and drive legislative, policy and cultural change to eradicate the normalisation of sexual violence.

Currently, its major project is the Department of Social Services-funded Promoting Consent Initiative, which is focused on developing and distributing trauma-informed and age-appropriate social media resources for young people aged 16 - 25 years on consent, sexual harm and healthy relationships.

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# Introduction

Teach Us Consent thanks the Parliament of New South Wales for the opportunity to respond to the Inquiry into the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional and physical health.

This submission will address the Inquiry Terms of Reference (a), (c), (d), (e), (f) and (i).

Our primary focus within all responses provided is to reflect and uplift voices of young people, with an approach to the subject matter raised within the Inquiry with a lens of opportunities for consent and healthy relationship education reforms for young people; drawing upon external and internal research conducted to inform insights outlined within the submission. The following recommendations aim to provide guidance to the Committee in relation to the Inquiry:

It is recommended that the term **'harmful pornography'** is defined for the purpose of this enquiry, with proven evidence and research for reasons of definition. This is to ensure that the parameters and intended purpose of any proposed legislation changes are clear and appropriate.

Second, we recognise the need for appropriate online measures to curtail incidental access of online pornographic materials for young people. Consultations with advisory bodies on metrics of effectiveness of age verification software for pornographic websites is recommended, as well as consultations, and in-depth considerations should be given to all person/s who may be adversely impacted by any related legislative changes.

Third, we emphasise the necessity for comprehensive and inclusive and age-appropriate porn literacy education and recommend it into Respectful Relationships curriculum. This will ensure young people are appropriately equipped for the skills necessary, as a proactive measure against media and pornography messaging that may exacerbate sex-myths, gender-based violence and misogyny.

Fourth, we recommend the NSW State government works in partnership and consultation with experts, advisors, advisory bodies, those with lived experience, and young people in the development of educational resources for young people regarding pornography, consent and healthy relationships.

Finally, young people from all demographics and backgrounds must be actively involved – and centered – in discussions, legislative decision making and the co-creation of age-appropriate educational resources. Young peoples lived experiences are integral for effective and targeted educational messaging; as well as advising upon legislative changes which directly impacts their well-being.

Teach Us Consent welcomes the opportunity to offer additional assistance or provide further advice to the Committee regarding the points raised within this submission and/or to assist with facilitating spaces for conversations with young people.

# Summary of Recommendations

1. The term ‘**Harmful Pornography**’ is clearly defined for the purposes within this inquiry; with research based evidence provided to explain how definition was reached.
2. Implementation of appropriate measures to prevent young peoples and childrens incidental access to online pornogrphahy. Consultation on effective age verification tools and technology, and with consideration of those who may be impacted by proposed legislative changes
3. The integration of comprehensive and age-appropriate porn literacy education in to Respectful Relationships and Sexuality Education cirriculum
4. Collaborate with experts, advisory bodies and young people to develop appropriate and relatable educational resources on pornography
5. Ensure the active involvement of young people from all demographics in discussions and decision-making, to shape policies and legislation which reflects their lived experiences.

## Definitions

For the context of this submission, **Pornography** is defined as: Materials and content considered to be of a sexual nature based upon context, with aim to sexually arouse the consumer.

**Young People** is defined as: Any person under 18 years of age.

**Children** is defined as: Any person under the age of 15.

**Mainstream Pornography** is defined through the following characteristics:

- Freely accessible online platforms (e.g Pornhub, xVideos)
- It is predominately heterosexual and cisgendered
- It is aimed at cisgendered and heterosexual men
- Often depicts ‘rougher’ or ‘extreme’ sex acts that do not overly show consent nor safer sex practices
- Typically places the man in a position of dominance, and woman in a position of passivity
- Forms a significant amount of global online pornographic content

# Young people & early access to online pornography

Survey of 1,004 young people aged 16 to 18 conducted by [eSafety Research \(2022\)](#)<sup>1</sup> found:

- The average age when first seeing pornography was 13 for young men and 14 for young women.
- 58% of young people who encountered online pornography reported doing so unintentionally at least once.
- 30% of young people unintentionally encountered online pornography, often before they were 13.
- Unintentional encounters were described as “frequent”, “unavoidable”, “unwelcome”, “intrusive”, and “disempowering”, often making young people feel uncomfortable.
- 71% of young people who unintentionally encountered online pornography chose to ignore it.
- Young people who encounter pornography frequently, such as daily, are more likely to first encounter it before age 13.

A 2024 cross sectional study on pornography access among young Australians also found that young men typically come across online pornography 2.3 years before their first sexual experience, whereas girls encounter it 2.0 years earlier.<sup>2</sup>

Testimonies Teach Us Consent received from young people also sharing their experiences with early exposure to online pornography:

## Testimony Submission:

*“Growing up in Sydney I've heard over the years multiple guys in my life tell me about when they had first been exposed to porn. All of the stories had been either at school in classrooms/lunchtime or when they went to friends' houses after school for play dates.”*  
F, 20

*“When I was 10 years old, 5 boys were viewing porn on a school computer. A parent reported the issue & the school addressed it by scolding the entire class for inappropriate use of school computers but had no conversations and didn't offer counselling to the boys or the kids nearby that saw it.”*

F, 17

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<sup>1</sup> [eSafety Research \(2022\)](#) Report: Accidental, Unsolicited and In Your Face

<sup>2</sup> Crabbe M, Flood M, Adams K.(2024) Pornography exposure and access among young Australians: a cross-sectional study.

## Impacts of early access to online pornography

The extent and long-form impact of pornography upon young people are still disputed due to lack of longitudinal and wide-ranging studies.<sup>3</sup> However, notable studies conducted indicate potential links between early pornography exposure and adverse physical and mental health impacts within young people<sup>45</sup>.

Further, research conducted by See, H. W., & Woodley, G. (2024) highlighted that within discussions on ‘harm’ and ‘harmful impacts’ in relation to young people and pornography, how young people and children perceive and define what is harmful to them within this context often is not considered.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> McKee, A., Litsou, K., Byron, P., & Ingham, R. (2022). *What Do We Know About the Effects of Pornography After Fifty Years of Academic Research?*

<sup>4</sup> Foubert JD (2017) *The public health harms of pornography: The brain, erectile dysfunction, and sexual violence.*

<sup>5</sup> [Flood, M \(2020\) Pornography is a powerful sexual socialiser for young people](#)

<sup>6</sup> See, H. W., & Woodley, G. (2024). *‘Firsthand’ versus ‘Secondhand’ Perspectives of Harm: Emphasising Teens’ Firsthand Perspectives of Online Sexual Content.*

# How are young people engaging with pornography?

## Frequency & Platform Accessibility

- Young people and children have markedly different attitudes towards pornography that accidentally came across, comparatively to pornography which they intentionally seek out to engage with. This is important to distinguish when understanding approaches of engagement with young people and children<sup>7</sup>.
- Frequency of pornography consumption, and reasons for engaging with pornography changes as young people get older.<sup>8</sup>
- 62% of young men who encountered online pornography did so intentionally, compared to 49% of young women.
- LGBTIAQ+ young people were more likely to have viewed pornography than heterosexual young people<sup>9</sup>
- 94% of young people who engage with pornography view it online through smart phones, predominately by themselves.<sup>10</sup>
- Free, mainstream pornography platform websites are the primary way young people access online pornography. The second is through social media.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> eSafety Research (2023) *Roadmap for Age Verification Background Report*

<sup>8</sup> eSafety Research (2022)

<sup>9</sup> Megan S.C. Lim, Agius, P. A., Carrotte, E. R., Vella, A. M., & Hellard, M. E. (2017). *Young australians' use of pornography and associations with sexual risk behaviours.*

<sup>10</sup> Crabbe M, Flood M, Adams K (2024)

<sup>11</sup> eSafety Research (2022)

## Reasons for Engagement

Young people access various types, or genres, of online pornographic content – not solely mainstream pornography. Their reasons for engaging with pornography varies amongst young people, including entertainment, curiosity, keeping up with peers or personal gratification<sup>1213</sup>

Young people also use pornography as an exploration of their own personal likes and desires<sup>14</sup> as well as allowing some LGBTQIA+ young people to explore and discover their sexuality<sup>15</sup>. LGBTQIA+ young people were also more likely to view pornography as having a positive effect on their sexual education and exploration, comparatively to their heterosexual peers.<sup>16</sup>

## Pornography as an educational tool

Multiple studies and interviews with young people in Australia highlight that pornography is also used as form of a sex education.<sup>1718</sup> OurWatch’s 2024 report *‘Impact of pornography on young people’*<sup>19</sup> found that 31% of young people surveyed indicated that they consume pornography also for sex educational purposes, despite many being aware that it is not the best way to learn about sex.

Young people using pornography as an education tool was also echoed in testimony submissions and as online poll survey responses received by Teach Us Consent:

### Teach Us Consent Poll (2021)

Q: Have you ever used porn as a source of sex education?

Yes: 118 (49%)

No: 123 (51%)

### Testimony Submissions

*“I stumbled across pornography when I was 12 and this became my sex education. I went to an all-girls catholic school. We had NO sex ed.”*

F, 19

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<sup>12</sup> Crabbe M, Flood M, Adams K (2024)

<sup>13</sup> eSafety Research (2022)

<sup>14</sup> Attwood, F., Smith, C., & Barker, M. (2018). *‘I’m just curious and still exploring myself’: Young people and pornography.*

<sup>15</sup> Harvey, P. (2020). *Let’s Talk About Porn: The Perceived Effect of Online Mainstream Pornography on LGBTQ Youth.*

<sup>16</sup> eSafety Research (2022)

<sup>17</sup> See, H. W., & Woodley, G. (2024)

<sup>18</sup> Crabbe M, Flood M, Adams K (2024)

<sup>19</sup> OurWatch (2024) *Impact of pornography on young people survey and report summary*

Studies indicate that young LGBTQIA+ people often turn to pornography due to their lack of representation within explicit RRSE. This was consistent within Teach Us Consent’s findings from in-house data received from Testimony Submissions and Polls conducted:

### Teach Us Consent Poll (2021)

Q: What kind of lessons were you hoping to learn (from pornography)?

*“I wanted to understand what lesbian sex looked like while I was exploring my sexuality”*

*“How to have sex with another woman, wanted more info so I didn’t go into it clueless”*

*“Queer sex bc they don’t teach that at schools”*

### Testimony Submissions

*“We weren’t taught anything about gay sexual health or consent, and it shows”*

M, 18

*“I am queer and never had any form of queer sex education during my schooling- it is only at uni that I have seen any consent or sex education which even briefly mentions queer people”.*

F, 23

Teach Us Consent sees it a significant issue that pornography is one of the only places young people receive explicit sex education, particularly for the LGBTQIA+ community.

## Young people, pornography & safer sex practices

Without adequate porn literacy and media literacy awareness, however, there are notable concerns associated with young people engaging with and accessing mainstream pornography to inform on mechanics of sex - specifically in relation to sex acts that have higher levels of associated risks<sup>20</sup>.

While the evidence links between depiction of violence in mainstream pornography and its enactment within real life are contested and inconclusive<sup>21</sup>, it is important to acknowledge the potential impacts of messaging or scripts which are communicated within mainstream pornography.

Some studies also have drawn potential links between men's attitudes toward sexual violence and consent, and mainstream pornography consumption<sup>22</sup>. Findings within a study on bystander efficacy reveals that the more pornography an individual consumes, the less likely they are to intervene in instances of sexual assault<sup>23</sup>.

Concerns have also been raised that woman framed as enjoying aggressive sexual acts within mainstream pornography presents a normalization to young people women can be justifiably receptors of physical violence, and it is normal within intimate relationships<sup>24</sup>.

A 2020 descriptive analysis conducted on the types, frequency and target of aggression within 4009 mainstream heterosexual pornographic videos. 45% of the videos contained aggressive and violent acts, and within 97% of the materials, the target of aggression was women. Primary aggressive acts included: spanking, gagging, slapping, hairpulling and non-fatal strangulation.

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<sup>20</sup> Lim, M.S.C et. al. (2017).

<sup>21</sup> Ferguson, C. J., & Hartley, R. D. (2022) *Pornography and Sexual Aggression: Can Meta-Analysis Find a Link? Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*

<sup>22</sup> Brown, J. D., & L'Engle, K. L. (2009). *X-Rated: Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors Associated With U.S. Early Adolescents' Exposure to Sexually Explicit Media*.

<sup>23</sup> Foubert, John D, and Ana J Bridges.(2016) *Predicting Bystander Efficacy and Willingness to Intervene in College Men and Women: The Role of Exposure to Varying Levels of Violence in Pornography*

<sup>24</sup> Vera-Gray, F., McGlynn, C., Kureshi, I., & Butterby, K. (2021) *Sexual violence as a sexual script in mainstream online pornography*.

## Teach Us Consent Poll (2021):

### Q: What lessons do you think that you picked up from porn?

*You should enjoy aggressive demeaning behaviour or at least accept it*

*That rough is always pleasurable*

*That I should like it rough and give a 'performance' always*

*Girls like it rough, not asking for consent, no to minimal foreplay*

Within much mainstream pornography, overly aggressive sexual acts are not prefaced with instructions safe ways to engage with such acts. The lack of depictions of condom usage<sup>25</sup>, consent discussions,<sup>26</sup> boundary prefacing<sup>27</sup> or aftercare within mainstream pornography can communicate the notion that these are not necessary or need to be routinely practiced.<sup>28</sup>

Young adults also mostly agree that pornography could be harmful to some people<sup>29</sup>, with the lack of consent depictions within pornography raised as a primary factor:

*"In those videos they never really go over consent, they just go straight in to doing it. I feel like it would harm you in those ways, if you aren't educated otherwise"* - Levi, 12<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Lim, M.S.C et. al. (2017).

<sup>26</sup> Fritz, N., Malic, V., Paul, B., & Zhou, Y. (2020). *A descriptive analysis of the types, targets, and relative frequency of aggression in mainstream pornography*

<sup>27</sup> Sharman, L.S., Fitzgerald, R. & Douglas, H (2024) *Prevalence of Sexual Strangulation/Choking Among Australian 18–35-Year-Olds*

<sup>28</sup> Vera-Gray, F et al. (2021)

<sup>29</sup> Lim, M. S. C., Roode, K., Davis, A. C., & Wright, C. J. C. (2020). 'Censorship is cancer'. *Young people's support for pornography-related initiatives.*

<sup>30</sup> Woodley, G & Green, L *Calls to ban 'harmful pornography' are rife. Here's what teens actually think about porn* The Conversation 21 August 2024

# Young People, Pornography and Consent

When it comes to learning about how to seek affirmative consent, respect rejection, practice ongoing consent throughout a sexual experience, and build respectful relationships, mainstream pornography is not the best educator.

Young people, when asked by Teach Us Consent what they wished their partners knew about porn, frequently cited consent:

## Teach Us Consent Poll (2021)

Q: What do you wish your partner knew about pornography?

*“Don’t try to emulate any of it without asking your sex partner if they’re into that first”*

*“Asking for consent is sexy! Porn doesn’t show it but it’s so important”*

*“That consent is so needed”*

- Research conducted by eSafety (2022) found that 74% of young people believed that online mainstream pornography had a negative or very negative effect on understanding of consent.<sup>31</sup>
- 35% of scenes in popular mainstream pornography contain non-consensual behaviour<sup>32</sup>.

Whilst coercive control within relationships and sexual coercion is not solely due to the influence of pornography, qualitative research does show that some young women feel pressured to engage in certain sexual acts from their male partners, based upon what they have watched in pornography.<sup>33</sup>

Findings from a study on Young Australian’s pornography use and associated health risk behaviors also reported young heterosexual women felt pressured from their male partners to engage in anal intercourse before they were comfortable to do so, with young women linking the pressure to their partners pornography consumption<sup>34, 35</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> eSafety Research (2022)

<sup>32</sup> Office of Film and Literature Classification (2019) *Breaking Down Porn: A Classification Office analysis of commonly viewed pornography in NZ*, Office of Film and Literature Classification, Wellington.

<sup>33</sup> Rothman, E.F., Decker, M.R., Miller, E. et al (2012) *Multi-person Sex among a Sample of Adolescent Female Urban Health Clinic Patients*

<sup>34</sup> Lim, M.S.C et. al. (2017)

<sup>35</sup> Sun, C., Bridges, A., Johnson, J.A. et al. (2016) *Pornography and the Male Sexual Script: An Analysis of Consumption and Sexual Relations*.

Testimonies received by Teach Us Consent had this echoed by young women, with some, mentioning pornography as a contributing factor when feeling pressured into certain sex acts:

### Testimony Submission

*“My ex-boyfriend coerced me into anal sex. He was obsessed with it from porn. He would try and make me act out the videos he watched...”*  
F, 24

The driver of this has been attributed by some to Paul Wright’s 3AM model (acquisition, activation and application) of ‘sexual scripts’, a theoretical framework which explains how pornography influences expectations and understandings of what is ‘socially acceptable’ to be involved in intercourse mechanics<sup>36</sup>.

An important preface: The ‘sexual scripts’ communicated by a lack of depictions of consent or safer sex practices depicted within mainstream pornography is the cause of concern, rather than the specific sex acts in of themselves.

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<sup>36</sup>Wright, P (2015) *Americans’ attitudes toward premarital sex and pornography consumption: a national panel analysis*

## Young People, Pornography and Misogyny

Some research argues that pornography can reinforce restrictive heterosexual gender roles, and present misogynistic attitudes as a normative model of behaviour.<sup>37</sup>

However, the extent pornography's impact upon gender perceptions is not definitive; with some studies acknowledging that multiple potentially influencing factors also contribute to shaping attitudes around gender. These including adults around them, and other forms of media engaged with.<sup>38</sup>

Some young men recognise the misogynistic attitudes which are depicted in mainstream pornography, and how that impacts/can impact their perceptions of women and gender roles.

Findings from OurWatch's 2024 Report highlighted that amongst young men surveyed (16-20):<sup>39</sup>

- 72% agree that pornography impacts how women are viewed in real life
- 65% agree that pornography is degrades women
- 79% agree that pornography pushes gendered expectations within sex
- 84% agree that pornography encourages rigid gender roles and stereotypes

### Testimony Submission

*"More teaching needs to be done at the pre-adolescent stage to assist these boys in developing healthy association with women to stop boys developing early distorted ideas of women through pornography."*

**M, 25**

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<sup>37</sup> Upton, J., Hazell, A., Abbott, A., and Pilling, K. (2020) *The relationship between pornography use and harmful sexual attitudes and behaviours: A literature review*

<sup>38</sup> Davis, A et al (2018)

<sup>39</sup> OurWatch (2024)

## Teach Us Consent Poll Results (2021)

### Q: What lessons do you think you picked up from porn?

*Women are naturally submissive*

*Boys will always initiative/be more horny than girls*

*That sex is about the man, not me as a woman*

*Male pleasure is all that mattered – it's still all that I focus on... I'm 30 FFS*

The fixation of Mainstream Pornography upon the gratification and pleasure of men, who are presented within a dominative position, can send messaging to young people that minimises the sexual agency and pleasure of women<sup>40</sup>, potentially further augmenting gender-based sex-shaming attitudes.

This was noted by some young women within some testimonies received by Teach Us Consent:

### Testimony Submission:

*“These boys feel the need to not only act out porn but then boast about it to their friends, while the girls are simply dismissed as either a ‘prude’ or a ‘slut’.”*

17, F

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<sup>40</sup> Ashton, S., McDonald, K., & Kirkman, M. (2017). *Women's Experiences of Pornography: A Systematic Review of Research Using Qualitative Methods*.

# Young People, Pornography and Body Image

The potential negative impacts upon body image for women due to mainstream pornography is a frequent topic of discussion, with studies drawing links to insecurities amongst young women and body standards depicted within mainstream pornographic<sup>4142</sup>.

Results from the poll conducted by Teach us Consent revealed how some young people's perception of their body was impacted by pornography:

## Teach Us Consent Poll (2021)

### Q: What lessons do you think you picked up from porn?

*"All labias look the same"*

*"Like "hairy girl" but otherwise the norm is no hair"*

*"That all women have no hair and always have to have a Brazilian – normalise pubes!"*

### Q: What do you wish your sexual partners knew about porn?

*"That there are MANY DIFFERENT types of vaginas, not everyone's picture perfect"*

*"The size of their privates doesn't matter too much"*

Teach Us Consent's testimony submissions also highlight how pornography has shifted some young women's perceptions of what a body should look like:

### Testimony Submission:

*"I grew up believing pornography was how people had sex. It made me have a distorted view of sex and about my body"*

F, 22

*"My first boyfriend told me I need labiaplasty because my body didn't look like the ones in porn - this made me self-conscious for years and it took a lot of work to regain my confidence."*

F, 25

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<sup>41</sup> Stewart, D. N., & Szymanski, D. M. (2012). *Young adult women's reports of their partner's pornography use as a correlate of their self-esteem, relationship quality, and sexual satisfaction*

<sup>42</sup> Maheux AJ, Roberts SR, Evans R, Widman L, Choukas-Bradley S (2021) *Associations between adolescents' pornography consumption and self-objectification, body comparison, and body shame.*

It is not only young women impacted. Research conducted suggests an increase in insecurities surrounding physical appearance and sexual performance from mainstream pornography consumption.<sup>43</sup>

Testimonies received by Teach Us Consent revealed that some young men had unfounded biological myths and concerns regarding their genitalia look, size and ejaculation ability; comparatively to what they had seen in pornography:

#### Testimony Submission

*“I thought there was something wrong coz I didn’t cum like the guys in porn”*

**18, M**

*“[After we watched porn together] I was worried that my dick was too small, and she wouldn’t want to have sex.”*

**20, M**

Notably, The Cass Review from the UK recommended further investigation into consumption of online pornography and gender dysphoria in young people is needed. Nadrowski (2023) suggests that exploration with gender-questioning youth experiencing body dysmorphia should include consideration of their engagement with pornographic content.

However, research found in surveys and interviews with young TNB young people, pornography had positive associations and was considered important regarding diverse gender representations for gender questioning young people<sup>44,45</sup> Additionally, for some young people, research findings also indicate that young people become more discerning over time regarding the body ideals represented in mainstream pornography<sup>46</sup>; due to development critical thinking, further education, and more life experience.

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<sup>43</sup> Maheux AJ, Roberts SR, Evans R, Widman L, Choukas-Bradley S (2021)

<sup>44</sup> Harvey, P. (2020).

<sup>45</sup> Flory, I. M., & Shor, E. (2024). “Porn is blunt [...] I had way more LGBTQ+ friendly education through porn”: The experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals with online pornography.

<sup>46</sup> Paquette, M., Bóthe, B., Dion, J., Girouard, A., & Bergeron, S. (2023). *Can I love my body even if it doesn't look like the porn stars'? longitudinal associations between pornography use frequency and body appreciation in a diverse sample of adolescents.*

# Age Verification and Non-Consensual Deep Fake/ AI Generated Pornography

## Non-Consensual Deepfake and AI Generated Pornography

All discussions pertaining to non-consensual deepfake and AI Generated Pornography should be in acknowledgement that it is classified as Tech-Facilitated Abuse/ Image Based Abuse, rather than created pornography using paid actors.<sup>47</sup> This presents a clear distinction between what constitutes as an abuse or harm act and what is considered pornography; in the context of both education and curriculum development for young people, and any proposed legislative changes.

## Online Age Verification software

- Studies pose that age verification software for websites and platforms which host pornography can help reduce younger children's accidental or incidental exposure.<sup>48</sup>
- Of young people surveyed aged between 12-17, 72% agreed with age verification<sup>49</sup>; however, survey results from eSafety Research report indicated that opinions from young people on age verifications vary depending upon gender, sexuality, ability and whether they have had prior engagement with online pornography<sup>50</sup>
- Young people also voiced concerns on how this can be appropriately implemented, citing data concerns<sup>51</sup>
- Some young people framed the online age verification measures more as something that is 'good for adults', rather than considering it to be a protective measure for themselves.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ashton, S., McDonald, K., & Kirkman, M. (2019). *What does 'pornography' mean in the digital age? Revisiting a definition for social science researchers*

<sup>48</sup> Lim, M.S.C et. al. (2017)

<sup>49</sup> [University of Sydney \(2023\) Emerging Online Safety Issues](#)

<sup>50</sup> eSafety Commissioner (2023) *Questions, doubts and hopes: Young people's attitudes towards age assurance and the age-based restriction of access to online pornography*

<sup>51</sup> *ibid*

<sup>52</sup> [University of Sydney \(2023\) Emerging Online Safety Issues](#)

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*

- Analysis studies on the U.K Age Verification software to prohibit children and young people accessing pornography, has highlighted notable shortcomings in its implementation – primarily drawing to attention its ineffectiveness - and suggests that it should not be used as a primary measure<sup>54</sup>.
- Researchers’ findings state that skills-based pornography and online media literacy education for children and young people is a more effective and appropriate approach.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Majid, Yar (2019) *Protecting children from internet pornography? A critical assessment of statutory age verification and its enforcement in the UK*

<sup>55</sup> Stardust, Z., Obeid, A., Mckee, A., Angus, D., (2024) *Mandatory Age Verification for Pornography Access: Why it can't and won't 'save the children'*.

# Young people and Respectful Relationships and Sex Education

Many young people have shared that sentiment that the current curriculum for Respectful Relationships and Sex Education (RRSE) is not adequate in equipping them with the necessary skills needed to navigate online pornography, as well as fostering healthy relationships and engaging in sex.<sup>5657</sup>

## Testimony Submission:

*“The girls watched the consent tea video, and the boys was told the dangers of porn not so much on the subject of consent. In PDHPE we were given a link to NSW health website about consent and that was it for our “sex ed”.*

F, 18

Teachers also recognise the current gaps within the current RRSE curriculums; with testimony submissions received by Teach Us Consent:

## Testimony Submission

*“I am a primary school teacher; I and I know for a fact that our sexual education program is not up to standard. There are plenty of ways we can be teaching healthy sexuality and relationships in an age-appropriate way”*

F, 33

- Some young people feel the current curriculum over- emphasises the risks surrounding sex, rather than acknowledgment of the pleasurable aspects<sup>58</sup>. Research findings indicate that a risk-centric RRSE curriculum can produce feelings of fear towards sex, as well as sexual shame within young people.<sup>59</sup>
- LGBTQIA+ young people especially felt a lack of representation, or relevance, to RRSE delivered within their schooling.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> eSafety Research (2023)

<sup>57</sup> Woodley, G (2023) ‘We haven’t been taught about sex’: teens talk about how to fix school sex education. The Conversation. May 25, 2023

<sup>58</sup> Woodley, G. & Green, L. (2024). Calls to ban ‘harmful pornography’ are rife. Here’s what teens actually think about porn. The Conversation.

<sup>59</sup> Harvey, P. (2020)

<sup>60</sup> [The 7th National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2021](#)

- Young people have expressed their right to an autonomous and safe sexual exploration and development, including agency over their engagement with online pornography as part of that exploration<sup>61</sup>.
- Young people viewed education as an effective tool for mitigating the harmful impacts of online pornography<sup>62</sup>, and recognise the benefits of pornography-specific education, relationships education, and sex education in reducing harmful attitudes which may arise from mainstream pornographic consumption<sup>63</sup>.
- 85% of young people believed in pornography education being incorporated into school curriculum. However expressed concerns with how it would be taught; specifically fears of sex-negative, or judgemental, porn literacy education<sup>64</sup>.

There is substantial evidence which demonstrates that Respectful Relationships Education (RRE), integrated with age-appropriate pornography literacy, is a highly effective approach which mitigates potential harms associated with online mainstream pornography <sup>65</sup><sup>66</sup><sup>67</sup>.

The diverse and varied backgrounds of young people means that there is not a one-size fits all approach for pornography literacy within RRSE education materials.<sup>68</sup> Research on effective pornography literacy in RRSE education materials emphasizes that it must be representative, targeted<sup>69</sup> inclusive<sup>70</sup>, and does not unintentionally alienate any young people through insinuations that only certain kinds of sex portrayed in pornography is ‘realistic’.<sup>71</sup> Additionally, considerations should be made for young people’s existing understanding of pornography in the development of educational resources.<sup>72</sup> This approach to pornography

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<sup>61</sup> eSafety Research (2023)

<sup>62</sup> Ibid

<sup>63</sup> Woodley, G. & Green, L. (2024). *Calls to ban ‘harmful pornography’ are rife. Here’s what teens actually think about porn.* The Conversation.

<sup>64</sup> Lim, M.S.C et. Al (2020)

<sup>65</sup> Evans-Paulson, R., Dodson, C. V., & Scull, T. M. (2023). *Critical media attitudes as a buffer against the harmful effects of pornography on beliefs about sexual and dating violence.*

<sup>66</sup> Rothman, E. F., Adhia, A., Christensen, T. T., Paruk, J., Alder, J., & Daley, N. (2018). *A Pornography Literacy Class for Youth: Results of a Feasibility and Efficacy Pilot Study.*

<sup>67</sup> Lim, M. S. C et.al. (2020).

<sup>68</sup> Healy-Cullen, S. Taylor, E.J., Morison, T., Ross, K (2021) *Using Q- Methodology to Explore Stakeholder Views about Porn Literacy Education*

<sup>69</sup> Litsou, K, Byron, P, Mckee, A & Inham, R. (2021) *Learning from pornography: results of a mixed methods systematic review*

<sup>70</sup> Our Watch. (2020). *Pornography, young people, and preventing violence against women*

<sup>71</sup> Byron, Paul et al. (2021) *Reading for Realness: Porn Literacies, Digital Media, and Young People*

<sup>72</sup> Byron, Paul et al (2023) *Porn literacy and young people’s digital cultures*

literacy curriculum development ensures that discussions recognise and credit the agency and critical literacy abilities of young people<sup>73</sup>.

Through actively engaging young people and allowing them the ability to express what they want to know about regarding pornography, sex, consent and healthy relationships fosters an open dialogue, providing young people a safe space to go to with their concerns.

## Concluding Comments

Pornography in of itself is not inherently harmful.

Given the vast variety of genres of pornographic content, it encompasses a broad range of genres and scripts, with diverse content that can be interpreted and engaged with differently by individuals.

It is difficult to state a singular definition of 'harm' or 'impact,' as these vary greatly depending on the person and context. As noted by See & Woodley (2024) the predominate body of research on the harmful impacts of pornography has not investigated, nor asked what 'harm' is according to young people themselves<sup>74</sup>.

However, as pornography does encompass a broad range, we also acknowledge that depictions and representations found within mainstream pornography can lend to adverse impacts and messaging to younger people<sup>75</sup>, particularly those who do not have comprehensive media literacy, or have had foundational sexual education, healthy relationship guidance or consent skills, or who are using mainstream pornography as a form of sex education<sup>76</sup>.

It is crucial that a nuanced, informed, and open approach that also recognises the agency and autonomy of young people is adopted to ensure they receive appropriate, supportive and constructive guidance that is not based upon judgement or shame.

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<sup>73</sup> Healy-Cullen, Siobhán et al (). *What Does It Mean to Be 'Porn Literate': Perspectives of Young People, Parents and Teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand*.

<sup>74</sup> See, H. W., & Woodley, G. (2024).

<sup>75</sup> Flood, Micheal 2020 *Pornography is a powerful sexual socialiser for young people*

<sup>76</sup> Evans-Paulson, R., Dodson, C. V., & Scull, T. M. (2023). *Critical media attitudes as a buffer against the harmful effects of pornography on beliefs about sexual and dating violence*. *Sex Education*, 24(6), 799–815.

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