



## **Impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health**

**November 2024**

## 1. Executive Summary

The Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales (P&C Federation) has two recommendations:

1. **Recommendation 1: Produce and widely publicise effective resources for parents, to provide them the tools to navigate this area.**
2. **Recommendation 2: Embed in the school curriculum age-appropriate education to support children and young people in their response to and management of exposure to harmful pornography.**

## 2. Introduction

The P&C Federation is thankful for this opportunity to contribute feedback to Impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health. The P&C Federation represents a collective voice of parents, guardians, and community members dedicated to supporting public schools across New South Wales.<sup>1</sup>

This inquiry's terms of reference focus largely, though not exclusively, on the impacts of harmful pornography on children and young people. The topic of this inquiry is immensely complex, touching on matters as varied as emerging technology such as AI-generated content, the cognitive and psychological impact on young people, the challenges of regulating technology and the risks of infringing on general freedom of choice. The P&C Federation's submission focuses on the role of parents, the education system, and where governments can support both.

## 3. Statement of Issues

In many ways, this topic poses unparalleled challenges on several fronts:

- The level and ease of access children and young people have to pornographic content is unprecedented. Even younger parents who were at school during the Internet era likely did not have the same level of access and inadvertent exposure to harmful pornographic material as school-age people today.
- This is due to not only an increase in the volume of online pornographic content, but also to smartphone technology, which means it is no longer the case that pornographic material is only accessible through desktop computers, or physical spaces accessible only by adults.
- It has been commonly observed that online pornography has become the main source of knowledge about sex and sexuality for young people, with some studies indicating that over 70% of teenagers have consumed pornography. The potentially repeated exposure of this many young people to sexually explicit material is arguably without historic precedent.
- There is evidence that risk of maladaptive behaviours in children increase with exposure to pornographic material. For example:
  - Exposure to pornography can shape young people's expectations of sex and sexuality in unrealistic and harmful ways.
  - There is evidence that adolescent boys who consume pornography are likelier to be perpetrators of sexually aggressive behaviours.
  - Compulsive consumption can be associated with the frequency of viewing pornographic material.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Parent" refers to anyone with legal care of a child, such as a parent, carer or legal guardian

<sup>2</sup> Many of these points were raised by the Australian Government in: *The effects of pornography on children and young people*. 2017 - [https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/online\\_pornography-effects\\_on\\_children\\_young\\_people\\_snapshot\\_0.pdf](https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/online_pornography-effects_on_children_young_people_snapshot_0.pdf)

- While overt pornography is banned from social media platforms, the filters are far from perfect. There is also content available on social media platforms that is not explicitly pornographic but is highly sexualised or has potential to cause similar impacts on children and young people's perceptions as harmful pornography.

Given all the above factors, and the fact that this topic to many people is inherently sensitive and uncomfortable in the extreme, it is common for parents to feel they are in uncharted waters and that they lack full control of their children's exposure to unsuitable material. Many such parents would welcome both more control over what their children are exposed to and information about how to handle these topics with their children.

#### 4. Recommendations

##### **Recommendation 1: Produce and widely publicise effective resources for parents, to provide them the tools to navigate this area.**

Given that most exposure to pornography occurs outside of school settings, parents play a primary and critical role in handling this issue. It is no exaggeration to say that without parents playing a role in this, solutions from anywhere else will be ineffective.

The government's principal focus should thus be on providing parents the tools to understand the implications of exposure to pornography, and to manage their own children's potential exposure.

It is noteworthy that while some surveys found a majority of parents of teenagers believed their children had not been exposed to pornography online,<sup>3</sup> other surveys of teenagers found as many as 73% had stated they have consumed pornography.<sup>4</sup> This indicates that parents underestimate their children's exposure to pornography and that young people are accessing online pornography entirely without their parents knowledge.

For example, the eSafety Commissioner has pages on its website with information about online pornography for parents, focused primarily on how parents can talk with their children about the topic. While this information is useful, it could be both further developed and publicised more widely. For example, we would consider it feasible for each government school website to have links for parents to resources on this topic, and for school newsletters to be a forum for dissemination of information. Parents should be consulted with widely on both the resources available but also the marketing strategy for those resources to ensure that educational material is reflective of parent needs and demands.

##### **Recommendation 2: Embed in the school curriculum age-appropriate education to support children and young people in their response to and management of exposure to harmful pornography.**

Schools are an important and underutilised space for children to safely navigate complex and sensitive topics. The NSW curriculum and NSW Department of Education cover topics that are relevant to exposure to online pornography through education, including the new consent education in the K-12 curriculum and the Controversial Issues in Schools Policy, although there are few to no examples of systematic education on student exposure to pornography. Embedding this topic in the curriculum in an age-appropriate way would be of potentially great assistance to students. Embedding exposure to pornography – harmful or otherwise – in the sex education curriculum will support in-home learning.

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<sup>3</sup> Parenting and pornography: Summary report: findings from Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. eSafety Research. 2018. <https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-09/summary-report-parenting-and-pornography.pdf?v=1730262567760>

<sup>4</sup> Robb and Mann. 2023. Teens and Pornography. <https://www.commonsemmedia.org/sites/default/files/research/report/2022-teens-and-pornography-final-web.pdf>

It would provide an additional safe space for children and young people to learn about their world in a way that is handled sensitively and with appropriately trained staff.

We suggest pre-service teacher training should cover the influence of pornography and how to address it, as well as regular training that is reflective of technological advances and social discourse to which children and young people are exposed. In recent years, governments have greatly revamped education on consent, and in our view exposure to pornography should be treated in a similar way. This would include:

- setting the curriculum and shaping in-class conversations reflective of the probability that students will have been exposed to pornography by the time they have finished school;
- Training teachers to deliver the developed content openly and empathetically, supporting students to respond in kind and break down barriers to learning
- Preparing for AI-generated pornography to become a growing challenge, and in particular the risk of young people using tools to generate child pornography without an understanding of the consequences. While recent high-profile cases have generated media attention, it is a new challenge that is not explicitly addressed in existing educational material.

## 5. Conclusion

The P&C Federation urges a proactive, collaborative approach to address the complex issue of children and young people's exposure to harmful pornography. By providing parents with comprehensive, accessible resources and embedding age-appropriate discussions on this topic within the school curriculum, we can empower families and educators alike to help children navigate this challenging digital landscape. Equipping parents and educators with the tools and knowledge to foster open conversations and informed responses is essential in supporting the wellbeing of the next generation. The P&C Federation stands ready to work alongside government, schools, and communities to ensure these recommendations are implemented effectively and inclusively, creating a safer and more supportive environment for all young people.