



## Information about Pornography and Young People: its effects on mental health, behaviour and relationships

This fact sheet is designed to provide information and advice to young people, parents, carers and professionals about pornography and how it may impact on young people's mental health, behaviour and relationships.

### What is pornography?

Pornography is defined as printed or visual material containing the explicit description or display of sexual body parts or activity, designed to make someone feel aroused or create sexual enjoyment to the person who reads, see or hears it.

Not all pornography is linked to harmful outcomes, however online pornographic videos that are freely available and mainstream often do not promote active consent or respect. *It's time we talked*, an Australian violence prevention organisation, estimates that nearly 90% of the most popular porn includes physical aggression.

### Facts about pornography

In their research on pornography and young people the Australian Institute of Family Studies found that:

- Just under half of all Australian children aged 9 to 16 years old have seen pornographic images (whether intentionally or unintentionally)
- Male adolescents who viewed pornography frequently were more likely to see women as sex objects, strengthening attitudes supporting sexual violence against women.

- Adolescents who watch violent pornography can be up to six times more likely to be sexually aggressive compared to those who viewed non-violent pornography or no pornography.
- Parents tend to underestimate the amount of pornography watched by adolescents, and overestimate the amount watched by younger children.
- Where comprehensive sexuality and relationships education is absent pornography can become a major source of sex education for adolescents - often leading to young people trying to perform sexual behaviour they have seen online.

For the full report see: <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/effects-pornography-children-and-young-people>

### Why do we worry about young people accessing pornography?

There are several reasons why accessing pornography can be potentially harmful for young people. These include:

### Negative mental health impacts:

- Body image issues
- Low self-esteem/depression
- Anxiety including the pressure to engage in sexual acts
- Loneliness and social isolation
- A lack of empathy
- A preoccupation with sex and sexual relationships

### Relationships:

- Creates unhealthy expectations in relationships
- Intimacy with real people may not seem satisfying
- A decrease in respect between partners
- Fosters “sexual uncertainty” - being unclear about what is expected in sexual encounters/acts
- Focus becomes on physical appearance rather than intimate connection

### Behaviour:

- Can increase aggression and/or the risk of sexual violence
- Can decrease love, affection and intimacy, and some research has suggested sexual dysfunction may be a potential outcome
- Girls and young women acting the way they think men want them too (like porn stars)
- Potential for watching more extreme material
- It can become compulsive and interfere with daily life functioning

### Common myths perpetuated by pornography:

- Men want sex all of the time
- Women like men to behave in an aggressive sexual way towards them
- Male sexual pleasure is more important than female sexual pleasure
- Men have to be in charge and women have to take a submissive or passive role in sex
- Safe sex (ie use of condoms) is not important
- More extreme sexual acts (group sex, violent or rough sex, anal sex etc.) are normal

### How can I protect my child?

- Set some “House Rules” - establish what is and isn't okay to share and access on devices
- Stay engaged, talk regularly with your child about what they are doing online and build trust
- Use available safe technology (parental controls, setting Wi-Fi curfews etc.)

- Have age appropriate conversations with your children about sexual content
- Make sure your children can not come across inappropriate content on your devices

### What do I do if I find out my child has been accessing pornography?

Finding out your child or adolescent has been accessing pornography can be confronting and bring up a range of reactions such as disbelief, shame, anger, disgust, disappointment, confusion and fear. It is important to remember that all of these feelings are normal and there is support available for you and your family. Remember that masturbation is a healthy normal behaviour used for self-soothing and sexual development. It is okay as long as it is done in private and proper hygiene practices are used.

If your child discloses or you discover that they have been accessing pornography, some ways you can support them are:

- Stay calm
- Reassure them that you still love them
- Don't shame them or make them feel guilty
- Ask them what they have seen and how it has made them feel
- Try to understand what they are telling you without judging them
- Talk with them in private about the behaviour and explain why you are concerned about it
- Provide appropriate, easy-to-understand information about the negative effects of pornography
- Take away or limit any access to devices if necessary and explain clearly why this needs to happen
- Seek professional support if needed – SASS counsellors are experienced in this area and can answer any questions you may have

### Is all pornography bad?

It is important to mention that the negative effects mentioned are all potential effects that may or may not affect your child. Some research has suggested that for adults there are some positive outcomes related to the consumption of pornography, such as normalising sex and sexual body parts.

What is important is that anyone who watches pornography does so with an informed and critical eye, and understands the vast differences between real, safe, intimate sexual behaviour, and sexual activity portrayed in pornography.

Young people and children typically do not have the life experience or understanding to make this clear distinction.

### Staying safe whilst accessing pornography

If you are supporting a young person who is accessing pornography, these are some things you might like to talk to them about to help keep themselves and others safe:

- You should not feel pressured to watch or access pornography and you always need to give informed consent
- Remember that most porn has been staged, performed and airbrushed - it isn't real
- Limit the amount of porn you watch and how often you watch it
- It is illegal to send, receive or share pornographic material (images or videos) which involve people under the age of 18 years. This is classified as child pornography
- It is also illegal to post or send a photo or video of an adult's private parts (whether bare or covered by underpants) or private activities (like having sex, undressing or bathing) without their permission
- Whilst online be aware of scams, pop-ups and do not open links you do not trust
- Do not download files from pornography websites
- If you are feeling threatened, bullied, pressured or even uncomfortable by something you see, hear, read or by something someone else is doing, tell a trusted adult or contact <https://www.esafety.gov.au/key-issues/Illegal-harmful-content> or SASS for support.
- There are other forms of pornography that can be a safer way of exploring sexual ideas and sexual play, such as static imagery (like magazines) and erotic fiction. Any medium which engages the imagination is safer and less overwhelming for the senses.

In developing this fact sheet, SASS has accessed the following resources:

- <https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/online-mobile-safety/online-porn/>
- <https://yla.org.au/tas/topics/health-love-and-sex/sexting-laws/>
- <https://www.esafety.gov.au>
- <https://www.esafety.gov.au/parents/big-issues/online-pornography>
- <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/effects-pornography-children-and-young-people-snapshot>
- <https://itstimewetalked.com/>

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### Sexual Assault Support Service

Ground Floor, 31-33 Tower Road, New Town, 7008

03 6231 0044 (9am–5pm, Mon–Fri)

admin@sass.org.au | www.sass.org.au

24 hour sexual assault response and

counselling service: **1800 MYSUPPORT**

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**1800 697 877**

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SASS holds Quality Improvement Council (QIC) accreditation.