

Youth Action submission to the Inquiry into the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional and physical health

Acknowledgement of Country

Youth Action acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and understands that sovereignty was never ceded. Our office is located upon the land of the Gadigal people and we recognise their traditional and ongoing Custodianship and pay our respects to Elders past and present.

About Youth Action

Youth Action is the peak body representing young people and the services that support them in NSW. We advocate for positive change on issues affecting these groups. Our vision is for a society where all NSW young people are supported, engaged and valued, and their rights are realised.

Principles that underpin our work:

- We give a particular focus to regional young people, First Nations young people, those doing it tough, those with disability, LGBTQIA+, and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, including migrants and refugees.

- We use a rights-based lens to focus on programs, policy and advocacy that achieve meaningful outcomes, embed strengths-based approaches and are informed by data and evidence.
- We are an ally to self-determination of First Nations communities and are led by the expertise of young people and the Sector to be a trusted partner and collaborator.

Introduction

Youth Action welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Standing Committee on Social Issues Inquiry into the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health. This submission is grounded in the voices and lived experiences of young people across New South Wales.

The internet, social media and pornography is ubiquitous with our current digital generation of young people. With 91% of 14–17-year-olds ^a owning a mobile phone, pornography is easily accessed, poorly restricted and free to view. With a lack of alternate educational resources relating to sex, sexuality and relationships young people are feeding their curious minds by accessing pornography and other kinds of online material. In consultations with young people, we heard that pornography and other highly sexualised images are being shared via messages from peers and occasionally strangers on social media platforms including snapchat. They also told us that they are viewing pornography inadvertently via pop-up advertisements on video games and social media sites.

^a Office of the Australian Information Commissioner. (2023) Australian Community Attitudes to Privacy Survey. https://www.oaic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/74482/OAIC-Australian-Community-Attitudes-to-Privacy-Survey-2023.pdf

With the average age of a young person viewing pornography for the first time being 13^b, this introduction to sexual behaviour coincides with a formative developmental stage in a young persons life.

While there is some research acknowledging the positive impact pornography can have on young people. For example, young people who identify as LGBTQIA+ have reported that pornography explores and validates their own unique sexual experiences, which is often not included within mainstream media. The overwhelming majority of evidence suggests that it may be harmful to the development of young people's attitudes and behaviours relating to identity, gender, relationships and intimacy.^c

Finally, it is important to note that the extent of pornography's influence on young people's beliefs and understandings of relationships and sexuality requires further investigation. Noting that young people are not homogenous, and their own unique circumstances and identities determine how they consume and interpret information, it is important that all future decisions relating to pornography and young people, are made collaboratively with young people and where possible educational and support programs are youth-led.

The recommendations in this submission draw upon feedback provided from the youth sector and the voices and experiences of young people themselves.

In preparation for this submission, we heard from over 60 representatives from the youth sector and from a focus group of 10 young people about the impacts of harmful pornography on young people.

^bE-Safety Commissioner. (2023). Accidental, unsolicited and in your face: Young people's encounters with online pornography: a matter of platform responsible, education and choice, p. 5.

^c <https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-08/Accidental-unsolicited-and-in-your-face.pdf?v=1725250911999>

We have also incorporated advice from our consultations in 2023 and 2024 with young people on mental health and sexual violence.

This submission responds to the following terms of reference:

- d. the relationship between pornography use and respect and consent education
- f. the impact of exposure to violent and/or misogynistic pornography on children, teenagers and young adults
- h. the effectiveness of any current education programs about use and misuse of pornography, and how these may be improved
- i. the effectiveness of current restrictions on access to pornography and consideration of any need to improve these

Recommendations

1. The NSW Government undertake a review of the existing programs in NSW that address pornography use by young people and their impact on respectful relationships. Use this review to strengthen and expand existing evidence-based educational materials and programs designed to equip children and young people with the skills and knowledge they need to develop healthy attitudes to sexuality, respectful relationships, consent and pornography.
2. The New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA) review the current syllabus in NSW as it relates to consent and respectful relationships education to include content about pornography. Consult with young people about how they would like to learn about pornography, what information they feel they need and how to best implement these changes in the curriculum.
3. The NSW Government strengthen and expand state funding for accessible resources for parents to include information and training on how to support young people's emerging sexuality, to understand what they are viewing when they access pornography and how to create an open discussion with them about the information and values they are taking from the content they consume.

4. the Standing Committee on Social Issues and the NSW Government undertake a rights-based approach to reform, ensuring that young people are given sufficient opportunity to advise Government on issues relating to them, that their voices are heard by decision makers and that their experiences are considered tantamount in the decision-making process.

The relationship between pornography use and respect and consent education

While Pornography is not inherently problematic, the depiction and portrayal of individuals and/or groups of people (often young women and girls) within pornography is problematic. At best, and in general, pornography depicts male dominance, power and control. In its extreme form, it depicts violence, aggression and sexual assault, typically against young women and girls.

In our consultation with the youth sector, representatives emphasised that pornography is easily accessed and is a pivotal mechanism for young people in the development of their understandings and expectations of relationships, intimacy and consent. It is often viewed prior to a young person's first sexual experience, and is unrealistically and at times negatively, colouring young people's perceptions of what a healthy sexual relationship is.

"Easy access to pornography has shifted perceptions of privacy and normalised the idea of monetising one's body among young people."

"The portrayal of sex and relationships in pornography can distort young people's understanding of healthy interactions, leading to misguided beliefs about consent and sexual norms."

"The consequences of pornography include addiction, a detrimental view of sexual health, and ruined perspectives on sex. There are also troubling issues surrounding consent, as well as a lack of knowledge among young people regarding the legal implications of sharing images."

The sector also highlighted their concerns that young people were not able to access detailed and reliable information about pornography, sexual health and respectful relationships. They stressed that young people do not currently have access to the information they need to understand pornography or to make healthy and informed decisions about the relationships and activities that they enter into.

"There is reluctance among educators and adults to use direct and authentic language when discussing pornography and its impacts, stemming from fears of media backlash and parental disapproval."

"There is a significant gap in education about the implications of pornography, especially regarding privacy, respect in relationships, and the realities of sex work."

One youth worker stressed that adults being afraid or unwilling to talk to young people about these issues, makes it harder for young people to feel comfortable learning about topics like pornography.

"Pornography has always been a taboo topic, leading to a lack of education for young people, especially regarding its implications".

The youth sector felt that addressing pornography in respectful relationship education can play an important role in helping young people understand what is depicted in pornography and how expectations in real relationships can be very different. Addressing pornography in sexual education has the potential to help young people differentiate between fantasy depicted in pornography and healthy, consensual sexual behaviour in real life.

Some representatives in the youth sector stressed that some young people they support turn to pornography to understand sex and relationships when their education at school is lacking. One representative observed that this was particularly the case for LGBTQIA+ young people, who may not receive the information they need in mainstream sexual education.

"The effects I have observed are particularly evident among homosexual young men, who feel they do not have a place to learn about homosexual

sex. The pornography they were encountering was often quite violent, leading to an expectation among these young men that this behavior is normal. This has affected their ability to understand their identity, especially if they do not feel connected to what they are observing."

Young people participating in our sexual violence consultations also spoke about how there is not enough relevant and relatable content covered in the current consent and respectful relationships education at school. They felt this education should start in primary school and develop through high school and university to cover consent education, respectful and positive sexual relationships education, bystander education, information about where victim-survivors can get support.

"Consent in education should be a much bigger topic in the PDHPE system and taught from a young age. Consent in general should have always been a thing like in kindy teaching it's okay to say no to even the teachers and who to go to if you have been a victim."

"We need early intervention programs like Love Bites to be funded and available across all schools to ensure we get to young people early enough that we break the cycle."

"More funding to be put into educational programs that will teach people about consent, sexual health and turn it into an open conversation within Aboriginal communities so people don't feel shamed when trying to open up about it."

Young people need greater access to educational tools that are evidence based and relevant to their unique experiences. Tools which assist them to navigate relationships, sex and sexuality in a safe and respectful manner.

It is promising to see the commitment made by the NSW Government to implement Respectful Relationships Education in NSW schools. Building on this, it is important the NSW Parliament takes the necessary steps to ensure all school-aged children have access to this education. Young people that are not engaged in mainstream education, must be considered and alternative

initiatives and strategies developed to ensure they do not miss out on this vital education.

Noting information relating to pornography can be difficult for religious schools to provide without compromising their belief systems and values, and it is an area of education that can be confronting for teachers and other untrained people to deliver, investment into programs which are delivered by independent facilitators should be prioritised.

Investment in educational programs is key to ensuring that young people develop their own narrative of relationships and sex that is realistic, consensual and respectful.

In the absence of this investment young people will continue to source information from inappropriate, unhelpful and deleterious platforms including pornography.

The impact of exposure to violent and/or misogynistic pornography on children, teenagers and young adults

Young people and the youth sector spoke to us about the role of some pornography reinforcing harmful gender stereotypes and normalising aggression. It was felt that the normalisation of certain behaviours in pornography can make certain practices seem commonplace, encouraging some young people to make assumptions about their partners preferences without obtaining consent.

Representatives from the youth sector spoke about the normalisation and casualisation of certain language being used by the young people and particularly the boys and young men that they worked with.

“We have also noticed an increase in casual language among our young people, which we have found necessary to address.”

Other youth workers talked to us about how for others, particularly young women, access to pornography can skew understandings of sexual abuse with some young people not understanding what it means to give their own consent and feeling pressured to engage in certain acts or activities.

"In relation to women's shelters, there appears to be a lack of understanding regarding sexual abuse, as well as the prevalence of women willingly engaging in sexual activities that might be described as abusive, yet they may perceive this as normal behaviour."

The effectiveness of any current education programs about use and misuse of pornography, and how these may be improved

Consultation with young people and the youth sector identified few programs that were working well to address the use and misuse of pornography.

The youth sector identified Love Bites as a helpful program that teaches young people aged 11 to 17 about respectful relationships. The program aims to equip young people with the knowledge needed to have respectful relationships, encourage and develop skills in critical thinking and assist them to be able to problem solve and communicate effectively.

However, it was felt that education programs did not adequately address pornography. Both young people and the youth sector identified that young people needed programs to address what they were seeing in pornography, why it differed from real life sexual experiences and to learn about the potential harmful implications.

"There appears to be insufficient education on this topic, and many young people seem uncertain about what is acceptable. We have had to engage in unpacking conversations with them, making generalisations about language use and the normal ways to communicate with others. This highlights the lack of education surrounding these issues."

Young people participating in our sexual violence consultations also highlighted the need for a better range of resources, provided through educational programs in schools and also broader educational programs for the community about respectful relationships, sexual violence, supporting victim-survivors and bystander resources to help normalize conversations within communities.

"Have resources available so everyone knows what consent is and the consequences... and more funding to be put into educational programs that will teach people about consent, sexual health and turn it into an open conversation within communities so people don't feel shamed when trying to open up about it."

The effectiveness of any current education programs about use and misuse of pornography, and how these may be improved

Young people and the broader youth sector have suggested that greater protections and regulations are needed to protect young people online.

Young people and the youth sector identified that online pornography is relatively easy for young people to access and spoke about its availability through social media. Polling results undertaken with the youth sector revealed that 66% of respondents were in favour of introducing age verification. Speaking with young people in Sydney, it was suggested that age registrations should vary depending on the platform. For example, those aged 10-12 can access general websites, ages 14-15 can access some social media and 15-16-year-olds can access even more social media sites.

When discussed with young people in a focus group setting, the majority were in favour of regulating young people's access to pornography.

Conclusion

The insights gathered from young people and the youth sector underscore the urgent need for a comprehensive approach to improved education and resources available to young people concerning pornography, consent and respectful relationships. This must be done in a way that prioritises the voices of young people, to encourage and equip them to navigate complex topics around pornography, sexuality and relationships.