

**INQUIRY INTO IMPACTS OF HARMFUL PORNOGRAPHY  
ON MENTAL, EMOTIONAL, AND PHYSICAL HEALTH**

**Organisation:** Interrelate  
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## Submission to Inquiry into Impacts of Harmful Pornography on Mental, Emotional, and Physical Health - Interrelate

Interrelate is a not-for-profit organisation that has supported adults and children to strengthen their relationships since 1926. For over 98 years we have provided relationship and sexuality education to children and their parents/carers in schools, online and throughout the community. We have delivered programs to more than 500,000 students and families over the past 10 years and work across over 450 schools in NSW and Victoria each year.

Interrelate's suite of relationship and sexuality programs is designed for developmental stages from Year 3 through to Secondary School. The aim is to deliver curriculum aligned, age-appropriate content through highly trained educators within a safe environment.

This submission describes the firsthand experiences of our educators regarding the impact of pornography on the delivery of relationship and sexuality education in primary school classrooms. It will also explore the perspectives of older high school students on the impact of pornography on themselves and their peers.



***I have been an educator with Interrelate for 12 years and I have seen changes to young people's attitudes around the topic of pornography. When I first started in the role, we would occasionally get the question, "What is pornography?" in our question box. Young people didn't really know a great deal about it, even though they may have heard the word. Over the last ten years, young people's questions show that they know more, they are making statements and ask questions that tell me they have seen or discussed pornography with their friends. "Why do women make noises when having sex, is it normal?"***

***Young people are more confident in asking these questions too. Being able to respond to questions on this subject with age-appropriate answers helps the students to understand this topic.***

Stefanie, Educator  
Western Sydney Team, NSW.



***I have been an educator for 14 years, recently the types of questions I receive from primary aged students indicate that they have been exposed to or heard about inappropriate online content. Often when we get these types of questions there will be two - three questions from the one student. I see themes that are increasingly being represented in the Question Box about penis size, consuming sperm and why people, particularly females, make noise/moan during sex. The questions reveal a natural curiosity and desire to make sense of what they see. It must be very confusing for many young people when they are exposed to pornography and do not feel that they can ask about what they are seeing and hearing. The types of questions we are asked does tend to come in waves and surges, often depending on what is happening amongst a cohort at a particular school.***

Glenys, Educator  
Melbourne Team, VIC.

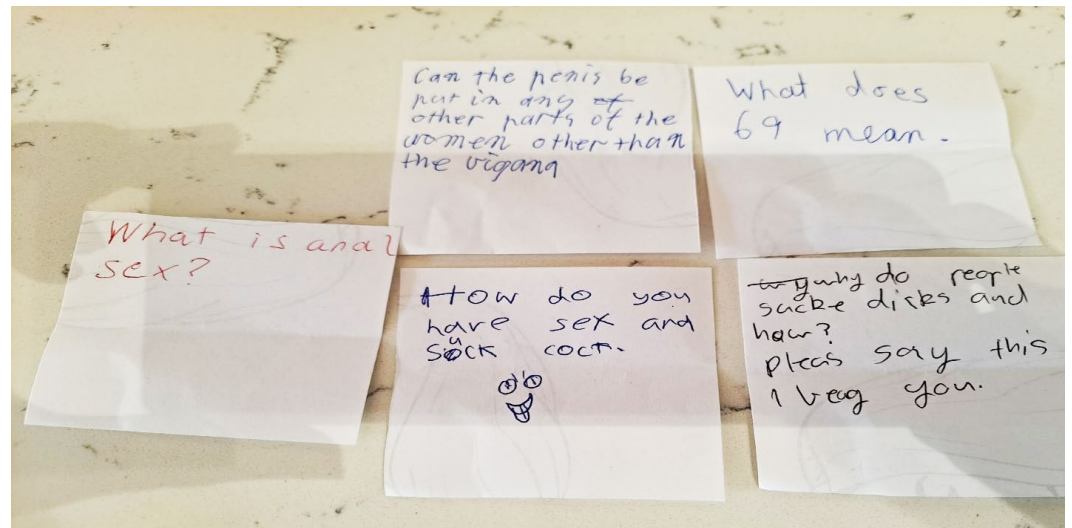


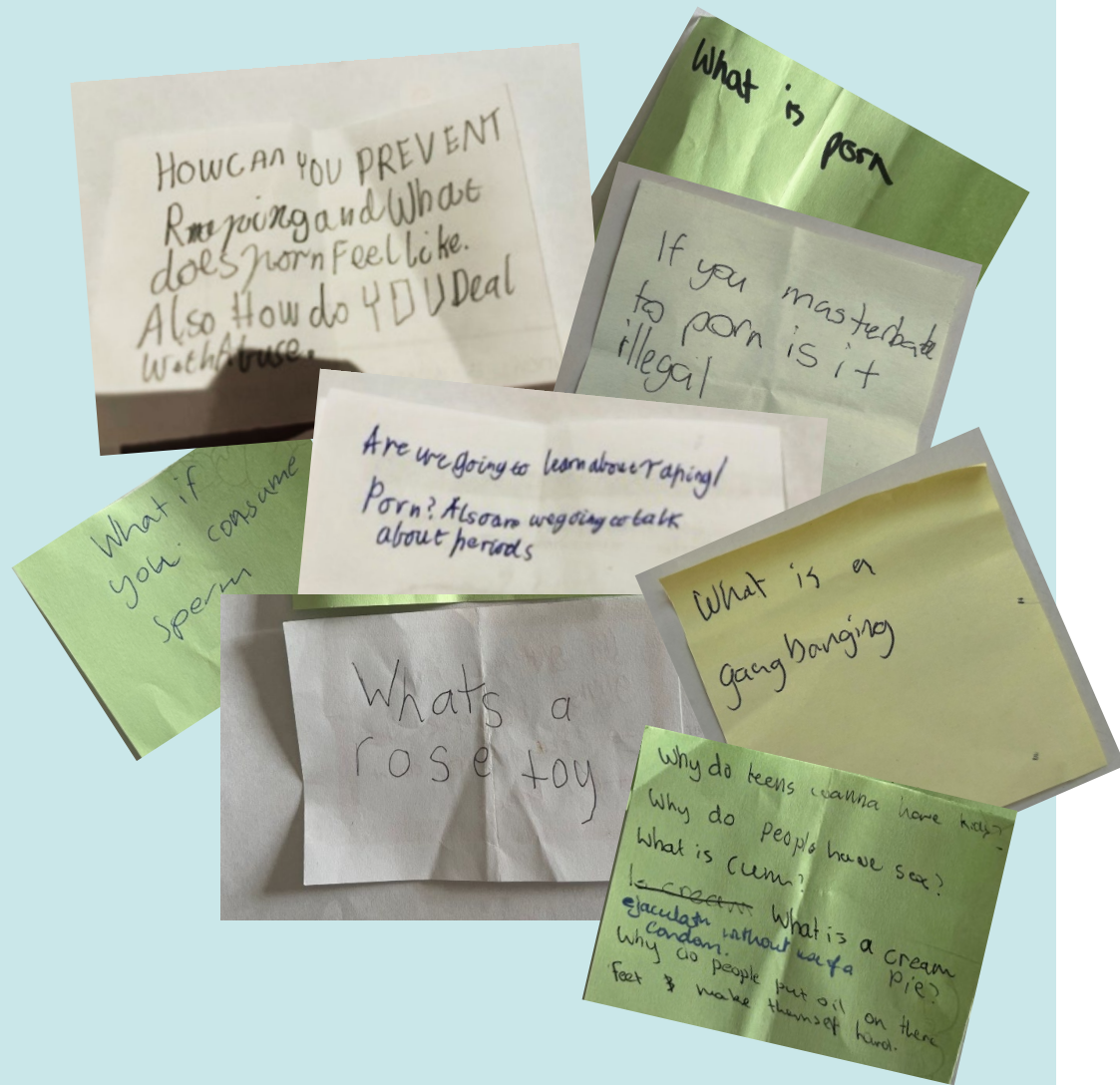
***I have been an educator for over 26 years at Interrelate. Around 12 years ago I started to see some questions come from male students around pubic hair. They would ask why Interrelate programs described pubic hair on female bodies and make statements such as "I didn't think females had pubic hair". At first we put it down to a lack of understanding of the female body but these types of questions and comments became more regular and I soon realised it was because they weren't seeing pubic hair in the videos they were watching. This was the beginning of Interrelate seeing the impact of pornography in the primary school programs. Since then the questions have exploded in terms of pornography and students are far more confident in their language around the topic."***

Sally, Educator  
Sydney South Team, NSW.

Throughout Interrelates longstanding history we have been on the forefront of social issues as identified by direct feedback and questions from the student cohort. Over the past ten years our primary school program educators have seen and heard an increasing number of comments and questions that indicate that a student has had exposure to pornography.

There is a shift in the language and themes of student questions from the '100+ questions kids have about puberty' collated for publication in 2013. At that time, most questions focused on body changes, body parts, reproduction and the 'hows' of sexual intercourse. Now, emerging themes in these student questions include multiple people having sexual intercourse, medications to make the penis bigger, oral sex, anal sex, and age limits for porn sites including specific references to 'OnlyFans' and 'Pornhub'.





This shift is also evident in the feedback we receive from students, parents and teachers as a part of our routine program evaluations.

***I would have liked more emphasis on safety and dealing with difficult scenarios/consent issues/misinformation/pornography.***  
Parent, program for 9-12 year olds

***I would like topics to cover how to have conversations about porn.***  
Parent, program for 9-12 year olds

***I hope future generations will be much more informed with the support of professional educators and schools and their parents (when parents are also educated on the related topics).***  
Parent, program for 9-12 year olds

When a group of high school students (65% 18yrs or over, 17.5% 15-17yrs, 17.5% 12-14yrs) were surveyed in the context of collaborative program design, we found the following:

**15% stated that they had been in a romantic relationship where pornography has had an impact on the relationship**

*“My partner at the time masturbated to porn regularly. It affected me because I felt I wasn’t good enough and I had to compete with the women on those sites”*

**50% reported that they had observed pornography having had an impact on the health and wellbeing of a friend**

*“A male friend was having sex for the first time and he couldn’t finish that afterwards he had to watch porn to cum”*

*“A female friend didn’t like her boyfriend watching it because it made her feel ugly and like she was competing for his attention”*

**35% stated they have never had school-based education about pornography, 15% had school-based education in yrs9-10, 35% in yrs7-8, 15% in primary school.**

**50% stated that they had received education about pornography outside of school with the top three sources of this knowledge being “Mum”, “parents” and “other kids”**

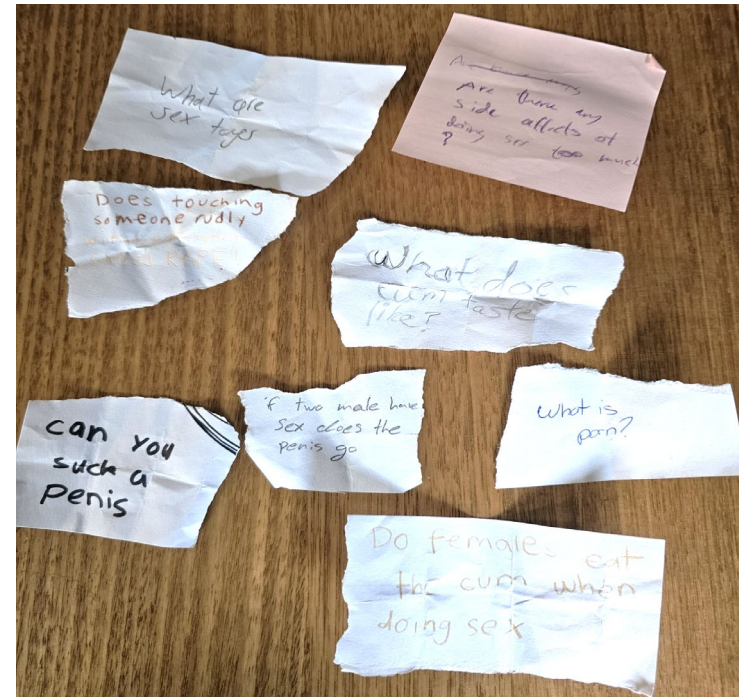
**100% of those surveyed agreed that there was a need for school based education around pornography.**

**85% agreed that pornography education be made available to parents/carers so they can share that knowledge with their children**

The topics they wanted covered in relationship and sexuality education sessions included:

- Ways to check in with your partner during sex
- Consent
- Unhealthy relationship behaviours
- Porn sex vs real life
- Pros and cons of watching pornography
- How watching porn affects me
- How pornography is made
- History of pornography

When asked who should deliver the education, the most popular response was an ‘external educator’ and ‘young people in their 20’s’ followed by ‘school counsellor or wellbeing team’



The experience of our educators and the direct feedback from the students with whom they work appear to mirror what has already been established by researchers in the field.

***“In Australia, just under half (44%) of children aged 9-16 had encountered sexual images in the last month”*** Quadara, El-Murr and Latham (2017)

There is also an indication that first exposure to pornography is becoming younger with an increasing number of questions that allude to this exposure coming from our youngest student cohorts. This has been of particular concern for Interrelate educators as it impacts the attitudes children and young people have towards healthy relationships with themselves and others.

***“The timing of pornographic exposure may play a significant role on the attitudes and ideas that children and adolescents have about sex and sexuality”*** Adarsh H, Sahoo S. (2023)

We believe timely and age-appropriate relationship and sexuality education that does not shy away from the topic of pornography, delivered in a safe environment by trained educators is key to establishing safe and healthy relationship behaviours.

This can include statements that can educate without explicit mention of pornography. For example, “you may come across videos on the internet of people performing sexual acts. That is exactly what they are doing. They are performing. The people in these videos are not in real relationships. They are usually paid actors making videos for people to watch. Sometimes they aren’t even real people but AI generated images.”

With educators who are trained to respond to tricky questions from students in real time we can provide our children and young people with both accurate information and the skills needed to make healthy relationship decisions, providing some protection from the potentially harmful impacts of early exposure to pornography.

Furthermore, there is also a need to educate parents/carers in parallel. We often see a disparity between what the parents believe their child knows or doesn’t know and what the child reports. This also extends to what the parents believe about what the child can access on-line, and with what ease.

***“The best approach for parents, caregivers and teachers responding to children’s exposure to pornography is to encourage open communication and critical thinking on the part of the children, while educating themselves. Parents and caregivers are less likely to be intimidated by on-line risks if they are informed and take an active role in their children’s digital lives”*** Quadara, El-Murr and Latham (2017).

This need is certainly articulated by the parents in our current programs. More opportunities to connect with parents either within or external to the school context would enhance program outcomes.

While the national curriculum provides schools with teaching resources that cover a variety of topics relating to sexual health, developing bodies, respect, safety and identity (Australian Curriculum Assessment & Reporting Authority, 2016), there is little to no education specific to the impact of pornography consumption. If exposure to pornography is almost inevitable, then curriculums must expand to provide education. A complete embedding of pornography education into the curriculum may be a tall order. Instead, a list of ACARA endorsed programs specifically related to pornography may be of benefit to children, young people and schools. By partnering with organisations that focus on providing relationship and sexuality education, children and young people can receive education at a time where exploring sexuality is central to their wellbeing.

## References

ACARA – Australian Curriculum and Research Authority

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