

**Submission  
No 16**

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

**Organisation:** Jesuit Social Services

**Date Received:** 1 November 2024

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**Jesuit**  
**Social Services**  
Building a Just Society

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

November 2024

*We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of all the lands on which Jesuit Social Services operates and pay respect to their Elders past and present. We express our gratitude for their love and care of people, community, land and all life.*

For further information, contact:

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## Jesuit Social Services: Who we are and what we do

Jesuit Social Services is a social change organisation working to build a just society where all people can live to their full potential. For 47 years, we have accompanied the most disadvantaged members of the community, providing services and advocacy in the areas of justice and crime prevention; mental health and well-being; settlement and community building; education, training and employment; gender justice; and ecological justice. Our services span Victoria, New South Wales and the Northern Territory where we support more than 57,000 individuals and families annually.

### Our work in Western Sydney

Since 2008, Jesuit Social Services has been building on the strengths of communities in the Western Sydney suburb of Mt Druitt. We work in partnership with local organisations, including Aboriginal organisations and Elders, to deliver locally appropriate and culturally safe initiatives. Using a place-based model, we work collectively to ensure every child has the best possible start in life. We support community members to break out of cycles of disadvantage by developing local answers to local problems; and we build relationships within local communities through training and work experience, employment, family support, and leadership activities.

### The Men's Project

Jesuit Social Services established The Men's Project in 2017 to provide leadership and develop new approaches to reducing violence and other harmful behaviours prevalent among boys and men, to keep families and communities safe and to improve their wellbeing. The Men's Project conducts research and promotes cultural change related to stereotypical ideas about what it means to be a man; develops, delivers and evaluates interventions that address violence and other harmful behaviour; shares knowledge across sectors about what works to engage men and boys and change their behaviour; and helps build capacity across services to recognise and respond to violence and other harmful behaviours in boys and men.

Current priorities for The Men's Project include:

- drawing on our [Man Box research](#) and [child sexual abuse prevalence study](#), building a greater understanding of perpetration including opportunities for prevention and early intervention
- supporting people who work with men and boys every day (e.g. teachers, sports coaches, social workers) to prevent violence and improve the wellbeing of men and boys
- developing new early intervention approaches with adolescents at-risk of using violence
- strengthening early intervention responses for adults and young people to prevent child sexual abuse (some specific interventions in this space are highlighted below)
- drawing on our grounded practice experience, advocating for systemic changes that seek to prevent violence and child sexual abuse.

## Summary of recommendations

### Recommendation 1:

Invest in more research into the prevalence and influence of pornography, in particular to inform the state's approach to the prevention of domestic, family and sexual violence. This should include specific data on:

- the relationship between the consumption of pornography, particularly violent pornography, and outdated views about masculinity
- the relationship between pornography consumption and attitudes and behaviours (including all forms of violence) which are harmful towards women and girls.

### Recommendation 2:

Explore opportunities to better educate young people on the impacts of pornography. This should include providing robust and informed consent and sex education, sexual health and understanding respectful relationships with consideration of:

- appropriate resourcing of respectful relationships curriculum to ensure teachers are well equipped to foster informative and critical discussions on pornography and its impacts
- directing young people who are concerned about their use of pornography to places where they can get anonymous help.

### Recommendation 3:

Conduct research into the relationship and pathways between consumption of legal/mainstream pornography and child sexual abuse material.

### Recommendation 4:

Ensure stronger regulation and monitoring of child sexual abuse themes on mainstream pornography websites.

### Recommendation 5:

Adopt stronger laws and strategies to ensure rigorous regulation and monitoring of technology companies with respect to pornography and other online content that may be harmful.

### Recommendation 6:

Invest in online opportunities to influence behaviour, including pop-up warnings on pornography sites, and early intervention services, providing support for people (including children and young people) concerned about their use of pornography and/or sexual thoughts and behaviours (such as Jesuit Social Services' Worried About Sex and Pornography Project and Stop it Now!).

## Introduction

Jesuit Social Services welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Inquiry into the impacts of harmful pornography on mental emotional and physical health, led by the New South Wales (NSW) Parliamentary Standing Committee on Social Issues.

Jesuit Social Services shares the NSW Parliament's concern about the impacts of harmful pornography, which we have observed first-hand through our program delivery and research related to the prevention of violence and abuse. We are particularly concerned about the inter-relationships between pornography use, the normalisation of violence, harmful sexual attitudes and behaviours; and their relationship to child sexual abuse material.

We recognise that the NSW government is putting infrastructure in place to better prevent domestic, family and sexual violence against women and children. This includes the appointment of a Women's Safety Commissioner, the recently released NSW Strategy for the Prevention of Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence, and the upcoming release of a strategy relating to people who use violence. Arising from our years of experience working in Mt Druitt and the leadership of The Men's Project, Jesuit Social Services is actively involved in conversations to support this work.

While our submission does not specifically consider the production of pornography, we note that pornography is produced in both legal and illegal ways. The illegal production of pornographic material includes child sexual abuse (the production of pornography depicting children, which we term child sexual abuse material), and pornography depicting people who have not consented to participate, including people who have been sex trafficked. Legal production of pornography, on the other hand, depicts actors or sex workers who have chosen to participate.

This submission does not comment on the pornography industry as a whole or the moral aspects of pornography. Nevertheless, we have seen through our work that the consumption of legally produced, well-regulated pornography can have harmful effects on those who consume it.

Our submission focuses specifically on:

- Understanding the relationship between men's exposure to violent pornography and attitudes and behaviours which are harmful towards women and girls (e.g. building on our Man Box research).
- Addressing the impact of exposure to harmful pornography on children and young people, including through media/pornography literacy in schools, and places where young people can access help.
- Initiatives which address the prevalence of child sexual offending behaviour and its relationship to pornography use, including Stop It Now!
- Opportunities to use technology to disrupt and deter the impacts of harmful pornography, including deterrence campaigns.

*A note on language: Jesuit Social Services uses the term 'child sexual abuse material', not 'child pornography', in this submission and in our work. This more accurately reflects the*

*gravity of the crimes and the harms inflicted on victims, and avoids any suggestion of compliance on the part of the victim or legality on the part of the perpetrator.*

## 1. Understanding the relationship between men’s exposure to violent pornography and attitudes and behaviours which are harmful towards women and girls

While there is a lack of evidence to date about the prevalence and effects of harmful pornography consumption, our work and research suggests a strong correlation between the consumption of violent pornography by men and boys, and harmful attitudes and behaviours, including violence against women and girls.

### The Man Box

In 2018, Jesuit Social Services conducted the first “Man Box” study. [\*The Man Box: A study on being a young man in Australia\*](#) was the first comprehensive study that focused on attitudes to manhood and masculine stereotypes, and links to harmful behaviours of young Australian men.<sup>1</sup> The Man Box explored how r stereotypical attitudes about what it means to be a man influence behaviour. It revealed that rigid adherence to ‘Man Box’ beliefs is closely associated with behaviours such as violence, sexual harassment, and mental health, surpassing factors like education, location, or cultural background.<sup>2</sup> These “rules” include statements such as “Guys should act strong even if they feel scared or nervous inside”, “men should use violence to get respect if necessary” and “men should really be the ones to bring money home to provide for their families, not women”.<sup>3</sup>

The most recent Man Box study, undertaken in 2024 in partnership with Respect Victoria, found that consumption of pornography was common among young Australian men.<sup>4</sup> Eighty-one per cent of men had viewed pornography over the past six months, and 59 per cent reported that they had “often” or “very often” accessed pornography or sexually explicit material in the past month.<sup>5</sup>

Two-thirds of those who had viewed pornography over the past six months had viewed violent pornography, which the Man Box study defined as material including any of the following perpetrated against a woman: pushing or shoving, pulling hair, spanking, gagging, choking, slapping, kicking, punching, bondage or restraint, or forcing sex.<sup>6</sup>

The [Man Box 2024](#) found that men with the highest levels of endorsement of the “Man Box” rules were more likely to use pornography – to look at it and to do so frequently.<sup>7</sup> This was especially true for violent pornography, with 61% of this group viewing violent pornography at least once a week.<sup>8</sup> These men were also more likely to have perpetrated violence and hold

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<sup>1</sup> The Men’s Project & Flood, M, (2018) *The Man Box: A Study on Being a Young Man in Australia*. Jesuit Social Services: Melbourne.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 16

<sup>4</sup> The Men’s Project & Flood, M. 2024. *The Man Box 2024: Re-examining what it means to be a man in Australia*. Melbourne: Jesuit Social Services.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pp. 155–158

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 72

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 119

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 75

violence-supportive attitudes. For example, they were eight times more likely to have perpetuated sexual violence against an intimate partner (including 28 times more likely to have used fear to coerce a partner into having sex).<sup>9</sup>

This research suggests that understanding the prevalence and dynamics of pornography use, including its relationship with attitudes associated with gender-based violence, is vital in efforts to address violence against women and girls. More research is needed in the Australian context on the consumption of pornography and sexual violence – including by children and young people – to better understand its prevalence and impacts – and how these can be addressed.

#### **Recommendation 1:**

**Invest in more research into the prevalence and influence of pornography, in particular to inform the state’s approach to the prevention of domestic, family and sexual violence. This should include specific data on:**

- **the relationship between the consumption of pornography, particularly violent pornography, and outdated views about masculinity**
- **the relationship between pornography consumption and attitudes and behaviours (including all forms of violence) which are harmful towards women and girls.**

## **2. Addressing the impacts of exposure to pornography on children and young people**

### **Age of first exposure**

It is normal for young people to turn to the internet for questions and curiosities they may have about sex and sexuality. Yet early exposure to pornography can impact young people’s development, their understanding of healthy relationships, and their attitudes and behaviours. One study found that 94% of children and young people first access, or are exposed to, pornography before the age of 14 years.<sup>10</sup> Our Watch has reported that many young people were not specifically searching for pornography the first time they were exposed to it online.<sup>11</sup> Studies show that exposure to pornography early in life can physically alter the brain development of children and young people.<sup>12</sup> This is particularly concerning given the proportion of sexually violent content and illegal sexual imagery found on many mainstream platforms and the accessibility of this content.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 12

<sup>10</sup> Martellozzo, E., Monaghan, A., Adler, J., Davidson, J., Leyva, R. and Horvath, M. (2016). "I wasn't sure it was normal to watch it...": A quantitative and qualitative examination of the impact of online pornography on the values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of children and young people. Middlesex University, NSPCC, OCC. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.3382393>

<sup>11</sup> Our Watch (2020). Pornography, young people and preventing violence against women background paper. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>12</sup> Faisal, N. A., Johari, K. S. K., Amat, M. I., & Yusof, R. (2022). Pornography Addiction on Adolescent: A Systemic Review of Reported Impact on Brain and Sexual Behavior. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 12(6), 2028.

<sup>13</sup> Children’s Commissioner (2023). Evidence on pornography’s influence on harmful sexual behaviour among children. Report from UK Children’s Commissioner Dame Rachel de Souza. ([Weblink](#))



Pornography is readily available and accessible to children and young people, and is often their first exposure to sex. This risks pornography becoming young people's main source of sex education, especially if they do not receive other forms of education on pornography. Even young people who do not seek out or consume pornography can experience its negative consequences given its influence on perceptions of sexual relationships and gender norms in society and amongst their peers. Further, numerous studies have identified pornography identified as a driver of harmful sexual behaviour onset specifically in children and young people.<sup>14</sup>

## **Case Study – Research on pornography use in young people and harmful sexual behaviour**

*As part of Jesuit Social Services' Worried About Sex and Pornography Project (WASAPP), in collaboration with The Gatehouse Centre at The Royal Children's Hospital and the University of Melbourne, we are currently conducting research to understand how harmful sexual behaviours in children and young people can be prevented. The research involves interviews with 13 to 18 -year-olds who have displayed harmful sexual behaviours, seeking to understand the kinds of early intervention resources they would find helpful and engaging – including resources in relation to pornography use and exposure. Exposure to pornography is a key theme emerging from interviews with young people who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour. Further, many of these young people do not know where to go for help to address harmful sexual behaviour or their use of pornography.*

## **Pornography in the school curriculum**

Given the widespread availability of online pornography, the need to equip young people to think critically about the material they are consuming is stronger than ever. Building young people's skills to analyse the messages in pornography and other explicit online material is increasingly seen as a necessary strategy in sex, sexual health, and consent education

Yet pornography is considered by many adults, including some parents, caregivers and teachers, an uncomfortable or inappropriate topic to discuss with young people. In Victoria, for example, while pornography is part of the Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships and Building Respectful Relationships curriculum, our staff working in schools have observed many teachers lack confidence when approaching the topic.

The burden of how best to approach this nuanced topic in the curriculum should not fall on individual teachers, but requires support, resourcing and a robust conceptual framework and participatory teaching and learning.<sup>15</sup> While the depictions of violence, misogyny and male dominance are perhaps more extreme in pornography, such messages are not isolated to pornography. Education programs should also consider the broader context of young people's exposure to sexually explicit images, including via social media.

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<sup>14</sup> McKibbin, G, Green, J, Humphreys, C & Tyler, M. (12 May 2023): Pathways to Onset of Harmful Sexual Behavior, Victims & Offenders, DOI: 10.1080/15564886.2023.2208579

<sup>15</sup> Crabbe, M., & Flood, M. (2021). School-Based Education to Address Pornography's Influence on Young People: A Proposed Practice Framework. American Journal of Sexuality Education, 16(1), 1–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15546128.2020.1856744>

## Case Study – Critical media literacy pilot

*In 2024, The Men’s Project was invited to develop and provide resources for a media literacy pilot program focused on the impacts of pornography within a Melbourne co-educational public secondary school. The school had identified a need to explicitly teach skills that address the rise and impact of online pornography.*

*The purpose of the program was to build participants’ ability to understand the realities of harmful pornography, including:*

- *identifying and decoding explicit imagery*
- *its impacts on body image*
- *consent*
- *the influence of social media*
- *recognising pornography’s reinforcement of rigid gender roles and its impact on violent attitudes and behaviour towards women and girls.*

*The program was delivered by health and P.E teachers to 150 year 10 students through three 70-minute lessons over a three-week period. The Men’s Project provided the resources, literacy and lesson plans. The resources catered specifically to this age group and promoted conversations that were robust and informative, but open and non-judgemental.*

*For instance, students were invited to consider the sexually explicit and suggestive nature of a series of images found in films, television and social media. They critically analysed the messages contained in these images, identifying how viewers can become desensitised to such materials. They also considered the ways in which men and women were positioned in an advertisement depicting the domination of a man over a woman.*

*While this one-off pilot program has not been rigorously evaluated, feedback received from both teachers and students was positive.*

*Of concern was the number of students (approx. 40% of post-program survey respondents) who identified concerns about their own use of pornography and indicated that they did not know where to turn for information and support in managing their use. This suggests that, while many young people may want to access help and services in managing the harmful impacts of pornography, they do not know where or how to get help.*

## Worried About Sex and Pornography Project

Contrary to conventional belief that child sexual abuse is only perpetrated by older adults towards young children, research shows that harmful sexual behaviour by children and young people is prevalent. The recent Australian Child Maltreatment shows that child sexual abuse carried out by another known young person is the most common form of abuse for young Australians (16–24 years old).<sup>16</sup> Although there are a range of well-established services that respond to harmful sexual behaviour, there are currently no national secondary prevention services in Australia that work with children and young people who are worried about their sexual thoughts or behaviours.

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<sup>16</sup> Mathews, B., Finkelhor, D., Pacella, R., Scott, J. G., Higgins, D. J., Meinck, F., Herskine, H. E., Thomas, H. J., Lawrence, D., Malacova, E., Haslam, D. M., & Collin-Vézina, D. (2024). Child sexual abuse by different classes and types of perpetrator: Prevalence and trends from an Australian national survey. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 147, 106562. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2023.106562>

The Worried About Sex and Pornography Project (WASAPP) commenced in 2019, arising from Jesuit Social Services' advocacy for Stop It Now!. We are currently undertaking an action research project in collaboration with the University of Melbourne to develop knowledge regarding harmful sexual behaviour prevention. This knowledge will inform the development and pilot of an online early intervention service for children and young people at risk of engaging in harmful sexual behaviours. WASAPP aims to synthesise current evidence and generate new evidence about intervening early in problematic or harmful sexual behaviour, and to apply that evidence to the codesign of an online early intervention service for children and young people worried about their sexual behaviours.

In collaboration with the University of Melbourne, we have developed knowledge regarding pathways to the onset of harmful sexual behaviour. We have combined this with the perspectives of national and international experts, and children and young people who have engaged in harmful sexual behaviour, to help guide service development. The findings reported have been published in three academic papers, and additional research is ongoing. These findings are being collated into a scoping study which will guide our development and implementation of a secondary prevention service for young people concerned about their sexual thoughts and behaviours. The options, scale and sustainability of this service are subject to further funding. Next steps include:

- designing an online early intervention service for children and young people worried about their sexual thoughts and behaviours, including pornography use
- implementing and refining the service.

#### **Recommendation 2:**

**Explore opportunities to better educate young people on the impacts of pornography. This should include providing robust and informed consent and sex education, sexual health and understanding respectful relationships with consideration of:**

- **appropriate resourcing of respectful relationships**
- **curriculum to ensure teachers are well equipped to foster informative and critical discussions on pornography and its impacts**
- **directing young people who are concerned about their use of pornography to places where they can get anonymous help.**

### **3. Initiatives and regulation which address the relationship between pornography, child sexual abuse material and offending**

The prevalence of child sexual offending behaviours and relationship to pornography use

In 2023, in collaboration with the University of New South Wales, Jesuit Social Services launched Australia's first child sexual abuse perpetration prevalence study: [Identifying and understanding child sexual offending behaviours and attitudes among Australian men](#). The report aims to better inform prevention of child sexual abuse by building knowledge of prevalence of the issue and related attitudes within a community sample. The largest study of its kind ever undertaken globally, it measures the prevalence of risk behaviours and attitudes regarding child sexual offending among a representative sample of 1,945 Australian men aged 18 to over 65.

The study found that one in five Australian men have sexual feeling towards children and/or have committed child sexual abuse offences, including 6.7% of men accessing child sexual abuse material during their lifetime.<sup>17</sup> It also found that the majority of Australian men who have viewed child sexual abuse material began such behaviour when they were children.<sup>18</sup>

It also found that men who have sexual feelings towards children and/or have offended against children were more likely to access online spaces such as dating websites, pornography websites, online shopping and online gaming. This finding is consistent with our experience delivering Stop It Now!, with problematic pornography commonly reported by participants in the service.

## **Stop It Now!**

Jesuit Social Services' Stop It Now! is a child sexual abuse prevention program for adults concerned about their own or someone else's sexual thoughts or behaviours towards children. A service based on the Stop It Now! model was highlighted as part of the [National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse](#) in September 2021 to address a gap in preventative interventions for potential perpetrators which had been identified by the 2017 [Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse](#).

In 2020, Jesuit Social Services received philanthropic funding to develop and pilot the program. In 2022, we established Australia's first child sexual abuse offender prevention service, working with police, victim-survivor groups, technology companies and academics. The key features of the service are an anonymous helpline, chat service, and online resources for adults worried about their own or someone else's sexual thoughts and behaviours. The helpline is staffed by highly skilled practitioners and provides an anonymous space for people to talk about their concerns and get the help needed to prevent child sexual abuse.

We work closely with professionals and victim-survivors of child sexual abuse to ensure their knowledge and voices help shape the service and the response. We also advocate for systemic change and work with the wider community to build knowledge and skills to prevent child sexual abuse.

In partnership with Bravehearts, the University of Melbourne interviewed victim-survivors of child sexual abuse to understand their perceptions about perpetrator-focused prevention (Stop It Now!) and whether they support such initiatives. This study was informed by the research question: How do victim-survivors of child sexual abuse perceive perpetrator-focused prevention, including the Stop It Now! program?

Their initial reaction was a sense of revulsion to perpetrator-focused prevention, but their final position was one of conditional support. This conditional support includes ensuring that perpetrators are held accountable and that Stop It Now! builds public knowledge regarding the harms of child sexual abuse. Such research has helped ensure that victim-survivor voices are at the centre of the work of Stop It Now! and the findings have guided the development and implementation of the service.

An evaluation of Stop It Now! by the University of Melbourne and has found that the program is having its intended effect. People concerned about themselves or others, as well as police

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<sup>17</sup> Salter, M., Woodlock, D., Whitten, T., Tyler, M., Naldrett, G., Breckenridge, J., & Peleg, N. (2023). Identifying and understanding child sexual offending behaviours and attitudes among Australian men. Jesuit Social Services & University of New South Wales. ([Weblink](#))

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.33.

and practitioners, reported planning and executing actions that reduced risk and increased protective factors in relation to child sexual abuse perpetration.

The federal government has committed to funding a national offender prevention service and we are awaiting the outcome of a related tender process managed by the National Office of Child Safety.

### **Pornography escalation**

Finnish child protection organisation Suojellaan Lapsia has found “clear patterns of pornography escalation” as a driver of child sexual abuse offending.<sup>19</sup> Other studies looking at child sexual abuse material usage on the dark web have found that around 60% of child sexual abuse material users first saw this material when they were children themselves and found commonalities between child sexual abuse material use and addiction.<sup>20</sup>

There are many factors that drive child sexual abuse offending, and this research by no means suggests that all adult pornography users will inevitably migrate to child sexual abuse material. However, it serves to highlight the serious consequences of pornography platforms’ algorithms and of pornography desensitisation for users, particularly when exposure begins at an early age. Professionals in this field are observing that children and young people who do not appear to have high levels of childhood trauma or adversity are displaying harmful sexual behaviours due to viewing pornography.<sup>21</sup>

#### **Recommendation 3:**

**Conduct research into the relationship and pathways between consumption of legal/mainstream pornography and child sexual abuse material.**

#### **Recommendation 4:**

**Ensure stronger regulation and monitoring of child sexual abuse themes on mainstream pornography websites.**

## **4. Opportunities to use technology in disrupting and deterring the impacts of harmful pornography**

### **Regulation and monitoring**

Governments should place an onus on technology service providers to report and remove known child sexual abuse material and to disrupt and deter its distribution. We know that ‘new’ child sexual abuse material online can be a pathway to locating children currently being

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<sup>19</sup> Nurmi, J., Paju, A., Brumley, B. B., Insoll, T., Ovaska, A. K., Soloveva, V., Vaaranen-Valkonen, N., Aaltonen, M., & Arroyo, D. (2024). Investigating child sexual abuse material availability, searches, and users on the anonymous Tor network for a public health intervention strategy. *Scientific Reports*, 14(1), 7849. DOI: 10.1038/s41598-024-58346-7

<sup>20</sup> Children’s Commissioner (2023). Evidence on pornography’s influence on harmful sexual behaviour among children. Report by UK Children’s Commissioner Dame Rachel de Souza. (HYPERLINK "<https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2023/05/Evidence-on-pornographys-influence-on-harmful-sexual-behaviour-among-children.pdf>"Weblink)

<sup>21</sup> McKibbin, G., Humphreys, C., Tyler, M., & Spiteri-Staines, A. (2022). Clusters of risk associated with harmful sexual behaviour onset for children and young people: Opportunities for early intervention. *Journal of Sexual Aggression*. 30(2), pp. 185–196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552600.2022.2117429>



harmed. Therefore, technological services that have access to this information must actively implement ways to detect, disrupt, report and remove this content. Failure to do this constitutes a failure to protect children’s rights and their best interests – and may constitute a facilitation of child sexual abuse.

While technology service providers hold responsibility for reporting and removing online child sexual abuse content, it is ultimately the responsibility of Government to regulate the activities of technology companies and ensure they adhere to their obligations. As such, to safeguard children from child sexual abuse and ensure that the rights of children are protected, we believe more needs to be invested in legislation and governmental strategies to regulate and monitor technology providers.

## Digital opportunities to intervene and access help

The rapid development of technology provides new opportunities to influence people’s behaviour and should be seriously examined as a way to intervene at the earliest stage. The online world has extensive reach, which offers a critical advantage in addressing the widespread nature of harmful pornography consumption. Further, online spaces can be anonymous, which can help to overcome the stigma that may otherwise prevent help seeking.

Places to access support should be readily and easily accessible for those concerned about their use of pornography or harmful sexual thoughts and behaviours. This includes the use of strategically placed pop-up warnings and interactive chat bots. For example, Jesuit Social Services’ Stop It Now! currently appears as pop ups on pornography websites (as well as search engines), when individuals attempt to access potentially illegal content, to increase awareness of the harm of this behaviour and identify a pathway for seeking help in order to prevent offending. We see a significant number of website referrals via this pathway, with approximately one third of all website users referred via our pornography warning messages. See an example warning below:



Governments should also invest in secondary prevention services for young people concerned about their sexual thoughts and behaviours, such as Jesuit Social Services’ Worried About Sex and Pornography Project (WASAPP). Lessons can be drawn from promising work underway to deter child sexual abuse. Results of the University of Tasmania’s evaluation of a child sexual abuse deterrence trial (see ‘reThink chatbot trial’) showed the approach working in two ways: for some people, instructing them that what they are doing might be illegal is enough to get them to change their behaviour, while others need more in-depth support from trained advisors or through online self-help.

## Case study: reThink' chatbot trial<sup>22</sup>

*Over the past two years, the UK-based child protection charity Lucy Faithfull Foundation has partnered with the Internet Watch Foundation and Aylo (the parent company of Pornhub UK) to trial a first-of-its-kind chatbot and warning message aiming to reduce the number of online searches that may potentially be indicative of intent to find sexual images of children.*

*An evaluation by the University of Tasmania found there was a decrease in the number of searches for sexual images of children on Pornhub in the UK during the time the chatbot was deployed. The vast majority of users (82%) whose searches triggered the warning and chatbot did not appear to search again for sexual images of children.*

*The trial involved use of a 'reThink chatbot' which engages in conversation with users attempting to search on Pornhub for these images. Alongside a static warning page, the chatbot tells users these images are illegal and signposts them to Stop It Now! where they receive help and support to stop their behaviour. Hundreds of people also clicked through to the Stop It Now! website or called the helpline during the trial. The chatbot resulted in 1,656 requests for more information about Stop It Now services, 490 click-throughs to the Stop It Now! website, and approximately 68 calls and chats to the Stop It Now helpline.*

### Recommendation 5:

**Adopt stronger laws and strategies to ensure rigorous regulation and monitoring of technology companies with respect to pornography and other online content that may be harmful.**

### Recommendation 6:

**Invest in online opportunities to influence behaviour, including pop-up warnings on pornography sites, and early intervention services, providing support for people (including children and young people) concerned about their use of pornography and/or sexual thoughts and behaviours (such as Jesuit Social Services' Worried About Sex and Pornography Project and Stop it Now!).**

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<sup>22</sup> University of Tasmania (2024) Pioneering chatbot reduces searches for child sexual abuse material. Media release 4 March (HYPERLINK "<https://www.utas.edu.au/about/news-and-stories/articles/2024/pioneering-chatbot-reduces-searches-for-illegal-sexual-images-of-children>"Weblink)