

Submission
No 22

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

Organisation: Top Blokes Foundation

Date Received: 1 November 2024



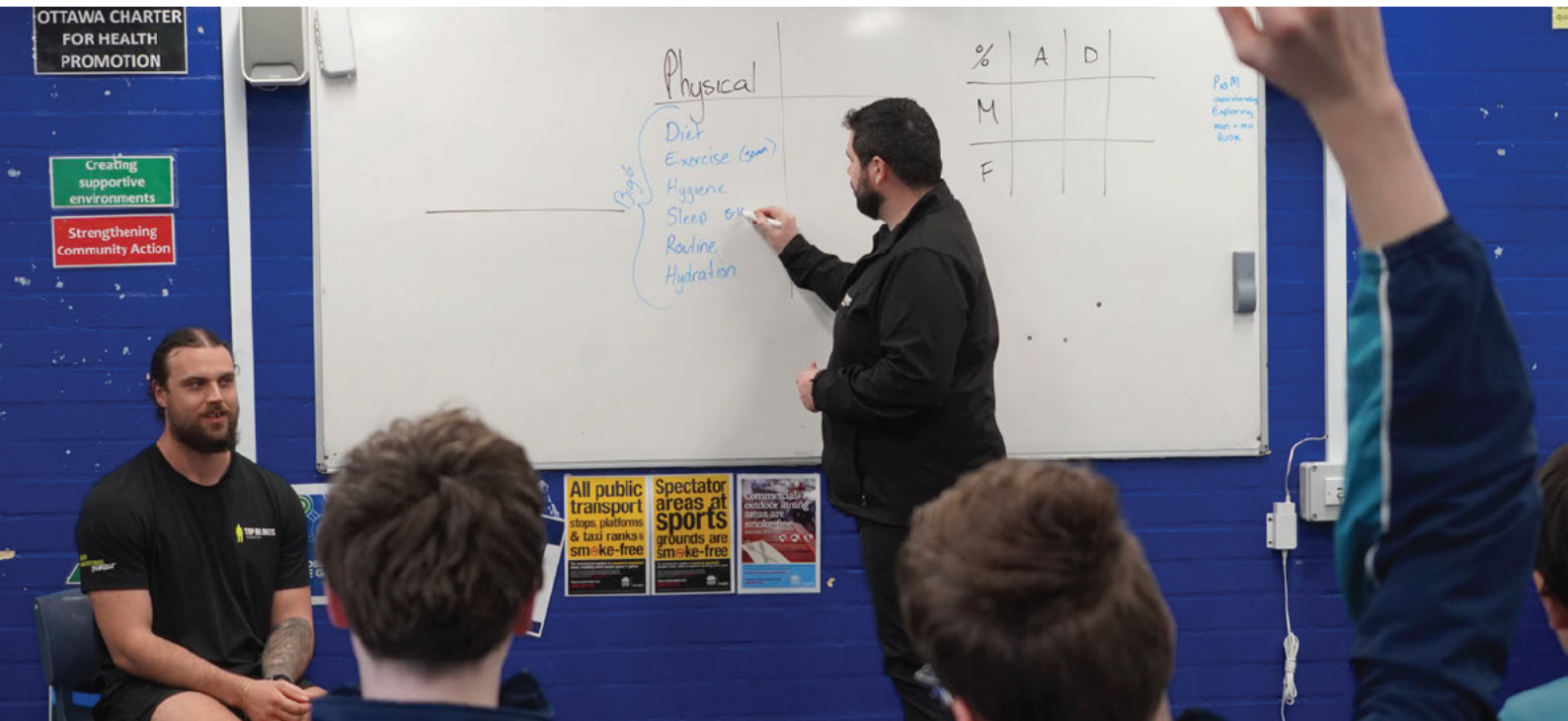
TOP BLOKES
FOUNDATION

SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL ISSUES

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

Prepared by Top Blokes Foundation

1 November 2024



WE BELIEVE...

Young males are catalysts for positive change. They have a unique perspective that can help solve some of the societal issues that we grapple with. Their voice is valuable and they make meaningful contributions.

When young males are healthy, engaged and well, they influence others around them to do well too.

Young males have the capacity to learn, can embrace change with open minds and are the solution to their own success.

Young males want to be invested in. They rise to the opportunities to become the best versions of themselves. They deserve the opportunity to harness their potential and become top blokes.

The future for young males is exciting. Our society is becoming more inclusive, attentive and caring to help young males grow into their full selves.

Building strong foundations today forges a positive path for the leaders of tomorrow.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Top Blokes Foundation (Top Blokes) is a youth mental health charity supporting young males aged 10-24 years old. Top Blokes welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Standing Committee on Social Issues on the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health.

Our submission is informed by our experience working with young males in schools and communities since 2006, the lived experience of our Youth Ambassador Council members (10 young males who have participated in Top Blokes programs and provide advice on Top Blokes strategy and operations) and the practice wisdom of our youth workers, who have supported over 20,000 young males across NSW and QLD.

To develop this submission, we ran **two focus groups with Youth Ambassador Council members and Top Blokes Youth Workers**. The results of these focus groups, as they relate to the terms of reference for this inquiry, can be summarised as follows:

- Young males are using pornography and want to talk about pornography. Many have a ‘gut feel’ that their pornography use is harming them, but do not have a trusted adult they can talk to about this.
- Young males feel shame and stigma around their use of pornography.
- Young males are changing their behaviours, including reducing pornography use and/or avoiding harmful pornography, once they understand the mental, emotional and physical health impacts.
- Pornography is impacting the sexual practices of young males and adversely influencing their perception of what it means to be a man and their body image.
- Parents and carers have a critical role to play in supporting young males to learn about the risks of pornography use and form healthier behaviours and perceptions on sex.

OUR SUBMISSION MAKES THE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Development of, and investment in, **educational programs for young males in primary school** that include age - and stage - appropriate content on how to avoid harmful content like pornography on the internet and the risks of pornography use on physical and mental health.
2. Invest in **domestic research into impacts of pornographic material** on young males in New South Wales, particularly with regards to mental and physical health, as well as impacts on relationships.
3. Consider appropriate **regulations to prevent advertising of potentially harmful content to young people**, including through digital channels such as social media and video games.

4. Educational **initiatives designed to minimise the harm** associated with pornography use among young males should include a focus on respect and consent and support young males to explore their sense of identity outside of socially dominant forms and patterns of masculinity.
5. Invest in **programs delivered by qualified and trained professionals** to educate young males on the harmful impacts of pornographic content.
6. Establish a **body that engages with and represents the voices and experiences of young people**, including pathways for co-design solutions to address the impacts of pornography.
7. Initiatives aimed at **educating young males about pornography and the risks** associated with pornography use include engagement with parents, guardians and supporters to share information and support ongoing discussions about pornography.

We hope that sharing these insights and recommendations gives the Committee a deeper insight into the experiences and thoughts of young males, and guidance on how we can work together to prevent and mitigate the health impacts of harmful pornography.

We welcome any opportunity to speak to the Committee about our submission.

Regards

Melissa Abu-Gazaleh
Founder and Managing Director

ABOUT TOP BLOKES FOUNDATION

Top Blokes provides safe and supportive spaces for young males to meaningfully connect, explore their identities outside of socially dominant forms and patterns of masculinity, develop critical thinking skills and build their knowledge and resilience.

Currently we support 2,500 young males across New South Wales, through programs delivered in 65 schools.

Top Blokes programs are informed by frameworks for promoting positive and healthy masculinities, improving mental health and harm minimisation. Programs are delivered by qualified Youth Workers in New South Wales and Queensland.

Top Blokes' mission is to challenge and nurture males to be their best selves.

Top Blokes' vision is that more young males lead healthy and safe lives.

Top Blokes has three programs that we deliver in schools and with community partners such as workplaces and community organisations:

- 10-13 program: run in primary schools over one school term
- 14-17 program: run in high schools over two school terms
- 18-24 program: run with community partners over 10-20 weeks

Graduates from these programs can become members of our Grad Club, which offers them ongoing support and opportunities for personal and leadership development as well as to stay connected with like-minded males.

Top Blokes has a Youth Ambassador Council, comprised of 10 young males who have participated in Top Blokes programs. The Youth Ambassador Council provides lived experience advice and guidance on Top Blokes programming, operations and strategies, as well as engaging in advocacy activities.

AGE OF FIRST EXPOSURE TO PORNOGRAPHY AND IMPACTS OF EARLY EXPOSURE TO PORNOGRAPHY

Anecdotally, parents have shared with Top Blokes that their primary school-age sons have been exposed to and/or are using pornography. This corresponds with international and Australian research, which has found that people as young as nine have seen sexual images, accidentally or intentionally (Quadara, El-Murr and Latham 2017: 10; Andrie et al. 2021).

Top Blokes Youth Workers report young males in both the 10-13 program and 14-17 program disclosing information about their exposure to and use of pornography. They have found that young males are eager to talk about pornography with adults in a safe space where they can ask questions and have meaningful discussions without being judged or criticised. They are interested in learning about how misuse of pornography can physically and mentally impact them. For most, this is the first time they are able to talk openly about pornography with a trusted adult.

The Top Blokes 14-17 program and 18-24 program address the harmful impacts of pornography and support young males to build respectful relationships across 16 modules. The modules are structured to help young males build trust and rapport with our Youth Workers while developing the knowledge and maturity they need to engage in deeper issues that can carry social stigma, including pornography.

THE TOP BLOKES MODULE ON THE REALITIES OF PORNOGRAPHY IN THE 14-17 PROGRAM AND 18-24 PROGRAM FOCUSES ON THREE KEY LEARNING POINTS:

- 1** Pornography is not always a realistic representation of common sexual behaviours. The lack of consent, communication and condoms is potentially dangerous.
- 2** Viewing too much pornography, particularly at a young age can lead to mental health issues, arousal difficulties and performance anxiety.
- 3** Limiting use of pornography and steering clear of viewing violent or extreme sexual behaviours is highly encouraged.

Figure 1

Top Blokes Youth Workers report young males in the 14-17 program exhibiting high levels of awareness of pornography and pornographic content. Some young males refer to adult entertainers by name and describe them as 'legendary' or 'inspirational'. They are aware of the money some people make from creating pornographic content. For some participants, this normalises pornography creation and distribution as an income stream:



Because we're in this Only Fans era where it's very easy for these men to make quite a bit of money through content creating. For [the program participants] it's not just porn anymore, it's actually a career."

– ZHALIN, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER

While young males are upfront in disclosing their general use of pornography, Top Blokes Youth Workers and the Youth Ambassador Council have identified ongoing shame and stigma among young males and limited awareness of the impact that pornography can have on them.



...the more messed up the content gets...the more shame is going to be around it so people talk about it less. So it just becomes this quiet thing in the corner, which keeps growing and getting worse..."

- YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER



[The boys] wouldn't want you to know how often they're using pornography, or what kind of porn they are consuming...they don't understand any of the impacts, because when we share [information on the impacts] in session, they're actually quite shocked."

- TYRONE, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER



They feel the shame and they may feel a sense that they're doing something wrong."

- DAN, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER

Early and unregulated exposure to pornography during these formative years can have a negative impact on the development and behaviour of young males (Adarsh and Sahoo 2023).

There is strong evidence indicating that behaviours and practices in pornography influence young people's expectations about sex and can shape sexual practices, including unsafe sexual practices such as not using condoms (Flood 2020; McKibbin, Hamilton and Humphreys 2016; Quadara, El-Murr and Latham 2017: 11).

Top Blokes workshops on pornography encourage young males to think about the '4 Cs', critical elements of real sex that are largely absent from pornography: communication, consent, condoms and connection. Top Blokes Youth Workers also report having to challenge the thinking of some young males who may consider slapping, strangling and hair pulling during sex as mainstream sexual practices because they have seen it in pornography.



[The boys are] like, 'No, I've seen what girls like through porn' and it's hard for them to even believe that that's actually not real life, it's not what women want, it's not what women value. They're like, 'Oh nah, they like whatever it is, like abuse and that sort of stuff,' which it's hard for them to connect, but when they do, it's like, 'Oh, wow.'"

- NATHAN, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER

Youth Ambassador Council members also reflected on pornography influencing the sexual practices of young males:



It's not something spoken on...people try shit [they see in pornography]. Yes this stuff is common. It's not spoken about, but it does [happen]."

- YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER



It's a bit of a monkey see, monkey do type thing."

- YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

Research has also found that pornography use may strengthen attitudes supportive of violence against women, including sexual violence and sexual harassment, and that male adolescents who view pornography frequently are more likely to hold sexist attitudes and view women as sex objects (Flood 2020; McKibbin, Hamilton and Humphreys 2016; Quadara, El-Murr and Latham 2017: 11; Privara and Bob 2023). Top Blokes Youth Workers have seen this in practice: the representation of males in most pornography, which represents men as powerful and dominant and women as subordinate, is an important reference for young males in understanding what it means to be a man in a sexual context.



...some of [the boys'] language was not specifically around manhood and penises and that, but again, identity. It was identifying [that pornography showed them] what it took to be a man, to be rough, to be domineering."

- DAN, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER

A Youth Ambassador Council member also reflected on the impact of pornography on the objectification of women:



I think it ruins your perception of how you see women as well because you see the porn stars [and the way they look], but that's what attracts the guys to the site. That's why they're there in the first place."

- YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

Early consumption of pornography has been suggested as an explanation for a rise in erectile dysfunction among young men (Jacobs et al. 2021, Park et al. 2016). Internet pornography consumption among males can also create conflicting emotional experiences and identity problems (Privara and Bob 2021). A Youth Ambassador Council member described the shame his peers

experience as their pornography consumption clashes with their religious and moral beliefs:



I found out that most of my friends' mental health issues come from a pornography addiction because they were too afraid to even share it...when you're brought up with [religious morals]..and when [pornography use] contrasts with that, they feel disgusting...you will not believe how many people go through this."

- YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

Importantly, prior to the Top Blokes program, young males generally do not recognise the physical and mental risks associated with the misuse of pornography. Top Blokes Youth Workers describe some young males as having a 'gut feel' that pornography consumption is negatively impacting them, but not understanding how and not knowing what to do about it. These young males are looking for help, but do not have people in their lives that understand this struggle or can openly discuss it with them.



Where can you go to ask questions? Because Googling it is going to get you another porn search, so who can you go and talk to?"

- DAN, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER



It's the topic of most concern that the boys ask immediately for help...They go, "So how do you know you've got a porn addiction? I think I'm addicted to porn." ...I'll find that they want that information."

- SACHA, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER



They can easily understand that it is fake, but they don't understand how much they're being impacted by it and still playing it out in their relationships and with each other. But they can understand that it's fake."

- NATHAN, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER

Top Blokes Youth Workers were asked what young males seem most surprised to learn about pornography during the workshop. Based on their observations, young males are most surprised to learn that the sex in pornography is not what all women want, though they are aware that the depiction of male pleasure does not align with their own preferences. They are also surprised by information about the human body, such as average penis sizes and average cervix size, that may differ from what they have seen in pornography.

Some of the young males participating in Top Blokes programs have challenged themselves to limit or eliminate their consumption of pornography and have reported feeling like a 'brain fog' has lifted.

RECOMMENDATION

Development of, and investment in, educational programs for young males in primary school that include age- and stage-appropriate content on how to avoid harmful content like pornography on the internet and the risks of pornography use on physical and mental health.

RECOMMENDATION

Invest in domestic research into impacts of pornographic material on young males in New South Wales, particularly with regards to mental and physical health, as well as impacts on relationships.

MEDIA BY WHICH PORNOGRAPHY IS ACCESSED AND CIRCULATED

Top Blokes Youth Workers have heard from young males who access pornography across multiple platforms including through internet searches and in games, primarily on their mobile phones.

Young males are inadvertently using search terms that lead them to harmful pornographic content. One Top Blokes participant shared with his group that his first online search for pornographic content at the age of 13 led him to a video titled 'Ten way hook up'.

Top Blokes Youth Workers note that many young males are not aware of search terms they can use to access less harmful or ethical pornography and become, as one Top Blokes Youth Worker described, 'slaves to the algorithm', which can direct them to harmful content.

Generally speaking, the young males we work with are not aware of the way pornographic content is marketed to them and it is unlikely that their guardians are aware of this either. Youth Ambassador Council members also reflected on the prominent positioning of extreme pornographic content on websites, which can expose people to extreme content when they are not actively searching for it:



YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER 1: **...there's stuff that's on there that should not ever be done to someone.**

YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER 2: **And bro, it's advertised on the front f***ing page.**

Sometimes young males in our programs describe being exposed to pornography by adults on platforms (for example Roblox, an online game platform and game creation system) that are marketed as safe for young people.

Top Blokes Youth Workers describe accidental exposure as being normalised and considered part of the everyday experience of online life for young people, for example receiving explicit calls from adults in games or receiving images of men masturbating to content they have posted online:



I've had disclosures with the online behaviours [workshop] that young people in primary school were being exposed to predator type behaviour, sexual behaviour of older men masturbating in front of them and they're already being exposed to that stuff. And that was almost normal. The boys didn't really react like, "That's weird." And me and the other [youth worker] were like, "That's horrible. That's very weird." But that was normal for these Year 5 and 6 boys."

- CORTLAN, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER

Some young males have disclosed playing first-person view games that gamify pornographic content and accessing explicit anime and manga (hentai) and AI-generated content.

Restricting young people's access to media is unlikely to prevent them from accessing pornographic content. Top Blokes Youth Workers report young males being in possession of multiple devices, sometimes having a second phone their guardians are unaware of, and being able to bypass parental controls with relative ease. They can also share devices with peers.



...if it's not a phone, it's a tablet. If it's not a tablet, it's a laptop. If it's not a laptop, it's a TV screen or some other form of device. I think the only thing that I can see as an effective barrier would be healthy communication with your parents."

- TYRONE, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER

While technological solutions are important in preventing early exposure to pornography, we are aware that parental controls on devices are not effective enough and are easy for young people to bypass. This, combined with the young age at which children are exposed to pornography, necessitates investment in earlier education in online safety, consent education and respectful relationships that can start the conversation about pornography in age-appropriate ways.

RECOMMENDATION

Consider appropriate regulations to prevent advertising of potentially harmful content to young people, including through digital channels such as social media and video games.

IMPACTS ON BODY IMAGE

Top Blokes Youth Workers report pornography as impacting the body image of young males, however, they identify social media (including celebrities and influencers) as a stronger influence overall.

Top Blokes Youth Workers report pornography influencing the body image of young males in specific ways, for example impacting their perception of ‘normal’ penis size, sexual stamina and sexual performance.



As far as pornography affecting their body image, I think it's more around penis size and penis aesthetics. Like do they have low-hanging balls? Are they circumcised or not? All of that aesthetic around there.”

- ZHALIN, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER

Just as with social media generally, young males are learning that pornography is a ‘highlight reel’ - pornography is a glorified and amplified version of sexual activity and not a true experience or representation of sex or of the realities of the pornography industry.

Outside of pornographic content, young males are following the lifestyle content of pornographic content creators and the lavish lifestyles some of them market themselves as living. This can influence their self esteem, including their body image.



You...have so much less confidence and self-image and respect for yourself as well.”

- YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PORNOGRAPHY USE AND RESPECT AND CONSENT EDUCATION

Our experience with young males shows that they are not ready to fully engage with evidence on the relationship between pornography use and respect and consent until they understand and acknowledge the physical and mental impact that harmful pornography use can have on themselves.

Understanding the impact pornography can have on them incentivises them to change their behaviours and habits around pornography use. While this is a useful starting point, we know that this is not the end point.

Our 14-17 program, run over two school terms, and 18-24 program, run over 10-20 weeks, are

structured to help young males build trust and rapport with our Youth Workers while developing the knowledge and maturity they need to engage in deeper discussions around the relationship between pornography, respect and consent.

The program structure highlights the interconnectedness of pornography use with other issues young males face, including healthy relationships and respect. Underpinning this is encouraging and supporting young males to explore their sense of identity independent of socially dominant forms and patterns of masculinities and helping them develop critical thinking skills.

RECOMMENDATION

Educational initiatives designed to minimise the harm associated with pornography use among young males should include a focus on respect and consent and support young males to explore their sense of identity outside of socially dominant forms and patterns of masculinity.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ANY CURRENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS ABOUT USE AND MISUSE OF PORNOGRAPHY, AND HOW THESE MAY BE IMPROVED

Through a review of literature on working with boys and men, along with insights from Top Blokes Youth Workers and the Youth Ambassador Council, we have identified five characteristics of good practice education programs about the use and misuse of pornography (and related issues).

1 Pornography literacy education as part of a comprehensive sexuality education in schools

McKibbin, Hamilton and Humphreys (2016) and Flood (2020) identify comprehensive sexuality education in schools as key to countering the impact of pornography on young people and providing age-appropriate content on sexuality. Flood (2020) notes resources and studies that support the provision of pornography literacy education to young people to help them better understand and think critically about pornography, which can change attitudes and intended behaviours.

Schools and teachers are important sources of information on sexuality education for young people. The schools Top Blokes work with elect to complement internal initiatives with our programs to offer a comprehensive wellbeing initiative to their male students and to take the pressure off internal student wellbeing staff. Top Blokes Youth Workers are trained and can build the rapport and trust with young males that are essential to sexuality education having a lasting impact.

The Top Blokes 14-17 and 18-24 programs contextualise pornography literacy education within a

broader program of content that offers a comprehensive harm minimisation approach to sexuality education. This includes:

- Program content that supports participants to develop strategies and skills for navigating conflict, creating connection and enhancing interpersonal communication.
- Program content on what constitutes healthy relationships, including information on consent and boundaries. Young males are supported to develop critical thinking skills, learn and implement methods for assessing and improving relationships.
- Program content on peer pressure and masculinities that supports young males to develop the knowledge and skills they need to navigate peer pressure and develop their own sense of identity independent of socially dominant forms and patterns of masculinity.
- Content on sexual health aimed at improving knowledge of STIs, promoting condom use and encouraging frequent sexual health check-ups and testing.
- Content on the realities of pornography aimed at improving young males' understanding of the difference between pornography and a healthy sexual relationship that is consensual and respectful.

Top Blokes Youth Workers also report discussions about pornography emerging in workshops related to online behaviours. There is an opportunity for education programs aimed at promoting healthy and safe online behaviours to include age-appropriate content on the harmful impacts of pornography.

Additionally, the accessibility and pervasiveness of pornography is influencing young people's ideas of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. This may increase the likelihood of them being victims, and perpetrators, of image-based abuse.

2 Targeting young males over a prolonged period of time

Male-specific interventions can address the impact of socially dominant forms and patterns of masculinity on male mental health and wellbeing (Our Watch 2020: 10; Pirkis et al. 2016: 7).

Multiple points of contact and sessions of longer duration can help sustain outcomes. The Top Blokes 14-17 program, run over two terms, and 18-24 program, run over 10-20 weeks, meet every week at the same time and are supported by the same youth workers for a total of 16 hours.

While there is no conclusive evidence on the most impactful duration or dosage for programs working with young males, 16 or more hours of program time across multiple points has been identified as a good starting point (Elliot et al. 2022: 44; Flood, Hewson-Munro and Keddie 2024: 11-12; Australian Institute of Criminology 2020: 7).

3 Thinking critically about what it means to be a man to develop healthier masculine identities

Critical to all Top Blokes programs and workshops is providing young males with the space and knowledge to explore their sense of identity independent of socially dominant forms and patterns of masculinity.

Adherence to socially dominant forms and patterns of masculinity is associated with negative consequences such as aggression and violence, accidents and suicidal ideation. There is also evidence that conformity to socially dominant forms and patterns of masculinity is associated with low levels of health literacy (Milner et al. 2019).

Current education programs about the use and misuse of pornography that target males should include a focus on healthier masculinities as part of their approach.



You just watch that moment where it just switches. The bravado switches off because you make a point that hits home...the language shifts, the language changes. Is it perfect? No, they will probably go home and still use [pornography] but we have [planted] the idea that maybe will affect their use going forward.”

- TYRONE, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER

4 Strengths based approaches that go beyond improvements in knowledge to change behaviours

Elliot et al. (2022: 32) found that more effective programs integrate activities that equip participants with tools they need to enact the skills and knowledge they acquire from programs.

Critical thinking skills are key to changing the current or intended behaviour of young males who are using pornography. When asked about how they help young males think critically about pornography and how they use it, Top Blokes Youth Workers emphasised the role of open and honest discussions, of using reflective questioning and framing to challenge preconceptions the young males have based on what they have seen in pornography.



I make an analogy with the Fast and the Furious...I'll say 'Does the Fast and the Furious have cars?'. Yeah, it does. Then I ask 'Would it make sense to watch the Fast and the Furious to learn how to drive cars?'. Nah, that wouldn't make sense. 'OK, well how do we apply that to pornography? Do we watch pornography and then try to mimic the things we do on there?'...that's the time when I have a lot of boys either lean in or sit back. It's the like the a-ha moment.”

- CORTLAN, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER

Top Blokes Youth Workers report young males being eager to understand what they can do to limit their pornography use after learning of the physical and mental impacts it can have on them.



[The boys] say ‘ok, so what do I do?’...they’re very interested in strategies.”

- SACHA, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER

Across program modules, Top Blokes promotes a harm minimisation approach. Harm minimisation focuses on reducing the negative effects or risks associated with potentially harmful behaviours. It assumes that risky behaviours may occur despite warnings and aims to make those behaviours safer. We recognise that young people may engage in risky behaviours despite best efforts to discourage them. Harm minimisation strategies focus on providing young people with knowledge, tools, and strategies to reduce harm, such as safe practices, safer alternatives, and emergency measures.

Harm minimisation acknowledges that risky behaviours are a reality for some young people. It provides information that feels relevant to experiences and choices, making it more relatable and applicable. This approach allows teens to feel understood rather than judged and builds trust and respect in a safe and open way.

It also respects a young person’s ability to make their own choices and decisions so they can make informed decisions without someone trying to dictate or control their actions. This fosters a sense of trust and personal responsibility. There is less stigma and judgement when using a harm minimisation framework. It does not stigmatise or shame teens for engaging in risky behaviours. Instead, it supports them in reducing harm if they do. This encourages openness in seeking advice, asking questions or raising concerns so they can gain practice advice which is immediately useful in their lives. It allows them to weigh up the risks and make more informed decisions.



I regulated [pornography use], cut down slowly, and they taught me instead of, “Don’t do that, that’s bad. Don’t do it” like my school did, I was taught how to do it safely, how to regulate it and that’s what eventually got me cut off it.”

- YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

“ Well, some of the young people I’ve worked with have actually tried to abstain altogether because they’ve noticed that they’re using it too frequently. And they go, ‘Well, let’s go cold turkey on it’. And then later on when that fails because it does 100% of the time, they come back and go, ‘Oh, nah, yeah, I messed up last week’. And I go, ‘Well, that’s because going cold turkey almost never works, bro, and the way you climbed up the mountain, you actually have to go through that process of climbing back down’.”

- ZHALIN, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER

“ We’re all intentional at some point of teaching them that we’re not trying to demonise the use of [pornography], right? We are trying to talk about a healthy and safe, respectful approach to using it should you and when you’re of age. But I think when we reinforce those messages of identity, of healthy use, just the same we do with alcohol, same thing we do with drugs, same thing we do with all of them, it’s reinforcing a healthy behaviour and healthy approach.”

- TYRONE, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER

5 Flexible content and delivery modes

Young males have different levels of knowledge and are at different stages of readiness for engagement in health and wellbeing interventions.

Research and policy recommend that programs have adaptable content that enables discussion and learning at a time appropriate for a cohort, depending on their knowledge, readiness, physical, social and cultural environment (Elliot et al. 2022: 31, 32; Mental Health Commission of NSW 2022: 38).

Flexibility in content and delivery is also key to interventions taking an intersectional approach that acknowledges the multiple layers of identity young males have and the ways these can intersect to amplify their experiences and inequalities they face (Our Watch 2022: 30).

While Top Blokes programs and workshops are structured, there is flexibility in how youth workers deliver their sessions. This helps youth workers build rapport with the young males, facilitating honest and open discussions on topics they may never have spoken to an adult about.



I've never had a struggle with the boys accepting that [pornography is] not realistic...they actually haven't had that conversation with a trusted adult where [the trusted adult] has been able to just declare it like that and give them credible information..."

- ZHALIN, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER

RECOMMENDATION

Invest in programs delivered by qualified and trained professionals to educate young males on the harmful impacts of pornographic content.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CURRENT RESTRICTIONS ON ACCESS TO PORNOGRAPHY AND CONSIDERATION OF ANY NEED TO IMPROVE THESE

This submission makes clear that current restrictions on access to pornography are largely ineffective. Young males are being exposed to and/or accessing extensive and extreme pornographic content online.

Some Youth Ambassador Council members see a role for government in restricting access to extreme pornography, but acknowledge this is challenging. They indicated that more stringent age restrictions and ID requirements are unlikely to be effective.

Top Blokes advocates for comprehensive evidence-based and co-designed reforms of social media and online platforms used to access pornographic content.

While not specific to pornography, [leading Australian mental health organisations have highlighted measures for enhancing online safety of young people](#) that Top Blokes supports and recommends the Committee consider when looking at improvements to current restrictions on access to pornography.

1. Co-designing reform and new safety features with young people to ensure that they are likely to be effective and fit-for-purpose.
2. Social media platforms put an end to 'sticky features' (something that keeps users interested over a long period) like infinite scroll.
3. Mandating safety features and increased social media literacy programs for users under 16.

4. Increasing support for parents and carers in how to manage their children's access to social media.
5. Giving users control to reset their algorithm, limiting the harmful content they are exposed to.

Online platforms designed for young people and those that distribute pornographic content must take responsibility for the safety of their platforms and ensure young people are not exposed to harmful content.

Top Blokes supports the findings of the e-Safety Commissioner (2023: 39) regarding the steps online platforms should take, and that they should be held to account for:

- Online services must have strong, effective strategies to prevent young people seeing online pornography unintentionally.
- If a service doesn't allow pornography, this should be clearly set out in the terms of service or community rules, and such terms or rules should be enforced.
- If a service does allow pornography, it should put in place effective safeguards to prevent younger users and those who don't wish to see pornography from encountering this content e.g. robust age assurance measures and empowerment features so users can identify the content they do and do not want to see.
- The online industry should continuously improve tools and practices to prevent unintentional encounters with online pornography. It should also raise awareness of existing measures that young people and their parents/caregivers can choose to apply at the device level, network level, browser level or account level.

Holding online platforms to account will be critical to the effectiveness of educational initiatives outlined in this submission. Governments have a role to play in enforcing compliance with these measures and penalising non-compliance to ensure the safety of young people.

RECOMMENDATION

Establish a body that engages with and represents the voices and experiences of young people, including pathways for co-design solutions to address the impacts of pornography.

THE RESOURCES AND SUPPORT CURRENTLY AVAILABLE TO PARENTS AND CARERS TO EDUCATE CHILDREN ABOUT PORNOGRAPHY, AND HOW THESE MIGHT BE IMPROVED

Young males participating in Top Blokes programs have a safe forum in which to learn about pornography without judgment, but most young males do not have this critical opportunity.

While there is a role for programs and services targeting young people, there is an important role for parents and carers to play in reducing the likelihood and impact of early exposure to pornography.

Parents and carers are critical to educating children about the harmful impacts of pornography and practical strategies to reduce these harms. There can be limits to what service providers and educators can discuss in a school setting.

We need to support parents and carers to have open, confident and knowledgeable discussions about pornography with the young males in their lives. This can help mitigate the impacts of harmful pornography use, and build stronger connections between young males and the adults in their lives that support young men through adolescence and beyond. This also models to young males what healthy, respectful and consensual relationships look like.

An important starting point is to educate adults on the nature and accessibility of pornography. Adults that do not access pornography may be unaware of how accessible it is, the variety of formats it comes in and how extreme the content can be.



I feel like it's almost worse than what the parents think because there's stuff that's on there that should not ever be done to someone."

- YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

From this point, adults need support to have respectful and meaningful conversations about pornography with the young people in their lives.

Top Blokes runs a supporters program for adults in the lives of our young male participants. These adults include fathers, mothers, uncles, aunties and cousins. At the conclusion of each workshop, we send the supporter a text message explaining the workshop content and offering prompts for them to continue the discussion with the young male. A survey of 49 supporters was run in 2022-2023 and found that:

- All the supporters (100%) found that the text messages helped prompt conversations with the participants.
- 44 supporters (90%) found that these conversations improved their relationship with the participants.

While this is not conclusive evidence, it illustrates the role adults can play in supporting young males to avoid exposure to pornography and misuse of pornography.

RECOMMENDATION

Initiatives aimed at educating young males about pornography and the risks associated with pornography use include engagement with parents, guardians and supporters to share information and support ongoing discussions about pornography.

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