

Submission  
No 29

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

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# 1. Introduction

This submission by **NAPCAN** will address the harmful impacts of pornography on children and young people’s mental, emotional, and physical health. Written by members of **NAPCAN Youth Speak Out** (NYSO Council), this document brings together firsthand perspectives from young people who have witnessed the impacts of exposure to pornography on relationships, attitudes and self-perceptions. The research discussed throughout this submission matches our personal experiences as young people growing up with the internet as an ever-present part of our lives. The recommendations we make here come from a perspective of respect and autonomy for young people, because we believe that young people are the experts on our own experiences.

## 1.2 Definitions of pornography

It would be helpful to begin by defining what we mean by “pornography”. The conventional image of pornography is of websites like Pornhub - free online streaming platforms with effectively unlimited hours of content made by many different producers. But pornography can include video, still images, audio only, and written text. For video and image content, the pornography can be produced by large production companies with paid actors, individuals creating and selling their own content (e.g. OnlyFans), or “amateur” content produced by non-professionals (which can often include non-consensual videos of someone secretly recorded and uploaded to pornography platforms). Content can be accessed either for free, with a one-time purchase, or with a subscription to a particular production company or actor. Pornography has also been impacted by recent advances in AI technology, with deep fake pornography, sexual chatbots and ‘nudify’ websites becoming more prevalent. In general however, young Australians mostly access pornography online through dedicated pornography sites (eSafety Commissioner, 2023, p. 28) and do not pay for pornography (ABC, 2019). And so most of our discussion will focus on that conventional image of free streaming sites like Pornhub, with some discussion of other formats such as social media and OnlyFans.

## 2. Harms and Impacts of Pornography

### 2.1 *What is the impact of pornography on the formation and maintenance of relationships?*

The average age that children and young people encounter or are exposed to pornographic content is 13 (eSafety Commissioner, 2023). This coincides with the time that most young people are beginning to learn and form an understanding of relationships. These encounters can be deliberate, accidental, or involuntary (eSafety Commissioner, 2023; Flood, 2009), which can characterise the impact pornography has on a person. The consumption of pornography can hinder young people's understanding and expectations of a relationship; their understanding of consent; and their understanding of realistic and safe sex.

While it is evident that exposure to pornography can have negative effects on children and young people, it is important to recognise that their access to this content can reflect that there is a gap within their education and understanding of relationships and sexual education. Furthermore, as pornography is not designed to be educational material with factual information on relationships or sexual intercourse, it is crucial to recognise the importance of young people being able to access it to explore their sexuality or understand various topics of intimacy. The pornographic content that has the most harmful impacts to children and young people's relationships tends to be more aggressive, extreme content that depicts unrealistic expectations.

#### 2.1.1 Understanding and expectations of relationships

When accessing pornography, viewers enter a virtual sexual reality resulting in psychological effects that can harm actual relationships (Lemma, 2021). Virtual spaces can be places where young people navigate and explore their sexual and gender identities, particularly through the use of social media and online pornography (Lemma, 2021). Pornography depicts unrealistic scenes, lacking a reflection of intimacy and respect (Flood, 2009) and creating improper relationship expectations for young people (Lemma, 2021). Along with misinformation around expectations, the reality of consent, gender roles, body perception, and respect can be warped, particularly if it is one of the only means of sexual education a young person has received. The current digital landscape offers young people ease of access to pornography, whether this access is intentional or unintentional. The growing exposure to this content can distort young people's perceptions on what realistic relationships look like.

It is imperative to ensure that children and young people are delivered respectful relationships education prior to the age they could be exposed to this content. One of NAPCAN's strategic child abuse and neglect prevention approaches is our Love Bites Respectful Relationship Program (NAPCAN, 2024). This is delivered to children and young people aged between 13 and 17, seeking to educate and equip young people with critical thinking to make informed choices in relationships free from violence or abuse. A diverse range of young people have been consulted on Love Bites content. They have advised us that they wish to be having these conversations and would like to learn more about pornography and other taboo subjects but there are limited opportunities to do so. There are limited amounts of adults who are informed and equipped to facilitate such conversations, particularly within schools.

Speaking on behalf of young people who we have heard from, and as young people ourselves, it is critical to ensure that more people working with children and young people are trained and equipped to facilitate these conversations. This includes being able to have trauma informed discussions, answering questions and not making young people feel uncomfortable or ashamed for accessing pornography and being curious about their sexuality.

If children and young people are not having adequate conversation around pornography, sex, and respectful relationships with adults, their primary source of education on respectful relationships can be pornography.

## 2.1.2 Understanding of consent

Consent is already a complex, multidimensional practice for adults to understand, let alone children and young people to understand. More than just a “yes”, consent has multiple variables attached to it and someone is free to withdraw this consent at any time (Metz, 2021).

One's perception of consent, and reality comes down to their education, social context, family, and what they have consumed in the media (Gerbner, 1969; Simon and Gagon, 2003). Studies have indicated that prevalent pornographic material contains verbal and physical aggression which can result in harmful thoughts and behaviours from those who view them (Bridges et al., 2010; Mulac et al., 2002; Jansma et al., 1997). Whilst children and young people are grasping at the concepts of relationships and sexual education, consuming this content can negatively alter their understanding of consent (Bridges et al., 2010; Marques et al., 2024).

A study of 1329 adults focused on the influence pornography has on sexual consent attitudes and behaviours (Marques et al., 2024). It found that the people who didn't watch pornography have more positive attitudes towards sexual consent, feeling more confident to give and ask for consent (Marques et al., 2024). Whereas participants that watched pornography every day, or frequently, felt less control in asking for consent, or in asking their partner what they want due to a fear of a negative response (Marques et al., 2024; Humphreys and Brousseau, 2010).

With such ambiguous representation of consent, and words and phrases being used outside their normal context, it could communicate to viewers that “no” does not always mean no.

If adults are psychologically impacted through their behaviour and perception of reality from viewing pornography, children and young people’s understanding of consent would likely be warped by such content. Young people are telling us at NAPCAN through our National Youth Speak Out (NYSO) advisory council, and through Love Bites sessions that they want to be having these important conversations with informed adults, and this does not always mean through school teachers. Whilst teachers are qualified and equipped to deliver education upon various topics, they may not be the best place or most qualified people to be having conversations about relationships and pornography. The complex themes and sensitivities within such topics, along with the diverse needs of students may require external facilitators (Ollis, 2014).

### 2.1.3 Understanding of realistic and safe sex

Pornography often fails to provide an accurate representation of sexual intercourse and interpersonal relationships, which can distort young people's perceptions of realistic and safe sexual practices. Conversations regarding consent and boundaries and signs of respect are generally not present, which has the ability to affect the way in which young people perceive intimate interactions should look like. The extent of sexual health education and instruction on respectful relationships that an adolescent receives significantly impacts the degree to which pornography shapes their understanding of these topics. However, when pornography serves as the primary source of sexual education, it is likely to convey misleading and potentially harmful messages regarding sexual norms and behaviours (Lim et al., 2016).

Research recognises the correlation between regular pornography viewing and younger sexual exploration, riskier sexual behaviour, as well as the likelihood to have a higher number of casual sexual partners (Stenhammar et al., 2015). This could be seen to create difficulty in forming monogamous relationships, commitment, and unrealistic standards of an intimate relationship. A larger focus on safe sex and respectful relationships education may assist in mitigating the influence pornography has on young people and how they view relationships and sexual practices.

## 2.2 *How does pornography impact attitudes towards sex of those viewing pornography?*

Research has indicated that pornography can be a source of misinformation for children and young people on relationships, intimacy, consent, and sexual intercourse (Ballester, Orte, and Pozo 2019; Litsou et al. 2021; Rothman, Daley, and Alder 2020). The unrealistic portrayal of sex

in pornography can distort children and young people's perceptions of the reality of intimacy. It often neglects safe sex practices, promotes dominant and aggressive behaviour, and presents unrealistic scenarios that can impact individuals' ability to experience pleasure in sexual relationships (Aznar-Martínez et al., 2024).

### 2.2.1 Lack of safe sex practices

Pornography is not created to be an educational resource for people who have questions about intimate relationships and safe sex. Therefore, it rarely depicts the practice of safe sex, and realistic relationships as it seeks to be an outlet for pleasure rather than guidance. With only 2-3% of online heterosexual pornography including the use of a condom (Lim et al., 2016), young people viewing this material may not see this as a necessity, placing them at a higher risk of contracting or transmitting a sexually transmitted infection (STI) or sexually transmitted disease (STD). Being exposed to the lack of condom use may lead to perceptions that condoms are unnecessary, that they do not know how to have conversations with a partner around a use of a condom, or that they don't understand its dual purpose of protecting you from STI's and STD's.

### 2.2.2 Dominant and aggressive behaviour

Scenes of violence, aggression, dominant behaviour, and objectification of women appear within popular pornographic content (Lim et al., 2016). A study in Spain found that men who viewed pornography containing the sexual objectification of women had the tendency to show types of sexually coercive behaviour (Sáez et al. 2019; Lim et al., 2016). This is not confined to heterosexual aggression against women; Seida & Shor (2019) found that same-sex pornography had more depictions of aggression than different-sex pornography.

### 2.2.3 Impact on sexual pleasure

With pornographic content displaying extremely niche practices, and sex with multiple people, people's attitudes towards sex between one other person can be altered. This can in turn make intimate connections feel less stimulating and impact the ability for someone to be pleased by a partner, requiring more extreme practices to experience pleasure.

A greater focus on pornography literacy is crucial to embed into sexual education to ensure children and young people are not misguided by the misinformation displayed in pornography. The reality is that young people will be accessing pornography to affirm their sexual desires, to not feel alone in their desires, and interest in sexual intercourse (Rothman et al., 2018). If educators acknowledge that students are exposed to this content and focus on teaching what is

realistic, while encouraging young people to think critically about the media they consume, they can help mitigate the negative effects of such content (Rothman et al., 2018).

## *2.3 Do you think there is a link between harmful pornography and violence against women?*

Harmful pornography has been linked false understandings of rape and sexual assault (Allen et al., 1995; Brosi et al., 2011; Davis et al., 2006; Foubert et al., 2011), contribution to sexism, and supporting violence against women (Hald, 2010; Malamuth, 2012). It has been found to contribute to harmful attitudes and behaviours due to the negative behaviours and actions depicted towards women within pornographic material.

In 2022, La Trobe University in Melbourne published research about the motivations of men to stop viewing pornography, and whether gender equality or violence against women played in their decision (Jonvanoski and Tyler, 2022). It identified that the primary reason for most men discontinuing their use of pornography was the sexual objectification, desensitisation to violence, and the normalisation of harmful attitudes towards women. The impact that their viewing of pornography had on their relationships with their partners and other women was another motive to stop watching the content as some found themselves “belittling” women in their lives (Jonvanoski and Tyler, 2022).

Many of the male participants rejected pornography due to preexisting concerns about the education of treatment and representation of women, with their relationships being the primary facilitator for them to cease the habit. The study strongly suggests the correlation between the consumption of violent and harmful pornography and perpetuating harmful attitudes towards women (Jonvanoski and Tyler, 2022). These harmful attitudes produce harmful behaviours and actions against women.

### 2.3.1 Image-based abuse through pornography websites

Image-based abuse is the non-consensual creation or sharing of a person’s intimate images. It is a complex issue beyond the scope of this inquiry, however it is worth noting the role pornography websites sometimes play in image-based abuse. The major pornography sites generally allow anyone to upload images and videos and do not verify whether the content is consensual and legal. Therefore pornography sites are a method for someone to spread image-based abuse material. It can be very difficult for a victim to remove their images, since many sites such as Pornhub have a download button allowing viewers to download videos to their device, and so material is often reuploaded by other users even after being taken down.



There is some scope for the government to prevent reuploading via hash-matching, where eSafety can require that a video that has been flagged with a unique identifier or ‘hash’ be taken down whenever the same hash is detected in a reuploaded video. However hash-matching is mostly used for identifying images and is much harder with video. Otherwise we recommend requiring pornography sites in Australia to remove the download button from their display, since it is easier to regulate the layout of pornography sites than regulate the material they host. Since online pornography is a near-monopoly with many of the largest sites being owned by the Canadian company Aylo, this move only requires compliance from a small number of companies to be effective. This will make it harder for users to download and reupload content and prevent some of the impacts of image-based abuse via pornography sites.

There is the limitation however that Australians can still circumvent Australian laws via a virtual private network (VPN). As we learnt though from the recent eSafety legal battle with X, we probably have to accept this as a limit of Australian jurisdiction.

## ***2.4 Impacts on minority groups including but not limited to First Nations, CALD or LGBTIQ+ people and people living with disability***

### **2.4.1 LGBTIQ+**

Different LGBTIQ+ people have varied and complex relationships with pornography. In general however, LGBTIQ+ people are more likely to report benefits from pornography than cisgender heterosexual people. This is because online pornography often fills the gaps in sex and relationship education, which tends to omit representation of LGBTIQ+ people and their unique experiences and health needs.

Gay and bisexual men tend to have a somewhat positive experience of pornography. Although it still contains problematic depictions of consent and body image, gay male pornography can be a useful medium for young men who are still closeted, questioning, or with little real life experience to explore and understand their sexuality. Gay male pornography provides a means for sexual exploration, sex education, identity formation, and community-building (Demant et al., 2024). However at the same time, gay and bisexual men have higher rates of pornography consumption than straight men, which correlates to higher levels of negative body image, anxiety, and depression (Whitfield et al., 2018).

Conversely, lesbian and transgender people are particularly harmed by the narratives presented in pornography. Unlike gay male pornography which is targeted towards a gay male audience, lesbian and transgender pornography is not targeted towards lesbian and transgender audiences, but rather mostly towards straight men (Puhl, 2010). And so these genres of

pornography fetishise these groups and reinforce myths and stereotypes that lead to physical, sexual, and political violence for lesbian and transgender people. In the United States for example, there is a correlation where the states with the highest consumption of transgender pornography also have the most negative attitudes and restrictive laws on transgender rights (Human Rights Campaign, 2024; Lawsuit.org, 2022).

## 2.4.2 People living with disability

People living with disability are another group with a complex relationship to pornography. Disability is also a genre of online pornography which often does not present a respectful narrative designed for people with disability, but rather fetishises them. Disability pornography often depicts a disabled woman or girl and encourages fantasies of gendered power dynamics and non-consensual male dominance (Elman 1997, 2001). This is a dangerous narrative to be spreading when people with disability are at high risk of sexual assault (Disability Royal Commission, 2021). On the other hand, people living with disability often report having their sexuality dismissed, ridiculed, or infantilised both in media and in sexual health and relationship education. And so pornography can be a medium to learn about and validate their sexuality (Ebrahim, 2019), particularly if the pornography is created by people with disability with a focus on respect and accessibility (Jones, 2023).

# 3. Legality, Accessibility and Technological Influences

## 3.1 Legality

In Australia, the regulation of viewing and accessing pornography falls under both state and federal laws. As the guidelines surrounding viewing and accessing this content are already quite unclear, the accessibility of this content is challenging to regulate.

Whilst legislation exists around restricting minor access to adult content under Australian classification law, they are not applicable to the internet age and existing restrictions do not work (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2019). Despite classification efforts, legislation does not restrict people under the age of 18 from accessing and viewing pornographic material online and the onus is on the platform to ensure younger people are not accessing this content.

Since it is difficult to regulate access through the flaws in tech-based solutions, as discussed later in this submission, the content on pornographic sites may be what is required to be regulated. For example, harmful and extreme pornographic material.

New South Wales legislation includes the following offences regarding pornography:

- consent of distributing, viewing and filming intimate content (*Crimes Act 1900* (NSW) s91P, s91Q, s91R);
- the distribution of child pornography and child abuse material (*Crimes Act 1900* (NSW) s91FB);
- the production of child abuse material (*Crimes Act 1900* (NSW) s91H(1)); and
- distribution of child abuse material (inclusive of 'sexting' between two consenting minors) (*Crimes Act 1900* (NSW) 91H(2)).

Such legislation does not legislate against the accessing and viewing of pornography, or the types of pornography that are produced (excluding content containing children).

## 3.2 Accessibility and technology

The pervasiveness of readily accessible, constantly online technology is increasingly undeniable, facilitating instantaneous information retrieval and digital interactions. For young people, this technological access is integral to academic success, learning, and social interaction. Data from 2023 indicates that 91% of 14-17 year olds owned a mobile phone, highlighting the ever-present nature of this technology (OAIC, 2023). This ease of access, however, exposes children and young people to a largely unmonitored digital environment encompassing diverse forms of communication, connection, and informational resources.

Through social media, online surfing, video games and other platforms, access and exposure to pornographic content is becoming more prevalent. Reiterating the nature of these encounters from earlier in this submission, these encounters can be deliberate, accidental, or involuntary (eSaftey Commissioner, 2023; Flood 2009).

Access to pornography can be important to groups of people wishing to learn more about their sexuality, physical intimacy, and sexual intercourse. Some of the platforms that young people access this material on are not designed to educate children and young people on relationships, intimacy, and sexual intercourse. Therefore, the content that young people view may be harmful to their understanding of relationships, intimate relationships, and their self-esteem, being unsafe ways to view pornography.

### 3.2.1 Online

Most young people encounter pornography unintentionally whilst online (eSaftey Commissioner, 2023). Many of these unintentional encounters are through pop-up advertisements when searching something online or being on a gaming site (eSaftey Commissioner, 2023; Crabbe, 2024). Young people also intentionally access pornography through curiosity, or seeking education upon the nature of intimate relationships and sexual intercourse. As discussed within the harms section of this submission, the unrealistic, extreme content that they may view could negatively influence their perspectives of relationships and physical intimacy.

### 3.2.2 Social media

In a study conducted by the eSaftey Commission, 60% of young people were found to be encountering pornography on social media, with young women more likely than men to encounter it unintentionally through social media (eSaftey Commissioner, 2023). These encounters generally occur through advertisements, or through peers circulating images using social media platforms.

In addition to the more traditional pornographic sites such as 'Pornhub', in recent years the platform 'OnlyFans' has become present on social media, with young adult influencers utilising their following to create subscribers. This privatised platform allows individuals to sell their explicit images and videos to people who subscribe to their platform, with them being in control of the value of this content. Whilst not all influencers centre their online personality and brand around this pursuit on the side, it does expose their younger followers to this content, whilst also glamourising their occupation.

As this content is behind a paywall, it has the potential to create more difficulty for young people to access this content, but social media such as Instagram and X are used to promote this platform and there may be ways to navigate around this. Whilst this paywall may protect young

people from accessing such content, many influencers dually advertise their Only Fans accounts, whilst also their lavish 'financially free' lifestyle. Young people can then turn to this as a more normalised career prospect and industry to make money.

As social media platforms are not designed for pornographic material to be circulated, specifically pornographic material to educate young people, it may not be a safe or reliable place for children and young people to be viewing pornography.

### 3.2.3 Deepfakes

This year the federal government has passed the Criminal Code Amendment (Deepfake Sexual Material) Bill 2024. The bill previously criminalised the non-consensual creation and sharing of sexual images or videos of a person. This amendment broadens the definition to specifically criminalise sexual images or videos that have been non-consensually created or altered with AI. With the rise of deepfake technology and commercially available 'nudify' websites and applications, this is a welcome strengthening of the law. Nudify software allows the user to upload a non-explicit photo of a person and non-consensually convert it into an explicit photo of the person, often with a lot of user control over what the person is doing in the photo and how the body looks. So we believe the law should be further strengthened by banning nudify applications from being hosted on app stores (e.g. Google Play and Apple App Store) in Australia, since most applications are distributed through a small number of app stores and so it is the easiest stage of the process to regulate.

## 4. Technology-Based Solutions

We broadly oppose the suggested technology-based solutions in the inquiry, particularly those that target the consumer rather than the producer or platform. In this section we explain why mandatory age verification, internet service provider filtering, and age limits are ineffective, dangerous and/or unjust.

### 4.1 Mandatory Age Verification

Mandatory Age Verification (MAV) is the process of verifying that the pornography consumer is at least 18 years old before allowing access to pornography. Although 78% of the Australian public supports MAV (eSafety Commissioner, 2021), eSafety has recommended against it for the federal government in its 2023 MAV roadmap, citing concerns about privacy and the lack of maturity of the technology.

There are five common methods proposed for MAV, each with their own issues:

1. **Providing identity documents directly to the pornography service provider.** It is dangerous to require people to link their identity with their pornography viewing habits, as the data may be used unethically by the pornography platform or leaked. There are also doubts that this method will prevent young people from accessing the pornography. Young people can still use other people's identity documents. And assuming that verification is not required every time but rather there will be certain approved accounts or devices, then young people would be able to access pornography via other people's verified accounts or devices.
2. **Providing identity documents to a third party for verification.** This method is more secure if there is no sharing of information between the third party and the pornography service provider beyond what is minimally necessary for MAV, i.e. the pornography service provider simply receives a confirmation that the user is over 18 and does not receive any identity information, and the third party does not receive any information about viewing habits. However the risk of data breaches is still serious, and the same issues of young people circumventing the restriction still apply.
3. **Cross-checking user information against other age-related databases,** e.g. confirming that the user is in the electoral roll. This is problematic however because some people over 18 are not in these databases, it is unfair on people who registered with these databases and did not consent to their data to be used in this way, and the verification may still require identity documents anyway to prevent young people from

claiming to be someone else.

4. **Biometric testing**, e.g. facial recognition or age verification software. This method is not recommended because it is highly invasive of the user's privacy, especially if performed by the government. It is also not possible to reliably determine age from appearances, and even if it were, this technology is known to have biases that make it more inaccurate for racial and gender minorities.
5. **Self-declaration**, e.g. the user ticks a box to confirm that they are over 18. This method is already common on many pornography websites. While it is the least invasive method it is also the least effective, since there is nothing to stop the user from lying.

Regardless of the method used, there are consistent harms and risks for MAV. The risk of data breaches and leaks is dangerous. A leak of the user's viewing habits would have serious consequences including shame, ostracism, relationship breakdown, and outing of LGBTQIA+ people. In a submission to eSafety's MAV roadmap, Digital Rights Watch "remind[s] the Commission of the leak of 30 million accounts when the adultery site, Ashley Madison, was hacked in 2015. The resulting harm caused by such sensitive information being inappropriately-accessed included several deaths by suicide." (Digital Rights Watch, 2022, p. 8). Secondly it is difficult for the government to be aware of all pornography sites, so it is likely that there would be smaller sites which are less safe, secure, and legal that do not comply with MAV requirements, which young people and adults that do not want to share their personal information would be pushed towards. Finally there is the issue that these restrictions could be easily bypassed by a virtual private network (VPN), which many people might find preferable to complying with MAV requirements.

## 4.2 Mandatory Internet Service Provider Filtering

Internet Service Provider (ISP) filtering is the process where someone directs internet service providers (e.g. Telstra, Optus, iiNet, TPG, Vodafone, etc.) to block access to certain websites for its users. The most common scenarios for ISP filtering are parents and carers blocking access for their household, IT administrators blocking access for their school or workplace, and governments blocking access for their jurisdictions.

Mandatory ISP filtering refers to the government requiring all ISPs to block access to certain websites for everyone in their jurisdiction. Generally ISPs voluntarily filter certain websites and the Australian government does not directly require them to do so officially, but the government issues "takedown requests" which the ISPs tend to comply with.

There are three common methods of ISP filtering:

1. **White lists**, which are a manually curated list of approved websites, and any website not on the list is blocked.

2. **Black lists**, which are a manually curated list of banned websites, and any website not on the list is accessible.
3. **Keyword filtering**, which involves a set of banned keywords and websites are blocked if they contain the keywords.

On a government level, black lists are the only feasible method for ISP filtering. White lists are too restrictive and the government does not have the resources to approve every acceptable website, while with keyword filtering it is too difficult to generate a list of keywords that reliably blocks problematic material without blocking acceptable content, for example material such as sexual health and relationship education content, academic and professional discussions of child abuse material, and legal information. Keyword filtering is also difficult since pornographic material is primarily consumed in video format, and so keyword filtering would rely on the minimal information available from the titles and descriptions of the videos, which may not accurately reflect the content of the videos.

The federal government already blacklists content categorised as Refused Classification, e.g. child sexual abuse material (CSAM) and content that promotes terrorism. However this inquiry is asking about blocking “all access to sites that contain harmful pornography”, not just illegal pornography. “Harmful” is a subjective term and it is difficult to quantify the harms from different types of pornography. And so the definition of “harmful” would have to be based on certain individual subjective opinions. Davis et al. (2018) find even the definition of “violence” is subjective, with young women more likely than young men to report that they had seen violent pornography. Therefore defining “harmful pornography” for ISP filtering would not be evidence-based.

Additionally, whatever criteria is used to define “harmful pornography” would likely result in most major pornography sites being blocked, since they are regularly accused of hosting non-consensual and illegal pornography. This creates the same issue as Mandatory Age Verification where users are subsequently directed towards less safe and less regulated websites beyond the government’s reach. However in this scenario, the major pornography sites would presumably be removed from search engine results and so the remaining websites would be much easier to find.

There is further the issue of pornography being present not only on dedicated pornography sites but also on social media, as explained above. While social media sites tend to have better content moderation than pornography sites, they still host “harmful” pornography. Major social media sites like Facebook, X, YouTube, etc. would need to be blocked to comply with this recommendation. Additionally, unless the material is categorised as Refused Classification or depicts CSAM, it is not illegal to consume harmful pornography. And so this approach is unfairly punitive towards adults who are consuming harmful but legal material.

There is also an equity issue for LGBTQIA+ people in ISP filtering of pornographic material. According to Lim et al. (2021, p. 669), “pornography-blocking software was more likely to block health and sexual education content related to same-sex relationships than heterosexual



relationships (Richardson et al. 2002). It has been argued that Australian film classification laws excessively criminalise non-heteronormative practices (Stardust 2014). This aligns to participants' concern that regulating pornography content to be 'a perfect model of normal sex' may reduce access to diverse representations of sexuality."

Therefore we oppose ISP filtering for being overbearing, subjective, and inequitable.

## 4.3 Age Limits

Creating legal age limits for accessing pornography is also not recommended because it is difficult to enforce and puts an emotional burden unfairly on young people.

There are many activities which have some legal age restriction for children, including: drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, driving, engaging in sex, voting, being employed, and receiving tattoos. Generally in these cases the criminal responsibility lies with the adult, business or organisation who enables these activities, not the underage child. Therefore it would be the responsibility of the internet service provider, the pornography platform, or the pornography producer to enforce age limits. This presents two issues: firstly, enforcing this would require some method such as age verification whose problems have already been outlined above. Secondly, it is difficult to define who is responsible for providing the pornography to the young person. A similar debate regularly plays out with social media companies and whether they should be legally treated as a media company with editorial responsibilities for the content they host, or whether they are simply a platform and responsibility lies with the individual posting the content. A similar ambiguity and denial of responsibility would occur in this scenario between the pornography platform, the producers, and possibly the ISP.

Legal age limits would also emotionally harm young people. As explained in the section below, young people often experience high levels of shame as they are developing and discovering their sexuality, especially in terms of pornography consumption. Many already avoid discussing their concerns about pornography because of the fear that it might be illegal (eSafety Commissioner, 2023, p. 49). From this we can say therefore that actually making pornography illegal for young people to watch would just further stigmatise pornography and prevent young people from getting help and education, since we do not expect that young people would understand that the legal responsibility does not lie with them.

## 5. Recommendations

At NAPCAN, we strongly believe in education as a method for preventing harm for young people. We deliver the highly successful respectful relationship education program ‘Love Bites’ for young people aged 11-17, which contains discussions of pornography and its harms.

We utilise four key facts about young people’s relationship to pornography to guide the recommendations in this section:

1. Young people generally believe that pornography is harmful. They are likely to believe that pornography has a negative impact on their understandings of consent (74% of young people), gender stereotypes (64%), intimate relations (76%), and expectations about sex (76%) (eSafety Commissioner, 2023, p. 37). They just may not necessarily know the details of how it is harmful.
2. Young people already feel high levels of shame (77% of young people) and embarrassment (80%) about pornography, as well as fear of getting into trouble (50%) (eSafety Commissioner, 2023, p. 49).
3. Young people want education on pornography. 85% of young Australians think that pornography literacy should be taught in schools (Lim et al., 2021).
4. Young people feel most comfortable accessing pornography education in private. The preferred methods are social media (35% of young people), peers (33%), and websites (28%) (eSafety Commissioner, 2023, p. 51).

Therefore we recommend four approaches to creating holistic community-wide pornography education: educating young people in schools, educating people who work with young people, educating young people online, educating parents.

### 5.1 Educating young people in schools

Respect and consent education on pornography is highly popular. 85% of young people (Lim et al., 2021) and 95% of parents (Hendriks et al., 2024) in Australia believe that it should be taught in schools. It needs to include discussions on pornography that are age-appropriate and non-judgemental.

We propose requiring education on pornography in the PDHPE curriculum for Stage 4 (Year 7-8) and Stage 5 (Year 9-10). This material would belong in the ‘Health, Wellbeing, and Relationships’ section of each stage’s syllabus. These sections focus on respectful relationships and ethical decision making in relationships, and so it would be best for the pornography content to explore the impacts that pornography can have on relationships and the viewer’s mental health and encourage critical media analysis skills. Syllabus points that discuss the ‘influences of media’ on ethical behaviour, beliefs about gender, and other relationship issues should specify pornography as a type of media.

Within the upcoming NSW Respectful Relationships Curriculum (curriculum implemented from 2027) the mention of pornography occurs three times. The first, is in the Stage 4 (Year 7-8 syllabus) and is used as an example on how the portrayal of the relationships in the media can influence one's perception on what a respectful relationship looks like. The example is *"unrealistic perceptions of safe and consensual sex that may be represented in pornography and online sexually explicit material"* (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2024, p. 24). The second, is in the Stage 5 (Year 9-10), and is the exact same as the use in the first example (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2024, p. 35). The third, is for Stage 4 and 5 and is an example of how the media can influence the expectations on intimate relationships *"depiction of trust, empathy, responsibilities and unrealistic perceptions of safe and consensual sex that may be represented in pornography or sexually explicit online material"* (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2024, p. 55).

However we know from our NYSO youth council that many young people feel that teachers are not well equipped to have sensitive conversations around pornography. NYSO members often describe teachers using shame- and fear-inducing tactics in discussions of pornography, which they find unhelpful and stigmatising, and causes them to disengage from these conversations. This is common across NYSO members of different ages and from different types of school.

Some young people on our NYSO council have also voiced concerns about the lack of education they have received in school and other contexts on pornographic material, sending nude images, and the use of technology. Some expressed their experience of the police coming into their school to instil fear into young people around the legal consequences of sending nude images, and how they use technology. This approach leaves young people with a sense of shame, feeling like they are unable to speak to an adult if something were to happen, and feeling unequipped in the instance they do something wrong and do not know where to turn to.

So instead we advise schools to use a specifically designed Respectful Relationships Education program that includes helpful discussions of pornography. NAPCAN's Love Bites program does this, where facilitators conduct conversations that encourage young people to consider the potential harms and benefits of pornography consumption. Our facilitators are trained to challenge harmful beliefs without telling the young people what to think, but rather steering the conversation towards helpful attitudes and allowing the young people to come to their own conclusions. Another advantage of this student-led approach is that it makes the course more suitable to religious schools, since the staff are not required to deliver any content that may go against the school's beliefs, but rather simply open discussion around the ideas raised by the students. A school can choose to either hire external Love Bites facilitators or train their own staff in our program. We encourage a school to train its staff so that the Love Bites skills and resources become locally-held institutional knowledge which the young people will have ongoing access to. Aside from Love Bites, we also recommend courses run by Consent Labs and Teach Us Consent which take a similar approach. There are not many pornography-specific courses, with the exception of It's Time We Talked which conducts staff professional development and supports schools to deliver pornography education. Additionally, researchers

at the University of Sydney have designed a 90-minute pornography education course for 18- to 25-year-olds, which teaches critical thinking around the ethics of pornography (McKee et al., 2023). We also recommend this as a starting point for developing a school-based pornography education course for under 18 year olds.

Alongside further-education teachers that facilitate respectful relationships training, we recommend syllabus teaching guides to include more guidance on how to facilitate a conversation around pornography with young people. This includes being able to take a trauma-informed approach, curious questioning, allowing the young people to guide the depth of the conversation, and not shaming participants for viewing pornography. For example, discussions that are driven by students allow them to critically think and challenge their thinking, and the teacher (facilitator) should be facilitating the discussion rather than telling them about the consequences of accessing such material. Through Love Bites sessions, we have found that young people are excited to speak about these topics as they rarely have such an opportunity. We also recommend designing adaptations for religious schools. Pornography is a particularly difficult topic for religious schools to discuss safely while remaining honest to their faith. Rather than leaving each individual school or teacher to deliver the secular content, we suggest working with governing bodies such as Catholic Schools NSW and the Islamic Schools Association of Australia to design faith-based adaptations of the teaching guides that do not reinforce the already high levels of shame and embarrassment that young people feel.

## 5.2 Educating people who work with children

Whilst this education is crucial at schools, children and young people who are not engaged in school should have access to people who can facilitate these conversations. Young people who do not attend school are a particularly important cohort to target since they are at higher risk of displaying problematic sexual behaviour (Anderson & Pörtner, 2010). Therefore case workers, practitioners, police officers, health workers and other adults who work with children outside of the school context need to be equipped to have sensitive conversations about pornography with young people. People who work with vulnerable children and young people not only inform them on respectful relationships and pornography, but provide them an opportunity to ask difficult questions. One method for obtaining these skills is for the staff to complete the respectful relationship education training outlined above. This will provide all the same useful skills in discussing pornography, although in some cases the classroom-based context will not be relevant to their work. Otherwise general trauma trauma-informed practice would be useful. NAPCAN has recently developed its TunedIn modules which teaches skills in having trauma-informed conversations with young people in small group settings. Completing this training would allow staff to engage in safe discussions of pornography with young people.

## 5.3 Educating young people online

Young people prefer learning about pornography in private and online, primarily through social media (eSafety Commissioner, 2023, p. 51). Therefore we suggest educating young people by providing online resources and social media campaigns. Specifically, we propose setting up a helpline containing a website with useful information on pornography, a quick exit button, and a voice or text chat function for young people to ask questions or discuss concerns.

We would also like to draw the committee's attention to the Pornhub Sexual Wellness Centre, which is an online sex and relationship education platform run by the world's largest online pornography platform and is easily accessible from anywhere on the Pornhub website. It contains useful information about sexual and reproductive health and relationships, and answers users' questions. However, presumably due to conflict of interest, it does not address the topics of sexual assault or pornography with enough detail or seriousness. While this source is limited, it is a useful example of providing pornography education on pornography sites themselves.

We propose a policy requiring pornography sites in Australia to prominently display links to online sources where both young people and adults can access information on pornography, such as the helpline recommended above. While it is difficult to regulate the content on pornography sites, it is easier to regulate the display and layout of the sites. We consider this analogous to the requirement for gambling advertisements to display gambling helplines.

## 5.4 Educating parents and carers

We also recommend a campaign educating parents and carers on how to talk to young people about pornography and providing basic information for them to feel equipped to have these conversations. This campaign would look similar to the current federal government's consent.gov.au campaign, which encourages adults to inform themselves about consent so that they can have conversations with young people. This campaign could be run concurrently with the social media campaign for young people recommended above.

## 6. Conclusion

Pornography is everywhere on the internet. Encountering pornography online is now simply a part of growing up as a young person. Whilst unavoidable, there are negative consequences for young people viewing this content, particularly without adequate respectful relationships education.

Pornography has impacts upon the formation and maintenance of relationships through providing young people with distorted understanding of relationships, consent, realistic and safe sex. It influences young people's expectation of sex, through the lack of safe sex practices, exhibition of dominant and aggressive behaviours, and effect on sexual pleasure. The viewing of harmful pornography has links to attitudes of violence against women, as there are scenes of sexual objectification, viewers are desensitised to violence against women, and it normalises harmful attitudes against women. Pornography sites can also act as platforms for intimate images and videos to be circulated, and image-based abuse to take place. Whilst some minority groups find benefits in viewing pornography to fill an information gap, it can also be a place where harmful narratives and attitudes are reinforced.

Pornography is incredibly accessible to children and young people due to the ease of accessing the internet, lack of legal implications, and various online platforms being infiltrated with such content. Young people viewing pornography unintentionally through 'pop-up' ads online and on social media is a routine occurrence, which has the ability to expose them to more extreme and harmful content.

Attempting to prevent pornography access is the wrong solution, because people will always find workarounds and riskier websites to access the content. Mandatory age verification, internet service provider filtering, and age limits are invasive and ineffective methods of preventing young people from accessing pornography, while also unfairly punitive towards adults who are accessing pornography legally. Instead young people need critical thinking skills that give them agency and allow them to decide for themselves what role they want pornography to play in their lives and their relationships. These skills need to come from all parts of their lives: school, parents, practitioners, and their online worlds. And so we need adults who are well equipped and confident to have conversations with young people in a way that values young people's curiosity and does not shame them. Every conversation matters.

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