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

Organisation: MacKillop Family Services

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Submission by MacKillop Family Services to the Standing Committee on Social Issues

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Introduction

MacKillop Family Services (MacKillop) is a community service organisation that works for the rights of all children to be free to enjoy their childhood in a safe and loving home. MacKillop is driven by social justice and committed to advocating for the rights of marginalised people. In 2023/2024, MacKillop supported more than 23,000 disadvantaged and at-risk children, young people and families throughout New South Wales, Victoria, Western Australia and the ACT. Our vision is that all children, young people, and families are safe, thriving and connected to culture and community.

The services MacKillop provide are supported by Commonwealth and state / territory funding, fundraising and philanthropic support. Delivered by over 2,000 staff, operating nationally from 56 offices, our services and programs provide practical and accessible assistance in family therapy, family relationship services, family support, foster care, residential care, disability services, youth support, youth homelessness, education and training, mental health, family violence, early intervention, sexual assault, parenting and early childhood. We also continue to support women and men who, as children, were in the care of our founding agencies.

Our work is underpinned by strong governance; a deep commitment to social justice; to children and families; to the prevention of harm; and to practice based on research evidence.

In New South Wales, MacKillop is a leading provider of services to vulnerable children, young people and their families. We deliver Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) services through the Targeted Earlier Intervention, Family Connect and Support, Specialist Homelessness Services, A Place to Go, Family Preservation, and Permanency Support Programs. MacKillop operates across urban, regional, rural and remote NSW, providing services across the Western Sydney, Nepean Blue Mountains, South West Sydney, Sydney, Illawarra Shoalhaven, Southern NSW, Hunter Central Coast, Northern NSW and Western NSW Districts. In 2024, MacKillop opened the Waranara Specialist School in Annandale, Sydney. MacKillop also provides Commonwealth funded education support, Indigenous parenting services, family programs and are a provider of NDIS supports. MacKillop has major offices in Dubbo, Lismore, Wollongong, Grafton, Newcastle, and Blacktown.

The MacKillop Institute

The MacKillop Institute is a part of MacKillop Family Services, and was established to share the experience, expertise, and evidence-based and evidence informed programs of MacKillop Family Services with the wider community. The MacKillop Institute draws on a wealth of experience from MacKillop Family Services' work across Australia to identify, promote, and independently evaluate good practice.

The MacKillop Institute is committed to MacKillop Family Services' strategic goal to be innovative and responsive, develop best practices and advocate for social justice. We do this by building long-term partnerships that create positive and sustainable change.

The Institute empowers other organisations with evidence-informed programs and services that promote school and organisational wellbeing and strengthen child safety. We work with others to share our collective knowledge to create practical solutions tailored to the culture, strengths and needs of an organisation.

The evidence-based and evidence-informed programs delivered by the Institute include Power to Kids, Power to Kids in Schools, the Sanctuary Model and the ReLATE model.

Focus of the submission

MacKillop commends the Standing Committee on Social Issues for addressing this important social issue. Our submission focuses on our experience of the impact of pornography on vulnerable children and young people, particularly those living in out-of-home care. Our submission will also focus on the capacity of MacKillop's innovative Power to Kids and Power to Kids in Schools programs to support professionals, carers, volunteers and children to understand and navigate the influence and impacts of pornography.

We address the points in the Terms of Reference that are of greatest relevance to the cohort of children, young people and families with whom we work.

Terms of Reference (f): The impact of exposure to violent and/or misogynistic pornography on children, teenagers and young adults

The existing approach to limiting children's access to pornography has failed. That children can access or are confronted with violent pornography online is beyond dispute. The ubiquity of pornography is impacting negatively on the health, wellbeing and relationships of children (Crabbe et al, 2024; see also Hilton, 2021). MacKillop strongly supports measures to address the access and availability of pornography, including violent pornography. We acknowledge the work of the eSafety Commissioner's initiative *Safety by Design*. The initiative provides an excellent framework for online platforms and services to incorporate, assess and enhance user safety. The guiding principles of 'Service provider responsibility', 'User empowerment and autonomy' and 'Transparency and accountability' provide a sound direction for improving safety. MacKillop strongly supports measures to mandate greater accountability from the technology platforms that enable and profit from the distribution of pornography that is harming children and young people.

We have seen first-hand the negative impact of pornography as a noxious educative medium for children and young people. This can lead to phenomena such as modelling of peer relationships, particularly sexual interactions, based on harmful stereotypes and the violent interactions that are presented in mainstream pornography. This can also provide a pathway to the self-production of child sexual exploitation material as children and young people seek to emulate the pornography they are freely able to access.

MacKillop notes the study of the Children's Commission in England that indicates consumption of degrading, aggressive and coercive pornography closely associates with real-life experiences. For example, their research highlights:

- Young people who first watched pornography aged 11 or younger were significantly more likely to present lower self-esteem scores than those who first watched pornography aged 12.

- Girls and frequent consumers of pornography were more likely to have experienced a violent sex act and girls were significantly more likely to have experienced a violent sex act (48%) compared to boys (45%).

- Young people who frequently viewed pornography, twice or more per week, were significantly more likely to have experienced a physically aggressive or degrading sex act (Children's Commissioner for the England, 2023: 31-34).

Exposure to pornography can distort the views and expectations of young people regarding gender equality and healthy sexual relationships. Young men may believe the sexual aggression and dominance they see in pornography is how men behave in intimate relationships. Young women may believe they should accept a subordinate role and place their own sexual needs and enjoyment second to their male partners.

Digital technology has supported the exponential growth of the porn industry allowing easy access to increasingly violent, misogynistic content including child sexual abuse material, cartoons and animai and material featuring bestiality and incest themes. Exposure to pornography may strengthen attitudes supportive of sexual violence and violence against women (Quadara *et al*, 2017). Young people's exposure to

pornography has been linked to adolescent dating violence and aggression (Rostad et al, 2019). We note the recent study that identifies the role which access to pornography has as a pathway towards the development of harmful sexual behaviours in children and young people (McKibbin, Green, Humphreys, & Tyler, 2023). Unsafe sexual health practices such as not using condoms may be reinforced through pornography.

Terms of reference (g) Impacts on minority groups including but not limited to First Nations, CALD or LGBTIQA+ people and people living with disability

Children and young people in out-of-home care are a cohort that are at particular risk from the negative impacts of pornography. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are significantly overrepresented in out-of-home care. Data shows they are 10.8 times more likely than non-Indigenous children to live in out-of-home care (SNAICC, 2024).

Most young people in residential care have experiences of developmental trauma including abuse, neglect and disrupted attachment relationships. These young people may lack consistent positive role models and be particularly susceptible to the messages regarding the dominant and subordinate roles in pornography. As noted in the final report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse:

> "Like many children, children in out-of-home care frequently have ready access to the internet and social media, via which they may be exposed to pornography. This may result in distorted and violent views about sexual relationships." (2017: 284)

We note that neurodivergent young people and young people with intellectual disability are overrepresented in residential care. Autistic children and young people can be especially vulnerable to the impacts of pornography. *Porn is not the norm*[1] is a recent initiative that aims to prevent pornography's harms to autistic young people by equipping them and their parents, carers, teacher and workers to understand the prevalence and impact of pornography and how they can safety navigate healthy and respectful relationships and sexuality.

For people with intellectual disability, opportunities to engage online can enhance inclusion, combat isolation and break-down barriers. Young people with intellectual disability may need additional support keeping safe online to read social cues, understand boundaries and judge the trustworthiness of those they come interact with (eSafety Commissioner, 2020).

Coerced "self-produced" child sexual exploitation material

The pervasive influence of the pornography industry contributes to the normalisation of sexualised imagery in general and, more specifically, fosters an enabling environment for perpetrators who seek to coerce children to "self-produce" child sexual exploitation material. This growing phenomenon describes child sexual exploitation content produced by the children and young people themselves.

Recent statistics show that the coercion of children to "self-produce" child sexual exploitation material is increasing rapidly. In 2022, "self-generated" child sexual abuse reports of 7-10 years olds were for the first time more prevalent than "not self-generated" and became the most common type of child abuse material to be reported (Internet Watch Foundation, 2022).

The Internet Watch Foundation (2023) have reported that of the 275,652 webpages actioned from reports during 2023, more than nine in 10 (254,071 or 92%) were assessed as containing 'self-generated' imagery.

There are complex legal, ethical and moral issues related to "self-produced" child sexual exploitation material. Whether voluntarily produced or coerced, legal responses are inconsistent across national and

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[1] Further information available at www.pornisnotthenorm.com.au

international jurisdictions. MacKillop calls for support to be offered to children and young people who have been coerced into "self-producing" this material rather than pursuing punitive criminal measures (Bloxsom *et al*, 2024).

The below case study highlights an example of how access to pornography via online platforms has enabled a child to be groomed and created a pathway towards harmful sexual behaviour and the distribution of child sexual exploitation material.

Case study: Seeking connection

Jason*, a 14-year-old young person living in residential out-of-home care has a history of displaying problematic and harmful sexual behaviour. Jason has used digital technology to access pornography including child sexual abuse material and material depicting bestiality. Jason has produced and distributed sexual images of himself and other young people.

Jason describes being first exposed to sexually explicit material at the age of 12 through popular online video chat platform Omegle. Omegle is marketed as allowing users to "connect with random strangers from all over the world."

Through Omegle, Jason connected with others, including an older male, who was using the platform to obtain and share child sexual exploitation and bestiality material. Jason began sharing sexually explicit images of himself. Jason obtained sexually explicit photos of female peers which he also shared.

Jason began using other social media platforms including Instagram, Discord and Snapchat to network with others seeking to share child sexual exploitation material. Images of Jason were found as part of an international investigation which resulted in the arrest of a perpetrator based in the UK. Jason was found to be a victim while also engaging in the distribution of child sexual exploitation material.

Jason stated that his interest in child sexual abuse material made him feel a sense of connection to those he interacted with to share and obtain the material. Jason described feeling a level of remorse however reflected that he, like the victims in the content he shared, were not kept safe and protected as children.

*not real name

Term of Reference (h) The effectiveness of any current education programs about use and misuse of pornography, and how these may be improved

Talking with children and young people regarding pornography requires planning and sensitivity to avoid implied criticism or punishment for those who have already been exposed to material online or with peers.

Children and young people need to know that curiosity about sex and sexuality is normal, healthy and positive but that the sexually explicit images which they may find online, intentionally or by accident, can be distressing. We need to explain that pornography is not real and the themes of violence and domination are wrong and not an accurate reflection of how people behave during sex. The aggressive and degrading depiction of women in pornography reinforces a sexist depiction of women as subservient.

Young people need to understand that the use of pornography can be harmful because it can lead them to believe that what they see is a normal or appropriate way to behave. We need to assist them to understand that acts which coerce or force sexual partners to do something against their will are always wrong, unacceptable and illegal.

Power to Kids and Power to Kids in Schools[2]

MacKillop recognises the need for educational programs about the use, misuse and impact of pornography, particularly age-appropriate programs for children and young people. A pronounced gap in programs was the driving force behind MacKillop's development of innovative programs – Power to Kids and Power to Kids in Schools – to address the risk of child sexual exploitation, harmful sexual behaviour and dating violence. A key theme intersecting with each of these risks is pornography. The Power to Kids programs provide a structured and comprehensive approach to build the literacy of pornography access, use and the associated harms.

Through Power to Kids, professionals, carers and volunteers understand the importance of challenging these views and reinforcing the aspects of respectful relationships which are consensual, equal, caring and where the needs and desires of both partners are equally important.

Power to Kids is a trauma-informed professional learning program that upskills professionals, carers and volunteers working with children and young people to strengthen prevention and responses to child sexual exploitation, harmful sexual behaviour and dating violence (McKibbin, Halfpenny & Humphreys (2019). The program was developed by MacKillop in partnership with the University of Melbourne. Power to Kids was co-designed and piloted, initially in 2017, in MacKillop residential out-of-home care homes and in 2022 was rolled-out nationally. Following a successful evaluation (McKibbin, Bornemisza, & Humphreys, 2020), a national roll-out of the program was funded in 2021 by Westpac. The program has been provided to over 45 organisations nationally. Power to Kids has also been successfully evaluated in foster care (McKibbin, Bornemisza, & Humphreys 2022; McKibbin, Bornemisza, Fried, Humphreys & Gallois (2023) and is currently being implemented in school settings in Victoria.

Power to Kids embeds a whole-of-house/school approach through evidence-informed prevention and response strategies. Participants explore each strategy through the lens of their own professional context and deepen their understanding of trauma-informed, relationship and strength based and culturally safe practice for effective implementation. Power to Kids recognises and responds to the impact of pornography, including the impact on peer relationships, gender identity and harmful sexual practices. A key problem the program addresses is the reluctance of professionals, carers and volunteers to engage children and young people in an educative and proactive way about pornography. Put simply, people can often have the knowledge and skill about what to do but a lack of confidence in how to do it. A pervading squeamishness about discussing pornography is a great impediment to addressing the risk of harm.

Using a structured implementation model, participants gain confidence to create safe spaces for brave conversations with children and young people on key respectful relationship and sexuality topics. The Power to Kids program includes access to eLearn modules focused on educating professionals to empower children on key topics including online safety and pornography (McKibbin, Lynch, Bornemisza, Green & Humphreys, 2024). The whole-of-house/school approach provides the imprimatur to do this in an authorised and transparent manner.

Children and young people in out-of-home care rely on those providing support to be tenacious and consistent in our efforts to prevent and disrupt child sexual exploitation, harmful sexual behaviour and dating violence. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, who continue to be over-represented in residential care across Australia, Power to Kids offers a culturally safe approach – celebrating the strength and healing power of culture while recognising the continued impact of colonisation.

Due to their adverse childhood experiences of many of the children and young people we work with, including histories of abuse and trauma, attending to the needs of young people in care in relation to sexual safety and consent education is of particular importance. These young people are disproportionately impacted by child sexual abuse.

In the wider community, the Australian Child Maltreatment Study has also highlighted the prevalence of the experience of child sexual abuse with survey results showing one in four Australian young people

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[2] Further information is available at: www.mackillopinstitute.org.au/programs/

experiencing sexual abuse. The same study indicates that more children experience child sexual abuse by an adolescent than by an adult perpetrator (Mathews et al., 2024). In Australia, 33% of all child sexual abuse reports to statutory child protection agencies relate to children residing in residential care (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2016, p.5).

Power to Kids supports professionals, carers and volunteers to understand the impact of pornography on children and young people. Building homes and schools which are free of shame around discussing the harm of pornography and explicit sexual images requires that practitioners model speaking openly about the risks and realities of pornography. It requires our commitment to provide consistent messages to children and young people and act in a way which models gender equality and inclusiveness.

Power to Kids educates professionals, carers and volunteers that it is necessary to take the time to talk with children and young people and provide age appropriate support and guidance to them regarding their own sexual development and relationships. Practitioners have an important role in reinforcing the message that it is possible to have enjoyable and satisfying sexual relationships which are caring, consensual and respectful.

Keeping young people safe

MacKillop notes the importance of engaging children and young people in the co-design of effective responses to the use and harms associated with pornography. In a recent study (eSafety Commissioner, 2023) young people described potentially valuable aspects of online pornography including seeing it as an avenue to learn about sex to support the exploration of their sexuality. Online pornography was also identified by young people as having the potential to negatively impact understanding and expectations of relationships and sex. Young people identified education and support as ways to reduce the negative impacts associated with exposure to online pornography.

The following themes about the importance of education were shared by young people (eSafety Commissioner, 2023: 57):

Yeah! Just like how they teach safe sex in school, they should teach safe use of online pornography. You will never be able to stop teenagers from using it, so teaching them how to navigate it safely would benefit them. (Pansexual woman, 17)

I feel like education is the BIGGEST factor in how people feel about online porn. Those who don't get the right education either think it's completely wrong [for everyone to consume pornography] or take it as the Bible [of sexual practice]. (Demisexual panromantic demiboy, 18).

MacKillop acknowledges recent legislative changes aimed at putting the onus on social media platforms to take reasonable steps to ensure fundamental protections for under 16s are in place. This includes the proposed exclusion of children under the age of 16 from social media. While MacKillop supports the greater attention from Commonwealth policy makers directed towards online safety, social media bans are not enough. Technology companies are aware of the pornography related harm being perpetrated through their platforms and should be held accountable for their role in grooming or hurting children and young people. We support strengthening the powers of the eSafety Commissioner to compel technology companies to disclose their actions to assess and manage risks to child safety and progress appropriate remedial or enforcement steps if they fail to do so. MacKillop encourages the NSW government to advocate for the Commonwealth to play a greater role in protecting the online safety of children and young people.

MacKillop welcomes this inquiry and any opportunities to work collaboratively to address the impact of harmful pornography which is compromising the safety and wellbeing of children and young people.

Recommendations

1. Support greater investment, transparency and accountability from technology platforms focused on identifying and responding to the risks to the safety of children.

2. Mandate the implementation of respectful relationships and sexual health and safety programs such as Power to Kids and Power to Kids in Schools, that:
   a. are age appropriate and trauma-informed;
   b. are tailored to the needs of diverse cohorts of children and young people, including children and young people who may be disengaged from education settings and
   c. include clear implementation models to support practitioners to build the knowledge, skill and confidence to implement the programs.

3. Invest in research and evaluation initiatives in areas including (but not limited to):
   a. the impact on children of access to pornography;
   b. the changing patterns of access to, and forms of, pornography, including the use of AI and
   c. the impact of programs to address the harms of pornography use.

4. Resource a public education campaign to build greater awareness of the harms associated with pornography.

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