

**Submission
No 43**

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

Organisation: Bloom-Ed
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Bloom-ED is committed to ensuring evidence-based Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is offered to all young people in their homes, schools and communities. Successful RSE has many positive outcomes that result in healthier hearts, minds, bodies and people.

We are a collective of teachers, researchers, sexologists, students, parents and activists who operate as an alliance - in conjunction with other organisations - to advocate for comprehensive RSE.

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Parliament of NSW Inquiry: Impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health

Dear Members of the Inquiry Committee,

We are Bloom-ED, a national peak body committed to ensuring evidence-based [Relationships and Sexuality Education \(RSE\)](#) is offered to all young people in their homes, schools and communities. We are a collective of educators, researchers, sexologists, students, parents and activists who operate as an alliance - in conjunction with other organisations - to advocate for comprehensive RSE. We affirm that successful RSE has many positive outcomes that result in healthier hearts, minds, bodies and people.

Please accept our submission in relation to the inquiry into the [“Impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health”](#). We commend the Parliament of NSW for conducting this important inquiry that presents NSW with the opportunity to be a national leader on the issue of pornography and appropriate policy responses.

Our recommendations are:

1. Increase funding for school-based [comprehensive Relationships and Sexuality education](#), including pornography education.
2. Pornography education to be made a mandatory inclusion in the current NSW Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum within a wider digital sexual literacy education, with programs and lessons based on co-designed strategies with teens to ensure information offered reflects their needs and existing wisdom.
3. Support pre-service teacher training and current teacher professional learning opportunities to ensure they are equipped to educate students on pornography.

4. Conduct meaningful co-design with young people, parents, families and communities, including diverse population groups, to develop pornography resources supporting home-based learning.
5. Ensure the above education initiatives do not enforce a moral view of pornography, rather encourage literacy skills to encourage people, families and communities to apply their own values.
6. Collaborate meaningfully with the Federal government as they resource and implement an age verification trial for pornography websites to ensure educators and administrators are aware of and understand what these changes mean for their students and how to keep students safe online.

Introduction and Summary of the Issues:

Online spaces, including those which contain pornography can be overwhelming for young people who have not been supported or prepared for how to navigate these spaces (Stardust et al., 2024; Thurman & Obster, 2021; Yar, 2020). Bloom-ED therefore supports and advocates for comprehensive education around pornography to assist to prepare young people for online engagements and minimise any potential negative impacts of pornography. Teaching these aspects as part of comprehensive Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is vital, we believe this is an educational issue, and should be treated accordingly.

Bloom-ED supports for the design and development of lessons and resources that offer the educational and life benefits of evidence-based RSE for all people including LGBTQIA+, culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD), First Nations, and disabled youth. Comprehensive RSE including the development of resources and information about pornography and wider digital critical literacy skills are crucial to the protection of human and sexual rights, along with quality education for all students ([Sustainable Development Goal 4](#)). Appropriate teacher training and student lessons and resources are vital mechanisms that serve as primary prevention strategies that targets violence before it occurs; thereby reducing sexual violence, abuse, and exploitation. These mechanisms are therefore crucial amid a nation-wide gender-based violence crisis.

Bloom-ED acknowledges the efforts of the government and educational system towards mandatory consent education which is vital for all students, however, feel that similar effort should be placed into education that tackles Sexually-Explicit-Media including

pornography. Education that includes these topics will equip young people with the necessary skills to negate any potentially harmful messages they could be internalised from sexual media. These skills could form part of pornography literacy, which can be considered an extension of media literacy or part of a wider digital sexual literacy within the current Curriculum. The Digital Technologies curriculum seeks to prepare young people for risks and potential harms online, however, it is not a requirement to discuss pornography despite the importance of this topic for young people, and therefore it is often overlooked and neglected. Currently pornography is only listed as an optional component of the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2022), and can be easily skipped if educators do not feel comfortable or feel they lack the resources to teach these issues. With the noted lack of resources and teacher training finding teachers who are knowledgeable and willing to teach this topic is rare.

Teachers therefore require further training and professional learning to support and teach these topics and further funding needs to be dedicated towards supporting schools to fund visiting sexual health specialists and the development of appropriate co-designed resources.

Below, we have addressed the specific Terms of Reference for this inquiry. We welcome the opportunity to discuss our recommendations in detail.

Kindest regards,

Bloom-Ed Relationships and Sexuality Education Advocacy Group

<https://www.bloom-ed.org/>

A. Age of first exposure to pornography and impacts of early exposure to pornography

Whilst research in this area is limited due to the many barriers of talking to young people and gaining accurate data about pornography, recent evidence suggests older teens have likely seen pornography. A recent survey of 1,985 young Australians aged 15–20 years finding that 86% of male and 69% of female participants had seen pornography (Crabbe et al., 2024). Research from the Australian eSafety Commissioner (2023) suggests that the average age of first viewing of pornography is 13. However, children as young as nine have also been noted to access porn in earlier Australian research (Quadara, 2017). These findings support the need for effective, comprehensive RSE to be delivered sequentially from early primary school, and for this to include education about pornography.

Research is limited in this area, as there are many barriers to talking with young people about pornography, thus existing research focuses on people over the age of 18 reflecting on their experiences of pornography when they were under 18 and often do not include an understanding of additional lifestyle factors (for example, socio-economic status, family life, other childhood experiences). Therefore, the findings may not be accurate representations of the experiences of young people and accurate life outcomes.

It would be remiss to not mention here that young people are provided access to literature, mainstream news, TV and movies all which highlight and often romanticise unhealthy relationships and continue to fail to show appropriate consent - and because it is not classed as porn it is shown to younger children, and in the case of movies and TV, rated PG or M allowing for viewers to be very young. The way that mainstream media has historically and continues to portrayed violence against women often supports a victim-blaming and dehumanising lens that is extremely damaging for young people to read and watch.

B. Media by which pornography is accessed and circulated

As stated in the SSASH survey (Power et al., 2022), young people primarily access pornography online via digital devices, and some through social media. Reducing the amount of young people who are able to access this content should be the focus of internet providers, businesses, and peak bodies (such as the eSafety Commissioner). Often, the onus is placed on the young people to make the 'right' decision. However, they have not been taught about

the messages in pornography, how to be critical of what they read and watch, or how to reduce the potential harms. Young people need to use digital and media literacy skills as they would with any other online content (including mainstream news, movies, and TV).

C. Impacts on body image

Bloom-ED affirms that while pornography affects young people of all genders in different ways; for young children assigned female at birth, the continual exposure to hypersexualised imagery may create an expectation to conform to a certain body type and can prompt or increase low self-esteem (Griffiths et al., 2018). Some images and videos may encourage young people to engage in certain sexual acts (often before they feel ready) and contribute to misunderstandings around pleasure associated with sexual activities. The concentration by pornographic materials upon male-centered pleasure and a possible pressure upon adolescent males to embody a certain masculine physique, which drives (generally misplaced) conceptions around engagement in everyday sexual activities. According to Griffiths (2018) when young boys have prolonged exposure to pornography this may introduce pressure to develop and maintain a certain body shape, including insecurities and anxieties around penis size. However, again, these hidden messages can be interrogated by young people should they be provided with education about pornography, body image and digital critical literacy skills. Furthermore, these messages are fed through books, movies, TV, and mainstream news from birth and are not representative of porn only, but rather a culture of misogyny and patriarchy.

D. The relationship between pornography use and respect and consent education

Consent education often does not explicitly focus on pornography use. Bloom-ED acknowledged this gap in the current education provided and calls for its inclusion in mandatory consent education. Research indicates that young people are often aware of consent, however, are unable to apply consent to practical situations (Waling et al., 2024) - highlighting the need for porn inclusion within schools so that young people may witness scenarios of consent (or no consent) and be able to critically analyse how to apply consent effectively.

Many educators are nervous to talk about pornography use with young people as they are not sure how to tackle such issues (Ollis, 2016; Harrison & Ollis, 2024)., and require

specific training that often is cost-prohibitive or does not exist. Bloom-ED confirm that respect and consent education could teach young people what messages they might learn from pornography, and how this might not directly translate to their own experiences. Consent negotiation is rarely depicted on screen, an observation made by teens themselves (Woodley et al., 2024); however these scenarios may provide strong discussion points and develop respect and consent problem-solving skills in young people. Furthermore, teens require skills around navigating consent in both sexual and non-sexual scenarios, as well as education around pornography to help them navigate healthy relationships safely, and in mutually caring ways.

E. The production and dissemination of pornography, including deepfake or AI-generated pornography

Bloom-ED affirm that this is a field that required further funding and research to determine the impact on young people, however, affirm that this is not just in relation to porn, but general digital critical literacy related to deepfakes that propagate all over the internet and not just within porn.

F. The impact of exposure to violent and/or misogynistic pornography on children, teenagers and young adults

In terms of impacts, the research is both polarising and divided. Some research suggests that early access to pornography can promote objectification of women, adopt sexual scripts and aggressive behaviours. Again, it would be presumptuous to assume that this impact remains solely due to porn only when movies, TV, mainstream news, and books can all contribute to misogynistic and patriarchal views that may promote these views of women. Interestingly, other research suggests that pornography use can promote egalitarian attitudes towards gender and have a positive impact on sexuality (Kohut et al., 2015; Martyniuk et al., 2015). Many claims within public discourse about pornography and its impact are noted as causal, however, at best a correlational relationship exists between pornography and negative impacts - noting that correlation is not causation. Evidence is thus inconclusive and contradictory. With this in mind, educational measures are best practice to tackle any potential negative impacts of early access to pornography and other media that may propagate objectification and oppression of women.

Porn and/or sexualised media, or media depicting relationships and sexuality has always existed and will always exist in one form or another. As such, education around pornography is the best form of mitigation for any potential negative impacts. Healthy understandings of relationship dynamics amongst the population traverse new and emerging media trends and technologies. Bloom-ED also believes that further longitudinal studies are required to track any potential harms or risks particularly within an Australian context.

G. Impacts on minority groups including but not limited to First Nations, CALD or LGBTIQA+ people and people living with disability

LGBTIQA+ young people often cite pornography as something positive and educational, as it is one of the few where they can see representations of the bodies and practices they are interested in (Flory & Shor, 2024). Similarly, whilst unlikely to find bodies that are truly representative of themselves, people with disability may find that pornography offers them a source of information about sexual activities that they cannot find elsewhere. When porn does show disabled bodies it can actually inspire sexual agency and hope for people with disability (Thorneycroft, 2021), and therefore positive body image and self-esteem. As such, comprehensive RSE initiatives containing information about critical digital literacy and pornography literacy would benefit from co-design with diverse populations to ensure applicability and accessibility. This is particularly vital for people with disability due to accessibility needs and resource development considerations that may be needed, and the current lack of accessible comprehensive RSE resources that exist, including a lack of pornography literacy education (Andreassen et al., 2024).

H. The effectiveness of any current education programs about use and misuse of pornography, and how these may be improved

Bloom-ED finds that many RSE providers do not talk about pornography in their programs. If they do, they often focus on 'dangers' or the abstinence only approach. Bloom-ED affirms that pornography needs to be included in Digital Technology curriculums, and become part of the mandated topics covered in RSE. The curriculum should respond to the needs and existing wisdom of young people.

Information to prepare young people should include discussions around sexual content, consent, and healthy relationships. Education should include pornography literacy

that does not demonise sexual content but allows young people to deconstruct and critique negative messaging (Byron et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2020; Rothman et al., 2020).. Young people report wanting shame-free education that respects their agency to watch pornography or not, if they choose to (eSafety Commissioner, 2023). As such, any education that centers or focusses solely on harms is unlikely to be effective and instead drive young people to consume porn with no knowledge or understanding of the lack of consent or potentially harmful impacts - that is, these harmful impacts exist only because of a lack of education.

In saying that, Bloom-ED acknowledges that teachers require support to navigate sensitive topics such as sex and pornography in a way that appropriately responds to the needs of teens. The provision of additional support for schools to engage experts and external stakeholders to offer information to students, with an auditing process in place to ensure efficiency could work well in conjunction with supported and trained classroom teachers. Research from (Hendriks et al., 2023) also shows Australian parents want schools to tackle all comprehensive RSE topics in more detail and from an early age. Such information will assist young people to feel prepared. Additionally, Australian parents support education around pornography (Zen et al., 2024).

I. The effectiveness of current restrictions on access to pornography and consideration of any need to improve these

It is well established based on the age of young people who have viewed porn that the age verification tick box does not stop them from accessing porn. The risks with age-restricted content is that the content is then often seen of significant interest to those who are not old enough to be able to access it. Increased prohibition may thus, often increases interest in restricted content. Banning material can magnify the risk that the more harmful material is circulated without the balance of the educational and positive material. Similarly, means for enforcing age-restricted content, such as biometrics, facial identification and digital identification profiles run the risk of unintended consequences (risks to privacy, issues around facial identification and racial issues) and might cause bigger social issues than the material that is legal, but which is age-restricted.

Adolescence is a time where people, particularly males, are likely to intentionally seek pornography for pleasure and/or education (eSafety 2023). Therefore, while reasonable restrictive measures to prevent unintended exposure are logical, it is not recommended to

rely on these. Given the Federal Government's investment in an age verification trial, the NSW State Government is better placed funnelling resourcing into comprehensive educational initiatives for young people and parents, supported by genuine co-design and best practice RSE.

J. The resources and support currently available to parents and carers to educate children about pornography, and how these might be improved

Bloom-ED believes there are existing resources useful for this purpose. For example, raising children and the eSafety office offer excellent age-based guides to assist families to speak to their children about pornography. Further promotion of such resources, in addition to further funding to support further resources would be useful. See also recent research by Zen et al. (2024) which provided details on resources and organisations. Useful links include:

1. <https://theconversation.org/>
2. <https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/media-technology/online-safety/pornography-talking-with-children-5-8>
3. <https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/entertainment-technology/pornography-sexting/pornography-talking-with-children-9-11>
4. <https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens/entertainment-technology/pornography-sexting/pornography-talking-with-teens>
5. <https://www.esafety.gov.au/parents/issues-and-advice/online-porn>

K. Any other related matters.

Pornography, sexuality, and relationships more broadly, are value laden topics engendering strong opinions on all sides of the debate. The Inquiry will doubtless receive submissions framing pornography as inherently immoral. At best, this framing is simplistic and dismisses the complexity and nuance discussion required for an effective policy response. At worst, it entrenches stigma for discussions about sexual activities, leading to greater harms and preventing help seeking. Bloom-ED affirms that appropriate education equips people to critique the media they consume and apply their own individual and community values, rather than imposing a moral view.

Appropriate educational content that addresses important sexual information gaps helps destigmatise sexual activities, encourage open discussion, and may enable new knowledge which can ultimately lead to a reduction in sexual and gender-based violence (Schneider & Hirsch, 2020). Consideration of these issues is vital given the current gender-based violence crisis Australia faces. It is therefore inappropriate and dangerous to create a blanket ban that prohibits all sexual content, when such content could prevent such violence from occurring and/or becoming more frequent or pervasive. In fact, nuanced policies and measures should make specific allowance for quality content with educational intent.

Bloom-ED reaffirms that pornography is a complex and nuanced issue, particularly when considering the impacts and potential harms for young people. Therefore, additional funding, mandatory pornography education included within the school curriculum, teacher training and support, co-design of additional resources with young people and diverse population groups, and meaningful federal and state collaboration is vital. Nuanced and inclusive policies, education, research, resources, and support is required.

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