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

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Inquiry into the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health

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Introduction

eSafety welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the New South Wales Parliament's *Inquiry into the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health.*

Like many aspects of the online world, online pornography is increasingly featuring in political and cultural conversations, especially about young people's health and wellbeing, and associations with gender-based violence.

eSafety shares the Committee's concerns about the potential harms of online pornography and its intersections with a range of issues. While acknowledging the broad ranging Terms of Reference for the Inquiry, this submission focuses primarily on the impacts and issues relating to young people. This includes considerations relating to parents and carers, as well as damaging depictions of misogyny, respect, and consent.

Overall, a holistic and coordinated approach is needed – consistent with [Safety by Design](#) principles. As eSafety's [age verification roadmap and background report](#) found, protections should include layered safety measures to support Australians' autonomy over whether they view legally permissible online pornography, the type of content they engage with, and how they do so.

It is important to ensure these protections remain effective as technology evolves, and that they are coupled with high-quality comprehensive, inclusive respectful relationships and sex education. This education should specifically address pornography in age and developmentally appropriate, using pedagogies with proven efficacy.

In making this submission, we note:

- The effects on young people who encounter, view, generate or consume online pornography are contested.

- The effects associated with young people encountering, viewing, generating, or consuming pornography sometimes relate to how that experience occurs. This can include whether the experience is intentional or accidental. [Our research](#) suggests accidental exposure to online pornography is very common and can involve harms that might be different to intentional viewing. Some people may also experience harm from sexually suggestive content that is not strictly 'pornographic'.

- Safety measures should be implemented at a systemic level and be targeted at the full range of online services and products which facilitate access to harmful content.

- Tailored safety education measures targeted towards young people should be non-stigmatising, non-judgemental, and support user empowerment. This is consistent with the increased autonomy that comes with late adolescence. It also offers additional protection for users who may be sensitive to content that is not 'pornography' as defined in terms of service and/or the National Classification Scheme (for example, suggestive bikini shots), while avoiding potential harms that might come with overly restrictive or stigmatising approaches.

- eSafety regulates illegal and age-restricted online content through a range of measures, including mandatory and enforceable industry codes and standards for eight sections of the online industry, as well as the power to require certain services to provide information about how they are meeting the government's Basic Online Safety Expectations. Our complaints and content removal schemes also provide a safety net for Australians affected by certain types of content.

- eSafety provides a range of resources to help Australians understand, discuss, and manage their engagement with online pornography. These include advice for educators, parents and carers on hard-to-have conversations, information on setting up age-based safety and privacy settings, and the eSafety Guide to apps and services.

- Lastly, but crucially, a nationally coordinated approach to online safety within Australia is vital. With eSafety as Australia's leader for online safety, states and territories can be harnessed as partners in a united national approach that will help us leverage our respective competencies. eSafety's existing regulatory activities, established and clear channels of communication, research and harm prevention activities mean we are well placed to facilitate efficient administration of systemic regulatory measures. This includes measures to prevent and address harms to young children, including relating to pornography. Any new measures or initiatives relating to online pornography should seek to align and expand upon existing measures.

About eSafety

The eSafety Commissioner (eSafety) is Australia's independent regulator, educator, and coordinator for online safety. We aim to safeguard Australians from online harms and to promote safer, more positive online experiences.

The *Online Safety Act 2021* (Cth) (Online Safety Act) sets out our legislative functions. Our regulatory approach comprises the three pillars of prevention, protection, and proactive and systemic change.

- **Prevention:** While eSafety acts as an important safety net for Australians online, our primary goal is to prevent online harms from happening in the first place. This work falls under our prevention pillar. Through research, education, and training programs, eSafety works to set a foundation to reduce the likelihood of online harms. We provide resources for parents, carers and educators, young people, and children to help them understand online safety challenges and have positive online experiences. We seek to provide Australians with the practical skills and confidence to be safe, resilient, and positive users of the online world, and to know where to seek help if issues arise.

- **Protection:** Where online harm does occur, eSafety offers tangible, rapid assistance. This work falls under our protection pillar. Our individual complaints mechanisms allow us to investigate and take action to remove certain types of content relating to four types of harm: cyberbullying of children, cyber abuse of adults, the non-consensual sharing of intimate images, and illegal or restricted online content (including child sexual exploitation and abuse). Under the Online Content Scheme, eSafety can require certain illegal and age-restricted material that is available to Australians to be removed or, for certain age-restricted material, placed behind a restricted access system. eSafety's image-based abuse scheme assists complainants who have experienced actual or threatened sharing of intimate images, including deepfakes.

- **Proactive and systemic change:** With the rapid evolution of technology, eSafety knows we need to be at the forefront of anticipating, mitigating and responding to online harms. This work falls under our proactive and systemic change pillar. This includes our powers to regulate digital platforms' broader systems and processes, including through the Basic Online Safety Expectations (BOSE) and industry codes and standards. It also includes our Safety by Design initiative, as well as our work anticipating and responding to emerging tech trends, opportunities and challenges.

These pillars reflect our broad and holistic remit. The way the pillars work together reflects how eSafety's various functions work together to create a multidimensional regulatory toolkit.

We take a risk and harms-based approach to our work. We also recognise that combating online harm is a global challenge. We therefore work as part of a cross-sector and multi-jurisdictional online safety ecosystem. This approach is underpinned by our core mission of safeguarding Australians at risk of online harm and complements the role other agencies play in investigating and prosecuting crimes perpetrated online.

We outline our key functions and powers relating to online pornography in the body of this submission. We also include at **Attachment A,** a list of further eSafety resources that more broadly relate to themes of tech and access to online pornography, experience and effects of pornography, digital capacity building, and education and harm prevention.

Statutory Review of the Online Safety Act

This submission draws from and refers to eSafety's current regulatory remit under the Online Safety Act.

An [independent review of the Online Safety Act 2021](#) was provided to the Government on 31 October 2024. This is to ensure it is an effective, up to date and future proofed legislative framework to protect Australians from online harms.

The [Terms of Reference](#) for the review were broad ranging and focussed on the operation and effectiveness of the Act. They specifically included consideration of:

- whether additional arrangements are warranted to address online harms not explicitly captured under the existing statutory schemes, and

- whether the regulatory arrangements, tools and powers available to the Commissioner should be amended and/or simplified, including through consideration of ensuring industry acts in the best interests of the child.

The supporting [Issues Paper](#) included a focus on the issue of 'child access to pornography and violent pornographic content'.

eSafety will continue to support reform to the Online Safety Act, in line with the Government's response.

Online pornography

This submission focuses on online pornography, rather than pornography more generally. This is because most pornography is now accessed and disseminated online. Online pornography also falls within eSafety's regulatory remit as the national regulator for online safety.

For the purpose of this submission, we refer to the impacts of pornography based on encountering, viewing or consuming online pornography. We note that young people may also experience harmful impacts from the production, self-production, and dissemination

of pornography, including deepfake or AI-generated pornography (as noted in Inquiry's Terms of Reference). For more on this please see our guidance on [addressing deepfake image-based abuse](#) and our [submission to Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee Criminal Code Amendment (Deepfake Sexual Material Bill) 2024.](#)

Defining pornography

Pornography is a broad category, and there is no universal consensus definition of the term.

Throughout this submission, we discuss eSafety activities that relate to online pornography, including the delivery of an age verification roadmap and associated research and consultation (discussed in further detail below). For these activities, we used a **broad definition** of online pornography: *online material that contains sexually explicit descriptions or displays that are intended to create sexual excitement, including sexual intercourse or other sexual activity.*

However, there are also legislative definitions relating to online pornography. eSafety has powers under the Online Safety Act to regulate — and, in some cases, restrict or remove — illegal and restricted content, defined by reference to the [National Classification Scheme](#). Pornography may be class 1 (Refused Classification) or class 2 (X18+ or R18+) content, depending on its nature:

- **Class 1 (RC)** online pornography: This includes material that depicts, expresses, or otherwise deals with matters of sex, cruelty, or violence in a way that offends against the standards of morality, decency, and propriety generally accepted by reasonable adults. Under the [Guidelines for the Classification of Films 2012](#), this covers depictions of sexual or sexualised violence, sexually assaultive language, and consensual depictions which purposefully demean anyone involved in that activity for the enjoyment of viewers. It also covers specific fetish practices, including body piercing, application of substances such as candle wax, 'golden showers', bondage, spanking, or fisting.

- **Class 2 (X18+)** online pornography: Other sexually explicit material that depicts actual (not simulated) sex between consenting adults.

- **Class 2 (R18+)** online pornography: Material which includes realistically simulated sexual activity between adults, or high-impact nudity or violence.

In the Phase 1 Industry Codes head terms, industry defined 'online pornography' as 'material depicting sexual activity between or in the presence of only consenting adults, or material depicting the nudity of only consenting adults.'

For the Phase 2 Industry Codes, eSafety has suggested industry groups adopt a definition that builds upon this definition with additional specific areas of focus, reflecting these Codes' goal of preventing access and exposure to age inappropriate material. eSafety has proposed that the definition should include:

- realistically simulated, generated and animated sexual content

- high-impact text-based sexual content, including interactive services with a focus on chatbots and AI models which are built to provide pornographic content; and

- nudity, making it clear that the protections apply to 'high impact' nudity only.

Industry groups will submit Phase 2 Codes for registration by 28 February 2025. eSafety has not endorsed the draft codes and will undertake an assessment of whether they create appropriate community safeguards, including relating to online pornography.

Understanding young people's experiences with online pornography

Young people – and adults – have mixed experiences of, and feelings about, pornography.

The age verification roadmap and background paper, which are outlined further below, highlighted that a significant proportion of online pornography contains depictions of sexual violence and degrading sexual scripts about women. Evidence also suggests that pornography can be a neutral or positive part of some young people's sexual development. While the age verification background paper emphasised that available research does not establish a direct causal link between seeing pornography online and engaging in certain behaviours, it has been found that this type of pornography may be associated with harmful sexual attitudes and behaviours.

Two eSafety primary research reports are available on the eSafety website. These reports, published in September 2023, were conducted for the age verification roadmap and are based on a survey of 1004 young people between the ages of 16 and 18 years and six focus groups involving a total of 32 young people aged 16 to 18 years.

Key findings included:

- On average, young people in Australia encounter pornography for the first time at the age of **13**. Young people who are sexuality diverse (e.g. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer) (54%), have a disability (53%) and/or speak a language other than English at home (47%) are significantly more likely to encounter online pornography before the age of 13.

- Most young people surveyed first encountered online pornography **unintentionally**. The younger a child was when they first encountered pornography, the more likely that encounter was to be unintentional. Young people typically had very negative feelings about unintentional encounters with online pornography, which they viewed as 'frequent' and 'unavoidable'. They told us they were most concerned about the regulation of these unintentional encounters.

- Young people expressed that pornography can reflect **harmful messages** about consent, intimate relationships, expectations of sex, gender stereotypes and body image.

- Just over half of participants thought pornography could also have a **positive impact** on young people's learning about sex and explorations of their sexuality. Sexually diverse young people were more likely than their heterosexual peers to think there were some positive effects, such as learning about sex and exploring their sexuality.

Despite evidence that young men engage with pornography at high rates, young men in our subsequent [Being a young man online](#) research, published in June 2024, were highly critical of online pornography. This tension suggests that young men could benefit from tailored education and support around sex, relationships and pornography. It may also indicate that algorithms and recommender systems may sometimes be serving young men pornographic content that they feel concerned or uncomfortable about. That is, the young men might have wanted to engage with pornography, but not the type that they ultimately encountered.

eSafety's role in relation to online pornography

The age verification roadmap and background report

As mentioned above, in March 2023 eSafety submitted a [roadmap on age verification](#) for online pornographic material to the Australian Government for consideration. The age verification roadmap resulted from the previous government's [2021 response](#) to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs report, ['Protecting the age of innocence'.](#)

eSafety was tasked with considering if, and how, a mandatory age verification mechanism (or similar) could be achieved in Australia, as well as providing additional advice on legislative, regulatory and complementary measures to government.

The age verification roadmap addressed **age assurance**: a broad umbrella of processes that can be used to establish or predict the age (or age range) of an individual.

Age assurance includes:

- **age verification** measures (which determine age to a high level of certainty, typically by verifying against external identification)

- **age estimation** measures (which infer an age or age range without other confirmed sources, e.g. through biometric data from a facial scan or voice recording, or from behavioural patterns).

In August 2023, eSafety also published a background report containing evidence and in-depth analysis that supports the assertions, findings and recommendations of the age verification roadmap. The government response was published on 31 August 2023, and eSafety published primary research conducted for the roadmap in September 2023.

Findings around access to online pornography

There are several ways to determine age online, which are based on different underlying technology. Different methods can be more (or less) suitable for different purposes. Age assurance can also be implemented at various stages of a user's online journey, and at different levels of the ecosystem – for example, on a specific service, part of an exchange or third-party, or at a device level.

Key conclusions of the age verification roadmap and background report included:

- Age assurance is just **one step** in making children's online experiences safer and more age appropriate, and choices about how to restrict access to children are just one part of the picture. Age assurance does not work on its own.

- Companies also need to provide a **safe user experience** using a range of complementary safer design practices, tools, and policies at all stages of the user experience and the service's or product's life cycle.

- Interventions should respect and support young people's need for **autonomy** and evolving capacities, and should be **empowering, non-stigmatising and non-judgemental**. For example, pornography sites could apply features to prevent recommender systems gradually suggesting increasingly extreme content that users might not want to see.

Social media sites could supplement age restrictions on pornographic content with sensitivity filters and parental controls. These could enable users to customise their exposure to material that may not be pornographic under Australia's classification scheme, but might be suggestive or include sensitive content such as nudity.

- Tech solutions must also go hand-in-hand with **education** for children and their parents and carers and professional learning for teachers and frontline workers. This will help equip children with the digital literacy and resilience they will need when they begin to access online pornography and other age-restricted content.

Findings around education and harm prevention

Research conducted for the age verification roadmap drew the following general conclusions:

- Young people saw **education** as the **most helpful tool** for mitigating the harmful impacts that could arise from encounters with online pornography. In particular, young people spoke about the benefits of pornography-specific education, relationships education and sex education in reducing the harmful impacts of online pornography.

- Young people thought that enabling **open dialogues and discussion** around online pornography could help to mitigate potential harms associated with it.

- **Embarrassment, shame and guilt were key barriers** to information and help-seeking. It is therefore important that online safety messages are conveyed in a strengths-based and stigma-free way to counter these information and help-seeking barriers.

- Some sexuality diverse young people and young people with disability perceive pornography **positively,** as a resource that fills gaps in their sex and relationships education. This may indicate that sex and relationships education does not always reflect young people's diverse sex and sexuality information needs. High quality, comprehensive, inclusive respectful relationships education could reduce reliance on pornography for this purpose.

- Young people generally favoured **social media, their peers, and websites** such as specialist and health sites when seeking information and advice about online pornography. This may be partly due to embarrassment or fear of stigma. It is important that these supportive resources remain accessible.

Subsequent developments

There have been several age assurance-related developments since the age verification roadmap was published.

eSafety has published additional resources to supplement and update information available in the age verification roadmap where appropriate. Our [Age assurance trends and challenges issues paper](#) provides an updated overview of different types of age assurance technology, their possibilities, limitations, risks and mitigations. It also includes updates to international efforts, including regulatory developments related to obligations on online pornography providers. Importantly, the paper explains how age assurance and complementary measures fit within eSafety's regulatory remit as possible tools to restrict children's access to online pornography.

eSafety has also revisited the topic of online pornography in our [Being a young man online](#) research, conducted in collaboration with [Deakin University](#) and the [Queensland University of Technology](#). This study explored the online lives, identities, and self-expression of more than 100 young men aged 16 to 21 years through 25 focus groups and 25 follow-up individual interviews. Like our earlier research, it found young men often encountered online pornography unintentionally. In part 2 of the study (report forthcoming), we spoke to expert practitioners who confirmed that the young men they work with are frequently encountering pornography online. They also reflected on the role of algorithms and recommender systems in serving them this content. Many young men in part 1 of the study expressed concern about the possible effects of online pornography in relation to attitudes around gender equality, consent, or respectful relationships.

Broader recent developments include the Government's May announcement of a [trial of age assurance technology](#) to examine options to protect children from harmful online content such as pornography and other age-restricted services, and [legislation](#) on [age restrictions for access to social media](#), which passed in December 2024 and will take effect by December 2025. These initiatives are being progressed by the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, and the Arts. eSafety is contributing to the trial as part of a cross-government working group.

Alignment with eSafety's regulatory compliance functions

Industry codes and standards

Industry codes and standards are designed to protect Australians from illegal and restricted online content, by setting obligations for eight sections of the online industry to proactively deal with this material at a systemic level. Under the current co-regulatory arrangements, industry bodies draft the codes and submit them to the Commissioner. If the Commissioner finds that the codes provide appropriate community safeguards for matters of substantial relevance to the community, she may register the codes. If not, she may determine industry standards.

The industry bodies tasked with developing the industry codes adopted a two-phased approach, consistent with eSafety's guidance. The first phase targets the most seriously harmful class 1 material, which includes child sexual exploitation material, pro-terror material, and extreme crime and violence material. The second phase of industry codes development broadly focuses on children's access and exposure to class 2 material, which includes **online pornography,** simulated gambling and other high-impact themes such as suicide and serious illness. The codes also aim to give all Australians better tools, options and information to manage their exposure to class 2 content they do not want to see.

eSafety is currently engaging with industry representatives on the development of the second phase of industry code development. The [Phase 2 draft codes](#) were released for consultation from 22 October to 22 November 2024. eSafety will undertake an assessment of whether they meet the statutory requirements when industry submits the codes for registration by 28 February 2025.

Phase 1 Codes and standards in operation

The six Phase 1 industry codes are already in operation. They apply to social media services, app distribution services, hosting services, internet carriage services, providers of certain equipment, and search engine services. Two Phase 1 industry standards also took effect on 22 December 2024. They apply to 'relevant electronic services', such as gaming, messaging and dating services, and to 'designated internet services', which are apps and sites which do not fall into the other categories, such as some generative AI services. Some Phase 1 codes and standards contain compliance measures specifically in reference to children, because children face greater risks in relation to these harms.

Phase 2 Codes development

eSafety issued notices for the development of Phase 2 Codes on 1 July 2024 and received interim draft Codes from industry representatives on 3 October 2024. Codes to be assessed for registration are due on 28 February 2025, following an industry-led [public consultation](#). The eSafety Commissioner will then assess whether the Codes submitted establish appropriate community safeguards before they can be registered.

eSafety also published a [position paper](#) in July 2024 setting out its expectations for the Phase 2 Codes and suggested measures industry sections could adopt to achieve these expectations. Importantly, the paper expressed that online service providers across every aspect of the technology stack should adopt protective measures in respect of age-inappropriate or harmful material. This means that the suggested measures in the Position Paper are not directed solely at certain types of service providers, such as online

pornography providers themselves, or social media services. It also reduces the likelihood of a single point of failure if those responsibilities only lie with one section of online industry.

eSafety's position on these matters is technology agnostic but suggests industry adopt measures mandating certain protections. These protections should be proportionate to the risk profile of a service, and the likelihood that an end-user might access or be exposed to age-inappropriate or harmful material through a service. Specific suggested measures include applying default protections like blurring of age-inappropriate images or placing interstitial warnings on high impact content. It also addresses filters, parental controls, and safety settings.

eSafety has also suggested that the codes should include reasonable and appropriate age assurance measures, which align to the extent possible with existing requirements under the Online Safety Act as well as emerging international requirements. While the Phase 2 Codes process is separate to the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts' Age Assurance Trial, as well as the recently passed social media minimum age legislation, eSafety will continue to work with our colleagues across government and industry to promote a complementary and coordinated approach. eSafety notes that the codes are both more targeted than the proposals currently being discussed – as they seek to address the specific risks and harms relating to class 2 material – as well as more comprehensive, as they require measures up and down the technology stack. This type of 'layered' approach can help avoid a single point of failure for specific sectors of the online industry.

Basic Online Safety Expectations

The Basic Online Safety Expectations are designed to improve online service providers' safety standards, transparency, and accountability. Services are required to have terms of use, policies, and procedures to ensure the safety of users.

The *Online Safety (Basic Online Safety Expectations) Determination 2022* (the Determination) establishes expectations that service providers will take reasonable steps to:

- ensure that end-users are able to use the service in a safe manner (s 6(1))

- proactively minimise the extent to which material or actively on the service is unlawful or harmful (s 6(2))

- ensure that the best interests of the child are a primary consideration in the design and operation of any service that is likely to be accessed by children (s 6(2A))

- make available controls that give end users the choice and autonomy to support safe online interactions (s 6(5))

- if the service uses recommender systems, consider end-user safety in their design, implementation and maintenance, and proactively minimise the extent to which they amplify material or activity on the service that is unlawful or harmful (s 8B)

- ensure that technological or other measures are in effect to prevent access by children to class 2 material provided on the service (s 12).

- ensure they have terms of use, policies, and procedures in relation to the safety of end-users, as well as policies and procedures for dealing with reports and complaints, including about class 2 material (s 14).

Some specific mandatory measures in industry codes and standards may correspond to these expectations. eSafety has suggested that industry consider aligning measures where possible.

The Determination also provides examples of reasonable steps in relation to each expectation. For the expectation that services will ensure measures are in effect to prevent access by children to class 2 material, these examples include:

- implementing appropriate age assurance mechanisms

- conducting child safety risk assessments

- continually seeking to develop, support or source, and implement improved technologies and processes for preventing access by children to class 2 material.

eSafety can require online service providers to report on the steps they are taking to comply with the Expectations, and to publish summaries of that information to increase transparency and accountability. There is also an expectation in the BOSE Determination that providers will give certain information to eSafety on request, such as the number of Australians using the service, both adults and children (Information Requests).

On 2 September 2024 eSafety sent an Information Request to YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snap, Reddit, Discord and Twitch, requesting information about the number of Australians using the service (both adults over 18 and children under 18), and what measures the services have in place to assess the age of end-users, and to detect where a user may be under the permitted age of 13. Providers are expected to respond within 30 days, and eSafety has received all responses. eSafety will publish a transparency report summarising the responses in 2025.

Safety by Design

eSafety's voluntary **Safety by Design** initiative supports companies to consider and build in safety throughout the design, development and deployment stages of the product lifecycle.

Safety by Design measures for age-appropriate access to content should incorporate, for example, mindful platform design, access restrictions, and appropriate reporting pathways.

Default safety settings for younger users, paired with appropriate content warnings, can go a long way to limiting harm. This should complement ongoing improvements to user controls and content curation, so that people can access content in a way that is appropriate for their individual needs and circumstances.

Alignment with education and prevention functions

While age verification and other regulatory measures are important are important measures to restrict access to technology, they are not sufficient on their own.

Layered and strengths-based safety measures that support children, parents and carers to customise their online experiences can enhance autonomy at the same time they protect children's safety.

Interventions must be **non-stigmatising**, and education and support must be **non-judgemental.** eSafety research (such as Mind the Gap and Accidental, Unsolicited and In Your Face reports) has consistently identified stigma and shame as key obstacles to help-seeking, and education and open dialogue as ways of mitigating harm. There is a role here for comprehensive, inclusive, sex-positive education about sex and respectful relationships that addresses pornography explicitly with age-appropriate teaching strategies and resources. However, communication at home between children and their parents or carers is crucial.

If it would be helpful, we would welcome the opportunity to facilitate the eSafety Youth Council's safe and age-appropriate engagement with the Inquiry process, in order to share their insights and opinions on how such interventions may impact children and young people.

Resources for parents and carers

Parents, carers and other responsible adults need to be **empowered to provide the right kinds of support**. eSafety provides a range of targeted and age-appropriate guidance to inform parents and prepare them for difficult conversations. Tech companies also have a role in supporting parental supervision and safety and wellbeing discussions – for

example, by providing a range of parental controls and tailored educational resources specific to their products.

Guidance on family, domestic and sexual violence

As a part of eSafety's work in prevention and education on family, domestic and sexual violence, we have specific resources to support people who may be experiencing family, domestic and sexual violence harms as they intersect with online pornography. This includes our website guidance on **coercive control** and **sexual violence**, with information relating to pressure to watch, mimic or participate in the creation of online pornography. This pressure might extend to physical abuse, if violent acts such as strangulation are copied.

Recent [research](#) has found a normalisation among young people in Australia of violent sexual practices in connection with access to online pornography, with over 50 per cent of participants surveys reporting either having been strangled during sex (56%) or strangling a partner (51%). Tailored initiatives that look to young people's experiences of pornography in intimate partner violence are especially needed.

Conclusion

eSafety welcomes the Committee's consideration of this important issue. We know that parents, carers and governments across the country are rightly concerned about the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional and physical health.

eSafety has long advocated for age assurance as part of a suite of measures to protect children from online content and conduct they are not ready for. It is crucial that age assurance measures form part of a broader set of complementary safety measures to protect users.

In particular, it is also crucial that children and parents are educated, supported and empowered so they can make informed decisions and solve problems when things go wrong online. This supports children's resilience and their ability to seek appropriate help if they are exposed to age-inappropriate content. It also builds media literacy skills they will need to engage healthily later, if and when they choose to access age-restricted content.

Ultimately, it is through a nationally coordinated and evidence-based approach that we can most effectively address this issue.

eSafety has the online safety research, resources and regulatory remit. We also have the established relationships and channels of communication with major providers of online services, as well as relevant Australian and international partner regulators and law enforcement agencies to promote regulatory coherence and enhance online safety.

However, states and territories have key delivery mechanisms to reach parents whether through the schools, mental health professionals, general practitioners and local law enforcement. That is why partnerships between eSafety and state and territory governments are so important.

Together, we can create a safer and more supportive digital environment that reduces the harmful impact of pornography on all Australians, especially young people.

Attachment A: eSafety resources

The [age verification roadmap](#) and [background report](#) are eSafety's definitive source for information about children's experiences of online pornography, and age assurance approaches. Our [Age assurance trends and challenges issues paper](#) (published 1 July 2024) provides updates on subsequent developments, as well as a reading guide to the age verification background report.

Below, we provide an outline of sections of the roadmap and background report that address the terms of reference of the New South Wales Parliament's *Inquiry into the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health.* These sections are grouped under the broader themes of **tech and access to online pornography, experience and effects of pornography,** and **education and harm prevention.** Links to education and harm prevention resources are also provided.

Tech and access to online pornography

This theme encompasses terms of reference B and I. Relevant sections of our age assurance materials can be found at:

- **Age verification roadmap:**
    - Mandatory age assurance mechanism (p 16-40)
    - Complementary measures and a holistic approach (p 41-56)
- **Age verification background report:**
    - Where do children see online pornography? (p 61-63)
    - Chapter 4: A human rights-based approach
    - Chapter 6: The digital ecosystem for accessing online pornography
    - Chapter 8: Age Assurance technology interventions
    - Chapter 11: Other technological interventions (complementary measures)
    - Chapter 12: Opportunities for change
- **Age assurance issues paper:**
    - a snapshot of providers' current practice (p 7)

- o a summary of concerns with different technologies, including accuracy and level of assurance, and mitigations for those concerns (p 10)
- o examples of complementary safety measures (p 25)
- o a summary of updates to international age assurance efforts at (p 28).

Experience and effects of online pornography

This theme encompasses terms of reference A, C, E, F and G. Relevant sections of our age assurance materials include:

- **Age verication roadmap:** Complementary measures and a holistic approach (p 41-56)
- **Age verification background report:**
  - o Chapter 5: Evidence of harm and impacts of online pornography on children
    - When, where and why are children encountering pornography? (p 54-60)
    - At what age is accessing online pornography harmful? (p 72-73)
    - What are the potential impacts for children? (p 73-92)
  - o Chapter 7: The future of online pornography.

Education and harm prevention

This theme encompasses terms of reference D, H and J. Relevant sections of our age assurance materials can be found at:

- **Age verification roadmap:** Education and awareness raising (p 57-71).
- **Age verification background report:** Chapter 13: The role of education in protecting and empowering children.
- **Age assurance issues paper:** Examples of complementary measures: educational resources (p 26).

In June 2024, eSafety Youth Council members submitted a letter to the Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society. They called on Government to prioritise relevant and comprehensive education for children and young people, as well as their families.

Additional eSafety resources

One of eSafety's functions is to support, encourage, conduct, accredit and evaluate educational, promotional and community awareness programs that are relevant to online

safety for Australians. To that end, eSafety provides a range of evidence-based universal prevention programs and resources for teachers and schools, such as:

- the Best Practice Framework for Online Safety Education and associated toolkit for schools, which were independently evaluated in 2023

- classroom resources and webinars

- professional learning for educators, including around inappropriate content

- outreach through our Trusted eSafety Provider program.

eSafety also provides a range of resources for **parents, carers, young people and children**. Relevantly, these include:

- the eSafety Guide, which includes information on policies, in-app controls and reporting for specific apps and services.

- information for parents on setting up age-based safety and privacy settings, filters and parental controls on apps and programs, devices, and at home.

- advice on hard-to-have conversations (including about online pornography) and how to navigate key online milestones for children.

- Age and stage appropriate guidance and advice for parents on how to talk with their children and young people about a number of online harms, including child sexual abuse.

- the Toolkit for Universities, created in partnership with Universities Australia, contains resources and support for staff and students.