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

Organisation: Childlight
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The Childlight East Asia and Pacific Hub submission to the NSW Inquiry on the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health
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Background

The Childlight East Asia and Pacific Hub is a partnership between the University of New South Wales, the University of Edinburgh and the Human Dignity Foundation. Childlight is a world-leading independent data institute founded at the University of Edinburgh to build evidence and drive coordinated action to protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse, funded by the Human Dignity Foundation. The Hub was established in 2024 in the School of Social Sciences at the Univerity of New South Wales to drive research for impact on child sexual exploitation and abuse in Australia and the region. Childlight has created the first global index on child sexual exploitation and abuse, Into The Light, and produces the data dashboard Searchlight to make research evidence widely available to policy-makers and the public.

In this submission, we seek to provide evidence and expert opinion that addresses the following:

- The age of first exposure to pornography and impacts of early exposure to pornography,
- Media by which pornography is accessed and circulated,
- The relationship between pornography use and respect and consent education,
- The production and dissemination of pornography, including deepfake or AI-generated pornography,
- The impact of exposure to violent and/or misogynistic pornography on children, teenagers and young adults, and
- The effectiveness of current restrictions on access to pornography and consideration of any need to improve these.

This submission presents evidence of the connection between pornography and child sexual exploitation and abuse, demonstrating how the early availability of pornography to children, the content of common genres of pornography, the saturation of social media with content created by adult pornography producers, and the unregulated nature of pornography, is associated with offending behaviours against children and the normalisation of sexual abuse.

Our recommendations include:

1. Age verification measures to inhibit child access to pornography.

2. The inclusion of frank discussions about pornography in school-based respectful relationships and sex education programs to address its impact on sexuality and sexual behaviour.

3. Australian authorities should enforce Australian laws against the distribution of child sexual abuse material by adult pornography sites, including where actors are adults but implied to be children, where pornography sites have failed to verify the age of young-looking actors, and where pornography includes incest and child abuse-related themes.

4. More research into the prevalence of Australian children making and selling sexual content to adults is necessary to ascertain the full scope of this problem, and identify prevention, disruption and education opportunities.

5. There is a need for coordinated action between law enforcement, the financial sector, the technology sector and regulatory bodies such as the eSafety Commissioner to ensure a comprehensive response to children selling sexual content online.

6. The proactive detection and removal of illegal pornographic content including sadistic and violent material, and bestiality content, to reduce sexual offending against children.

7. People searching for child sexual abuse material are currently receiving some warning messages encouraging them to contact prevention services to discuss their behaviour. These messages could be expanded to include people who are consuming large amounts of pornography, particularly violent and deviant pornography, since these people are at heightened risk of engaging in child sexual abuse.

8. There is a currently an unmet need for services for boys and men concerned about their excessive and/or deviant pornography consumption, and the potential overlap with sexual feelings or behaviour towards children. The government should consider the funding and establishment of such a service as well as workforce development to ensure that mental health practitioners are equipped to work with such clients.

9. With exceptions for illegal content such as child sexual abuse material, explicit content is largely unregulated and widely available online. Many popular social media sites do not distinguish between explicit and non-explicit content. Regulation of the availability of online pornography may reduce its public health impacts including the child protection risks posed by excessive pornography exposure.

Child exposure to pornography increases harmful sexual behaviour by children

Over the past two decades, sexual violence perpetrated by children against other children has risen significantly, and this is most likely attributable to premature access of pornography amongst children. The Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS), a nationally representative epidemiological survey of 8503 Australians, identified significant increases over time in the perpetration of sexual violence against minors by adolescents, including current or former romantic partners of the victim, other adolescents known to the victim (non-romantic), and unknown adolescents (Mathews et al., 2024). The rate of sexual violence against adolescent girls by other adolescents (nearly always boys) who are current or former romantic partners has doubled in a single generation.

While multiple factors contribute to harmful sexual behaviour by children, exposure to pornography is a key influence. Almost one-third of Australian boys were first exposed to pornography between the ages of 9 – 11, and almost two-thirds first viewed pornography between the ages of 12 – 14 (Bernstein et al., 2023). Childhood exposure to pornography is a risk factor for harmful sexual behaviour committed by children against other children, particularly amongst children with other risk factors (such as exposure to family violence and dysfunction), but also amongst children who otherwise have no apparent underlying vulnerabilities (McKibbin, Green, et al., 2024; McKibbin, Humphreys, et al., 2024). The extraordinary increase in peer-to-peer child sexual abuse in a relatively brief period of time in Australia is most likely attributable to the unprecedented availability of pornography to children provided by the internet.

> Recommendation: The widespread availability of pornography appears to be driving the increased perpetration of sexual violence by children, particularly boys.
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> - Age verification measures to inhibit child access to pornography is an important child sexual abuse prevention measure.
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> - Respectful relationships and sex education programs should include frank discussion of pornography and its impact on sexuality and sexual behaviour.

Child sexual abuse is normalised by popular genres of pornography

There has long been concern over the potential role and impact of adult pornography on sexual violence against women. However, a recent analysis of over 150,000 pornography videos from the three most popular pornography websites found that child sexual abuse is the most depicted form of sexual violence (Vera-Gray et al., 2021). In their coding of pornography video titles, Vera-Gray and colleagues (2021) found that 7% of online pornography videos explicitly referred to "teen" and emphasised the young age of those depicted in the videos. While the term "teen" may refer to actors of the age of consent, this cannot be guaranteed, since most highly trafficked free adult pornography sites conduct no age verification of their content, and they have been found to host child sexual abuse material (Kristoff, 2020).

6.4% of all online pornography videos referred to incest and sexual activity between family members (Vera-Gray et al., 2021). Most of these titles referred to sexual activity between immediate family members, such as fathers and daughters. Such videos are arguably in breach of Australian law, which defines child sexual abuse material as any material that depicts a person who appears or is implied to be a child engaged in a sexual pose or sexual activity. Pornography titles such as "When Mom's Mad, Dad Goes To His Daughter" and "Daddy, I Don't Want to Go to School!" are clearly intended to imply that the actor in the video is a child (Vera-Gray et al., 2021).

Sexual abuse by a caregiver in the home is the most common form of adult-perpetrated child sexual abuse in Australia (Mathews et al., 2024). As Vera-Gray et al. (2021) have demonstrated, it is also one of the most commonly depicted scenarios of sexual violence in widely available adult pornography. The widespread availability and consumption of adult pornography depicting sexual violence against children as normal, legitimate and desired by the child is contrary to the aims of child sexual abuse prevention and dangerous to children. It is well known that perpetrators of child sexual abuse use pornography to groom their victims and normalise child sexual abuse (Ringenberg et al., 2022). The widespread availability of incest-themed and child abuse-themed pornography has provided perpetrators with an inexhaustible supply of material to teach their victims that sexual activity within the family is normal and common.

It is important to note that the popularity of incest-themed content spans adult pornography and child sexual abuse material. The most in-demand and highly traded child sexual abuse material involves videos and images manufactured by fathers and male caregivers in the sexual abuse of pre-pubescent daughters and other female relatives (Salter & Whitten, 2022). Incest is the most common type of child sexual abuse referred to on child sex offender forums (Westlake & Guerra, 2023). Hence, the normalisation of incest and family-based sexual abuse via adult pornography represents a point of intersection with online child sexual abuse offender networks and suggests that adult pornography may provide a conducive pathway for some pornography consumers into illegal offender networks and forums.

Recommendation: Pornography depicting incest as a form of sexual violence against children, and containing actors who are implied to be children, is arguably unlawful in Australia but remains widely available on highly trafficked adult pornography sites.

- Australian authorities should enforce Australian laws against the distribution of child sexual abuse material by adult pornography sites, including where actors are adults but implied to be children, and where pornography sites have failed to verify the age of young-looking actors.

Commercial child sexual exploitation is being normalised by children's exposure to pornography business models

The popularity of pornography subscription sites such as OnlyFans, in which adults produce pornography of themselves for a subscription base, has coincided with an increase in children who are proactively making and selling their own nude and sexual content online. On youth-orientated social media sites such as Instagram and TikTok, children are regularly exposed to content created by adult pornography actors, who post risqué but non-pornographic content to attract attention and drive traffic to their explicit content on OnlyFans and similar sites. Our research has found that children are emulating the behaviour of adult pornography creators by producing and trying to sell their own sexual content online for money (Salter et al., 2023). They may seek to recruit other children into this behaviour (Salter et al., 2023). There are now large networks of accounts on social media sites that appear to be operated by children for advertising and selling self-generated child sexual abuse material to adults (Thiel et al., 2023). While platforms like OnlyFans claim to have strict age verification measures, reports indicate that minors continue to sell explicit content through the site, raising serious concerns about the platform's role in enabling child sexual exploitation (Picchi, 2025).

> Recommendation: The normalisation of transactional sex through subscription pornography sites such as OnlyFans is having significant impacts on child behaviour, including the normalisation of commercial child sexual exploitation.
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> - More research into the prevalence of Australian children making and selling sexual content to adults is necessary to ascertain the full scope of this problem, and identify prevention, disruption and education opportunities.
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> - There is a need for coordinated action between law enforcement, the financial sector, the technology sector and regulatory bodies such as the eSafety Commissioner to ensure a comprehensive response to children selling sexual content online.

There is an association between child sex offending and frequent and deviant pornography use

In 2023, we surveyed 4,918 men across Australia, the UK, and the US on the prevalence of sexual feelings and offending against children. The survey included questions about men's use of adult pornography. As a result, we have essential data on the frequency of men's use of pornography in Australia, the types of pornography they are using and associations with child sex offending. The findings point to an important relationship between pornography use and men's child sex offending and highlight the increasing need for regulation of online pornography to safeguard children, families and the wider community. In this submission, we include currently unpublished research findings that we are analysing for a peer-reviewed publication.

It is well recognised that "hypersexuality" (that is, heightened sexual interest and preoccupation) can underly deviant arousal patterns and behaviour, such as sexual offending against children (Wurtele et al., 2014; Wurtele et al., 2018). Consistent with this, our study found that, as the frequency of pornography viewership increases, so too does the proportion of men who sexually offend against children. For example, our study found that 5.9% of men who never watch pornography sexually offend against children, whereas 22% of men who watch pornography daily sexually offend against children. Relative to those who never watch pornography, the odds of child sex offending were 1.69 times greater if they watched pornography less than once a month, 2.32 times greater if they watched pornography a few times a month, 3.56 times greater if they watched pornography once a week, 3.36 times greater if they watched pornography couple times a week, and 5.18 times greater if they watched pornography daily.

Specific types of pornography were strongly associated with an increased risk of child sexual offending. Men who watched violent or rough pornography were 4.91 times more likely to sexually abuse a child than other men. Men who watched bestiality pornography were 10.56 times more likely to sexually abuse a child than other men.

We calculated the potential impact on the risk of child sex offending if there was a reduction in exposure to pornography. We found that there could be measurable reductions in offending if access to specific types of pornography was regulated. For example, if access to violent and rough pornography was more regulated, there could be a potential 23% reduction in child sex offending. Even more impactful would be the restriction of access to bestiality content, with a possible 42% reduction in offending. Limiting the use of webcams and live streaming of pornography has the potential to reduce offending by 38%.

As part of this research, we also examined men's attitudes towards child sex offending and found that harmful attitudes mediated pornography use. These included downplaying or dismissing the harm to children from sexual abuse, which explained 42% of the connection between pornography use and child sex offending. These attitudes make it easier for men to justify their sexual feelings and behaviour towards children, creating a potential pathway from pornography use and offending against children. Given the prevalence of widely available videos on highly trafficked pornography sites that depict incest and child abuse themes, it is very feasible that popular pornography is increasing the risks of child sex offending.

Recommendation: The connection between the use of pornography, particularly extreme and violent pornography, and the risk of child sex offending indicates that there is a significant impact on the health and safety of the community through men's consumption of this material.

- The proactive detection and removal of illegal pornographic content including sadistic and violent material, and bestiality content, may reduce sexual offending against children.

- People searching for child sexual abuse material are currently receiving some warning messages encouraging them to contact prevention services to discuss their behaviour. These messages could be expanded to include people who are consuming large amounts of pornography, particularly violent and deviant pornography, since these people are at heightened risk of engaging in child sexual abuse.

- There is a currently an unmet need for services for boys and men concerned about their excessive and/or deviant pornography consumption, and the potential overlap with sexual feelings or behaviour towards children. The government should consider the funding and establishment of such a service as well as workforce development to ensure that mental health practitioners are equipped to work with such clients.

- With exceptions for illegal content such as child sexual abuse material, explicit content is largely unregulated and widely available online. Many popular social media sites do not distinguish between explicit and non-explicit content. Regulation of the availability of online pornography through age verification and other mechanisms may reduce the public health impacts including the child protection risks posed by excessive pornography exposure.

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