REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL ISSUES

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

UNCORRECTED

At Jubilee Room, Parliament House, Sydney, on Monday 24 March 2025

The Committee met at 10:15.

PRESENT

The Hon. Dr Sarah Kaine (Chair)

The Hon. Susan Carter (Deputy Chair)
Dr Amanda Cohn
The Hon. Wes Fang
The Hon. Taylor Martin

PRESENT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

The Hon. Anthony D'Adam

The CHAIR: Welcome to the first hearing of the Committee's inquiry into the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional and physical health. I acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to Elders, past and present, and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of New South Wales. I also acknowledge and pay my respects to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining us today.

My name is Sarah Kaine, and I'm the Chair of the Committee. I ask everyone in the room to please turn your mobile phones to silent. Parliamentary privilege applies to witnesses in relation to the evidence they give today. However, it does not apply to what witnesses say outside of the hearing. I urge witnesses to be careful about making comments to the media or to others after completing their evidence. In addition, the Legislative Council has adopted rules to provide procedural fairness for inquiry participants. I encourage Committee members and witnesses to be mindful of these procedures.

Dr PAUL CAHILL, Executive Director, Curriculum, NSW Education Standards Authority, affirmed and examined

Ms MEGAN KELLY, Executive Director, Curriculum and Reform, NSW Department of Education, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome and thank you so much for making the time to give evidence. Would either of you like to start by making a short statement?

PAUL CAHILL: I think we're fine. I just acknowledge also that we're on the lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and pay my respects to Elders, past, present and emerging.

MEGAN KELLY: And I'm the same.

The CHAIR: Thank you for being here today and for opening up our witnesses for the day. Could you explain to me a little bit about the differences in roles of NESA and the Department of Education and how you work with public schools and private schools or independent schools?

PAUL CAHILL: NESA is responsible for the three school sectors. It is a regulatory authority. In my role, I look after the development of the curriculum, the New South Wales syllabuses, which are being reformed at the moment. We also are engaged in the registration of schools and also teacher accreditation, so they're the main functions that NESA is involved in.

MEGAN KELLY: The NSW Department of Education works with New South Wales public schools. Our role is to implement the syllabuses that NESA deliver and to provide that support for teachers to implement those syllabuses effectively, so professional learning advice and resources to be used in the classroom.

The CHAIR: One of the things in the submission and in the submissions is a lot of discussion about respectful relationships education. I wondered if you could perhaps go through for us the different types of content in the syllabus, and I'm guessing that's quite different across the stages. Perhaps if you could give us an overview of whatever that respectful relationship education looks like throughout the stages of the education system?

PAUL CAHILL: There are probably two areas of the curriculum that I'm focusing on. One is the respectful relationships component, which is in the PDHPE syllabus, but also wellbeing and safety are part of the PDHPE syllabus. In terms of the matters under discussion with the inquiry, the other areas of the curriculum that that impacts is in terms of technology and the technology syllabuses, given students' experience online and offline. You're quite correct. What we've tried to do in establishing the PDHPE continuum of learning from K-10 is to make sure that all the materials are age and stage appropriate. We have a situation where even younger students are taught how to keep themselves safe in online and offline environments. They're also in a situation where students learn what is appropriate behaviour at each stage.

In terms of matters such as pornography itself, we certainly don't address that in the early primary years. We do talk, however, about safety online and being an upstander in terms of one's behaviour. All these matters are interrelated. Consent is another area of the curriculum that is developed in an age and stage appropriate way as they go through the years. By the time we reach years 7 and 8 and years 9 and 10, certainly we're much clearer in terms of the direction. The examples that we have for pornography relate to content points about being safe online, about appropriate representation, understanding the relationship with consent and also the way in which individuals should interact with one another.

The CHAIR: Quite a lot of the research that we've read in the submissions from a range of stakeholders talks about first exposure to pornography being quite young, being one-third of kids having incidental exposure between 10 and 13 years. I note what you said, Dr Cahill, about more explicit discussion of those issues comes a bit later. I just wonder, what is it at that age more particularly are we telling children who might just be playing Minecraft or whatever and have something pop up? I wondered if there had been changes or discussion amongst you syllabus experts about whether we should be considering something different, given that that seems to be such a young age.

PAUL CAHILL: We've only just really developed the new syllabus, so that's been a reformed piece of work. The last syllabus was done in 2018. I think we released last year, or the year before, the PDHPE syllabus. In terms of the work that we did, and as part of curriculum reform, we're guided by the fact that we need to have a strong evidence base for what we do. We've worked very closely with the Department of Health and the eSafety Commissioner in terms of looking at ways in which we can represent things appropriately for students. In terms of the development, I might just go through a bit of a progression because I've got some notes on that.

In stage two—years 3 and 4—students are taught to identify unsafe situations in online environments and describe how to seek help, so that's appropriate for a student of that age. They identify respectful digital citizenship behaviour. These are just content points that I'm reading directly. Again, that sets the framework in which students start then to understand an online environment is a place where there are dangers, but also it's an area where one needs to be responsible. When we go to stage three, we identify and apply strategies to contribute to safety in online environments as well and describe and demonstrate ways to report negative, harmful or unsafe situations to trusted adults.

In matters such as pornography, sometimes that's something that students may not ordinarily feel comfortable with, but if they're taught to be able to seek a trusted adult and to be able to describe things that are unsafe to them, then I think there's some benefit. They demonstrate and explain how respectful and responsible digital citizen behaviours enhance online safety. Then we move on to stage four and stage five, which I said previously is more specific in terms of its reference to upstanding behaviour and things that are appropriate online protective strategies that students can adopt as well.

The CHAIR: Can I ask, with regards to how that syllabus is delivered across different types of schools, is that the same? Does it change in delivery in a public school, in a private school, in an independent school? What's mandatory and what's optional with regards to how schools deal with that?

PAUL CAHILL: Both the outcomes and content of the syllabus are—we describe them now as essential content, which means effectively they are mandatory. They need to be taught across schools. We are conscious that across the sectors, different schools have different ethoses, and certainly the materials can be taught appropriate to that ethos, but it needs to be taught. We went to a lot of trouble to make sure that the language we were using in the syllabus didn't water down what we wanted students to learn, but also that that it could be taught appropriately across the range of schools that exist in the State.

From a very pragmatic point of view, we were very cautious with the language as well, because there is sensitivity around the issue of pornography. I'd hate it misrepresented that we were teaching students in stage 4 or stage 5 or even younger to engage with pornography. We've been very careful with the language we've used, but we've been more explicit with the syllabus. We do actually have the example of pornography twice in the stage 4 and the stage 5 syllabus which didn't exist previously. We're giving a very clear steer to what we are expecting schools to teach.

The CHAIR: I've got one more, and then I'll pass over and see if my colleagues have more questions. I've certainly got lots more. I wondered with—two things, actually. Would it be possible for us on notice to get that syllabus content?

PAUL CAHILL: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: That would be really helpful. Thank you.

PAUL CAHILL: I'll get you a copy of the syllabus itself, but also some annotations that I've got as a tab to that.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I'd appreciate that. My last question on this part is in terms of delivery of that content one of the things that kept coming across in the research that we received is that young people actually are looking to have conversations—they really want to have conversations—but that as adults we're like, "Oh, it's a bit hard." What training do we give teachers or whoever else? Do we bring people into schools? How do we deliver that content?

PAUL CAHILL: I might say a couple of things and then throw that to Miss Kelly. Just one of the things that we've done with the reformed syllabuses is we've developed a suite of teaching advice. Particularly in this area of PDHPE we've been very conscious of the fact that there are matters that need to be taught that are quite sensitive, and people, adults particularly, can feel uncomfortable addressing those. What we've tried to do both with the syllabus and with the teaching advice is give some direction to teachers but also some permission to teachers to actually address these issues and address them in a way that is appropriate. That's from the curriculum point of view. Miss Kelly?

MEGAN KELLY: Yes. In addition to what's in the syllabus and the support that NESA provides, we also provide that professional learning—and have been for some time—giving teachers tools and resources to enable them to address these topics. Dr Cahill's right: It is sensitive, and our teachers do need to build their confidence around these sorts of issues. That's further work for us to do as we support the implementation of these syllabuses and address these issues, that professional learning that gives them that confidence and enables them to have the conversations, but also to do that in partnership with their families and communities in schools as well. It's about building those relationships with parents and giving them the tools and the skills to be able to have those

tricky conversations at home. There's lots of capability building that needs to be underway. It is definitely there, and we have that advice, but we know that we can strengthen that now with these new syllabuses to provide that framework for us.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Carter?

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Thank you both for being here today. I note in your submission you discussed the Safe Wayz program, which indicates children aged eight to nine years with high levels of exposure to and engagement with pornography. Do you have any advice as to how children of eight and nine are accessing pornography and high levels of pornography?

MEGAN KELLY: I don't have any specific advice on that. What I could talk to is the response that would occur at school should an issue like that be raised, if we become aware of a student who has had that sort of exposure. We would deal with that from a wellbeing and a health perspective. We would report any of the concerns that we have to our child wellbeing unit, and that child wellbeing unit would then assess the severity of that concern and then provide advice to schools about what those next steps are.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: How, typically, would a primary school become aware that children were accessing pornography?

MEGAN KELLY: Again I don't have any specific details on that. I guess it would be students disclosing those matters. Often when they've got a trusted relationship with their classroom teacher—they talk about who the safe people are that they can have conversations with. That may, in fact, be that classroom teacher, and so that would be an example where those matters could be raised, and in the context of the teaching and the learning in the classroom as well.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: And I wonder if you could outline—I understand from a number of the submissions the impact that pornography is having on children abusing other children, and children behaving in an abusive manner to teachers. What sort of issues are we seeing in schools that are caused by exposure of children to pornography?

MEGAN KELLY: I guess it's difficult at times to attribute behaviour to anything in particular. As much as we try to understand what the triggers might be and what might be sitting underneath those, we really do want to take more of a proactive approach in giving students the skills to be able to manage those responses and their behaviour in a much more appropriate way. The frameworks and the guidelines that we've got around behaviour in our schools would apply in those instances.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Sorry, are you saying that you don't think there's a connection between growing levels of pornography use by young children and sexual abuse of children on children?

MEGAN KELLY: No. I know that the evidence is telling us that there is an issue there, absolutely, and that's part of the work that we are doing. It might be an appropriate time to speak to the Respectful Relationships education program that we are delivering as part of the work of the team that I lead. That program is funded through the Commonwealth Consent and Respectful Education funding there, as well as New South Wales primary prevention into—sorry, I'm just pulling up my notes here so I can get the details right—prevention of domestic family and sexual violence. In that program we are looking at how we can support effective teaching around these matters to address those harmful effects and to take a preventative approach to it, actually, so that we can stop some of those behaviours from emerging, I guess, as a result of that exposure.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: I understand that you're in the process of curriculum renewal and that the PDHPE syllabus is relatively new. How long has the new syllabus been operating in schools?

PAUL CAHILL: Well, it's not. To be fully implemented I think it's '26 or '27. I'll take that on notice. I think it's '27. But schools are able to begin. Anecdotally there are a number of schools I know have begun to be early adopters of the curriculum, but effectively it's either that date '26/'27, but I'll get the specific date.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: So currently there would be no explicit teaching about pornography in high schools in New South Wales, necessarily?

MEGAN KELLY: We also have designed and we're implementing another program, a course for our year 11 and 12 students, which is called Life Ready. That's a 25-hour course that all of our New South Wales public school students engage with. There is content in there that is addressing issues around respectful relationships, consent, coercive control, and pornography is addressed in that course.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: If the median age of exposure to pornography is 13, is a course in year 11 and year 12 coming too late?

MEGAN KELLY: Not if it's building on the syllabus work in stages 3 right through to stage 6.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: But is that currently in place?

PAUL CAHILL: The 2018 syllabus which is currently being taught doesn't explicitly reference pornography in the examples. It does still take—and I've got to say the 2018 syllabus, I think, was quite strong—a strength-based approach to being proactive. But in the current syllabus students would still learn about factors that that influence sexual behaviour and the understanding of sexual engagement. They're there, but, guided by the evidence and certainly the advice of the eSafety Commissioner and the department of health, we've been a bit braver this time and made sure that we include the example of pornography in terms of image-based. Students would currently be learning it. We probably haven't been brave enough in the past to explicitly say "pornography", for a range of reasons. Like a lot of adults, it's a sensitive issue, and you don't want to go down that path. It does exist currently, but it's far greater strength in the new syllabus.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: When you were developing the new syllabus, are you aware of any research or evidence which suggests that this problem can be addressed solely by curriculum changes?

PAUL CAHILL: There is very little evidence to say it can just be the curriculum doing the heavy lifting. In terms of the work that we've done and what the evidence shows, there are multiple levers that are in place. There isn't a silver bullet to address the issue of pornography. The reality is, pornography is part of a broader suite of things that are happening in online and offline environments. You need to address those range of issues. Within the curriculum, we have tried to make sure that we're addressing issues of consent, particularly, because that's part of it. We are trying to make sure that we show that gender-based violence is a real problem that needs to be addressed. There are multiple ways in which the syllabus has tried to address these matters, but there is no silver bullet. There are so many levers at play. The curriculum is one part of it, but there are many other parts of society—things like the notion of behaviours online in terms of misogynistic behaviour. That's something that is well beyond the control of a curriculum, but the curriculum can lay the foundation to outline that those sort of things are detrimental to people's wellbeing and health.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: BYOD—to what extent does the fact that kids at school have access to devices make it more difficult to control them accessing pornography?

MEGAN KELLY: In the New South Wales Department of Education, any devices that are brought to schools do have to connect through our system and our IT structure. There are filters and firewalls in place that would prevent them from accessing materials of that nature at school.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: You're aware that the first thing a lot of kids do when they get to school is work out how to break the filter each day?

MEGAN KELLY: Aren't they clever? Those firewalls are pretty strong, and the cyber safety and security aspects of the work of the department is very strong as well.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Thanks so much for the evidence you're providing today. There have been a fair few questions already about the syllabus, specifically relating to respectful relationships and consent. I'm also interested in what is being taught specifically about sexual development. In the written submission, you've helpfully pointed out the *Children First* framework, which identified that a lack of access to reliable information about sexual development can result in young people turning to online social media content and pornography for information. What is the framework in the syllabus currently for that specific information about sexual development and sexual behaviour?

PAUL CAHILL: I'll take that on notice, because there's a bit of specificity in it. The focus of the syllabus tends to look at healthy manifestations of sexuality and sexual expression. The whole notion of respectful relationships is predicated on the fact that we're trying to teach students to know about their responsibility for their own wellbeing but their responsibility for the wellbeing of others. That is manifested in the behaviours that students may engage in. Within the syllabus, we teach what are appropriate behaviours. Also, we teach the fact that there are a range of things external to the student, like online environments, that really have an impact upon the way in which students understand the world in which they live and the way they behave. I'll send you the specific details in terms of what the syllabus says, but that's the general framework in which we operate.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Thank you. I appreciate this is going to be taken on notice as well, but there is a specific recommendation in the written submission about "providing access to evidence-based information and advice about sexual behaviours for children and young people." We've had an extensive discussion about schools and school curriculum, but I'm interested in understanding what other information the New South Wales Government provides that young people can access online or in the community in terms of public education.

MEGAN KELLY: One of the things we do is work closely with other government agencies—DCJ, Health—and accessing their resources is a part of that provision, and also working with our academic experts in the field. We need to understand what the current research is telling us to develop that advice and materials for our students as well. There's a range of things that we want to do there. We also need to listen to our students and what their lived experiences are. As we're developing materials, it's hearing from them and co-designing and testing it with our students before we roll it out more broadly. It's a multi-pronged approach to where we're getting that evidence base from, both State and nationally, as well as the work that we do with our own students too.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Are you able to provide us on notice with some of that work that already exists?

MEGAN KELLY: We can for the work that already exists. There's a body of work to come as well.

PAUL CAHILL: In terms of the evidence that we used in terms of developing the syllabus, we use the *International technical guidance on sexuality education* from UNESCO; *Pornography, young people and preventing violence against women* by Our Watch; *Respectful relationships education as part of a national approach to preventing gender-based violence* by Our Watch; the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032*, the Department of Social Services; the *NSW Sexual Violence Plan 2022-2027*; the *NSW Domestic and Family Violence Plan 2022-2027*, and the *Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence* from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Thank you. That's helpful. This is a question for Health, but you're representing the Government's submission today, so I appreciate this will be taken on notice. I'm specifically interested in Sexual Assault Services. I've worked with a number of those practitioners previously who are really excellent and provide a really important service. The written submission says that:

> Despite having an extensive network, NSW Health Sexual Assault Services experience significant demand and waitlists.

On notice to Health, could you advise the Committee what the barriers are to expanding those services and what would be needed to address the unmet demand and waitlists for sexual assault services at the moment?

PAUL CAHILL: Yes.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Mr Cahill, you've said a number of times that this is a sensitive area of the curriculum. I wanted to ask Ms Kelly whether there an ability for parents to opt their children out of this content.

MEGAN KELLY: It can be controversial content in some schools and communities. That does really rely on strong relationships between families and school leaders: our principals and classroom teachers. When parents have concerns about some of this content and it being taught, the first thing they should do is have that conversation with the school, the classroom teacher or the leadership of the school. In most cases, when that occurs, those issues and concerns can be addressed. They can request an exemption from curriculum. There is a process that can be undertaken to do that. Because curriculum is mandatory—it's based on evidence, it was widely consulted, it's age-appropriate—we would expect that students will continue to participate in lessons around this content. Yes, they can. In most instances, though, we can work that through with the families and address those concerns. That's the best place for that to occur.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Given the content is protective of children, do you think it's an issue that in some circumstances, some children may not have access to this content because their parents, for one reason or other, choose to opt them out?

MEGAN KELLY: At this point, because the syllabus content is mandatory, students are participating in those lessons. Where we can make some considerations is around the kind of resources that we might use. There is some scope for us to adapt the resources but not address that content, because it is mandatory content.

PAUL CAHILL: If I can just add, with the essential content, while I acknowledge that the material can be sensitive, we did go to a great deal of trouble to ensure that it would be teachable across every school—as I said before, sensitive to the school's ethos but also appropriate to the needs of students. As I say, and Ms Kelly said, the content is essential and therefore needs to be taught.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Does the department collect any data on when students are opted out of content?

MEGAN KELLY: The process that we have in place requires a parent to write to the Department of Education. The secretary has delegated that decision-making down to me. A parent will make a submission based generally on religious grounds about why they wouldn't want their students participating in those lessons, then that is considered. We've been using that process now for just over 12 months. In that time we haven't had any students opting out.

The CHAIR: We've reached the end of our time this morning. Again, thank you for being here and also representing the Government as well. I think Ms Carter wants to put one more question on notice.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: I'm conscious that you're Education rather than Health. I note in the submission discussing the Safe Wayz and the New Street Services that a key priority of these services is to address children and young people's access to pornography. If it was possible to have more information about how that was achieved, I'd be very grateful.

The CHAIR: We have asked you several questions and you've taken some information on notice. The secretariat will be in touch. There may also be supplementary questions. We thank you very much for appearing today.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Associate Professor MEGAN LIM, Head of Young People's Health Research, Burnet Institute, affirmed and examined

Ms GISELLE WOODLEY, Researcher, Edith Cowan University, School of Arts and Humanities, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

Professor LELIA GREEN, Professor of Communications, Edith Cowan University, School of Arts and Humanities, before the Committee via videoconference, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Would any of you like to make a short opening statement?

MEGAN LIM: My submission and evidence today are based on extensive mixed-methods research into pornography with young people, parents and educators. In addressing the impact of pornography, a key consideration is the difference between accidental exposure, particularly in young children, and intentional consumption of pornography. Accidental exposure among young children is best addressed with a combination of education, technological and parenting-based strategies. There is a reasonable level of support for this in the community, but there are also significant concerns about the impact of some more restrictive strategies on privacy and autonomy. Restrictive strategies are unlikely to be very effective in preventing deliberate access to pornography, but they may prevent access by young children.

Deliberate consumption of pornography among teenagers and adults can be a positive and pleasurable experience but is also often harmful. Addressing these harms requires comprehensive and inclusive sexuality and relationships education for young people and adults that goes beyond the simple message that porn is fake, to address social norms, consent, gender and sexuality. There are few education programs focusing on porn that have been developed and evaluated, which is why we co-designed The Gist with young people and educators. We are currently seeking funding to implement it more broadly. I have tabled a document that gives you a little bit of information about The Gist, if you are interested in learning more.

The CHAIR: Professor Green or Ms Woodley, have you got an opening statement?

GISELLE WOODLEY: Yes, we do. Edith Cowan University has been awarded over $6 million of Australian Research Council and Australian Government funding to research children's lives online since 2002. We conduct ongoing research with teens exploring their digital sexual practices and our submission was based on qualitative interviews with teenagers aged 12 to17 and their parents, to explore their perceptions around pornography as well as their experiences of their relationship and sexuality education. This research occurred during a timely period where discussions around age assurance and age verification technologies have accelerated, and also consent has become a mandatory component of the curriculum. As such, teens were hyper aware of impacts of porn, such as lack of consent depicted on screen, gender stereotypes and aggressive depictions of sex. Teens also recognised benefits to accessing pornography, which filled a gap in education not covered in school and most home environments, such as pleasure, queer sex and the specifics of sexual intercourse.

Some teens sought ethical sources of pornography and depictions of mutual pleasure. Concerningly, teens' experiences of education around pornography were lacking considerably or were non-existent. Teens overwhelmingly recognised that, to combat any potentially detrimental impacts of pornography, education is key. If education was administered, it was far too late, occurring years after the teens had first encountered porn. Teens also noted educator discomfort around these topics. In the face of a social media ban which will impact a media channel that provides so many teens with information about sex, now more than ever we need to resource relationship and sexuality education on multiple levels, including education around pornography, so teens are able to process, digest and critically consume sexual content around them.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Professor Green?

LELIA GREEN: Thank you. I think Giselle has summarised the overview there that we put into our submission.

The CHAIR: I've got a whole list of questions here about research methods and whatnot, but I guess my overarching question is this difference between accidental viewing of porn and deliberate. Associate Professor Lim, I think you spoke about the different approaches. We seem to assume that it's all—it feels like we're having a discussion about accidental, but there is also this deliberate aspect as well. We also seem to be presuming that it's all negative and that we need to stop access. Can you maybe expand a bit more on what you were saying in your opening statement? I'd also like a response from Ms Woodley and Professor Green as well.

MEGAN LIM: Yes. Accidental viewing does tend to occur before deliberate viewing, and generally it is a fairly negative experience for most children at the age that it occurs, whereas deliberate or intentional viewing, people are usually doing it for a reason. They have motivations to do it and often have a positive and pleasurable

experience. This applies for teenagers and adults as well. No, I don't believe it's all harmful always. I think there's pretty clear evidence that there can be some major harms for some people and some of the time, but it also provides a positive experience for a lot of people.

The CHAIR: Just before I go to Edith Cowan University researchers, your survey, which you've conducted over time, has that had the same questions in it? For example, first, incidental exposure because I think it's some of your research that says 10 to 13. I'm not sure. Has that been consistent over time since you've been doing that the last 10 years? Have you got that longitudinal comparison on all of your questions?

MEGAN LIM: Not on all questions. The pornography, we have been asking about that—I think there's been a few years where we haven't separated accidental and intentional viewing, but what we found when we've looked at trends over time is there hasn't been a significant change in the age of exposure or the frequency of exposure in the last 10 years.

The CHAIR: So in the last 10 years, there hasn't been something that's happened online that's meant that there's been more than there was when you started?

MEGAN LIM: No.

LELIA GREEN: We do our research talking to teens in person and also in focus groups. We also talk with younger teens than is the case with Professor Lim's work, so I think our youngest teen in the most recent research looking at whether children feel they're harmed by pornography was 11 or so. We call them the pre-teens, any child 13 or under. They're much closer to when they often first were to see pornography, in terms of age. The other thing is that, when we were talking to children about pornography, they didn't really differentiate between what adults call sexting and sexual images that are part of other content, so the things that were coming sort of unexpected and unawares tended to be things like dick pics or what teens call nudes. So for many children, their first experience of, as it were, real sexual images, as opposed to the soft sex that you might see in advertising and such like, would be an unsolicited dick pic.

In this case, it isn't necessarily older people, but it could be. When I say older people, it might be a 12-year-old sending a dick pic to a 10-year-old, so there's a whole conversation that is missing at the moment. One of the problems is that the children concerned don't necessarily feel able to talk to adults they trust about these issues because they worry that their access to media will be taken away or will be severely restricted, so they end up talking to each other. And whilst there has some strengths in this and they build relationships and mutual trust in turning to their friends about these issues, it means that they don't get the perspectives that they might otherwise be able to get from talking to an adult that's trained, sympathetic, empathetic and able to give them a bigger picture on these issues as we know relationships and sexuality educators can do. But I'll hand over to Giselle because she's our specialist RSE person and also did the interviewing with the children.

GISELLE WOODLEY: The only thing I would add to that is that, whether deliberate or accidental, for the pre-teens and the young teens, their conceptualisations of sex were quite warped if pornography was their main source of information. We looked at pornography in the context of a range of harms to see where pornography is at in terms of concerns for both teenagers and parents and, for some teens, this was quite low on the priority list. But, for an example, one pre-teen that we spoke to said that their biggest fear was someone doing arse porn to them, a stranger in an alley. This was an example of how pornography had shaped both their fears and their conceptualisation of sex without any other information to supplement that, and to us that was concerning.

The CHAIR: You note that access to age-appropriate evidence-based information around sex and sexuality—you talk about it as a human right, including for children. How do you propose that balance is struck between the protections that we might want to put in place for those age groups and the rights to information and education?

LELIA GREEN: I believe this has been addressed by General Comment No. 5. That was an elaboration of the Convention of the Rights of the Child. I'll take that on notice, but I believe it is General Comment No. 5, where there was a specific focus on children's rights for sexual information. At the time that that was written, which, again, I believe was 2003, the General Comment was addressing children's rights to information about diverse sexualities, in the sense that it had been perceived that children that didn't have a majority heteronormative perspective or sexuality often felt alienated and potentially at risk as a result of not seeing how they were feeling reflected in any of the educational or other information available to them. This was put forward by the Committee and eventually endorsed and adopted as an elaboration.

There it very carefully does differentiate between relative to the capacity of the child to understand and their relative age. But effectively what it's saying is that it is inappropriate and not helpful to a full understanding of children's rights to imagine that an eight-year-old has exactly the same need for information as an 18- or as a 17-year-old and, consequently, one has to take into account a child's age, stage, interest and their own awareness

of these issues when tailoring education for them and when allowing them to have a say in their future and what they want to know.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Thank you all for being here. My first question is to the researchers from Edith Cowan University. In terms of accidental exposure to pornography, I note that in your submission you indicate that some teens mentioned that their first exposure had been pornography pop-up advertisements appearing on their school computers. Is that from talking to teens exclusively in Western Australia or is that across Australia? Can you give us some more information about that?

GISELLE WOODLEY: We did have interest from a couple of teams around Australia, but we ended up keeping our data to Western Australia because we wanted to favour face-to-face interviews, although a couple of interviews did occur via Zoom. And, yes, a number of teens advised that they had first accessed pornography from school pop-ups, freaking out as well because they saw the pop-ups come up and thought they were going to face significant consequences. But they also shared that some of their schools had used internet filtering software to prevent that happening as well, but also internet filtering software was also preventing access to important websites and resources that they needed for their studies as well.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: I think you indicated that what we might call sexting is perhaps often first exposure. In terms of accidental exposure, what information do you have about other pathways for accidental exposure to pornography?

GISELLE WOODLEY: In terms of the accidental exposure to pornography, it was mostly pop-ups, either at school or at home, in terms of the gaming pop-ups. Sometimes there was a game that looked a little bit innocuous or innocent, and teens had clicked on that. Mostly search terms, but for the most part, I would say the pre-teens were looking up content deliberately and putting in search terms such as "cute girls" or "naked girls" or "breasts" and things like that.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Associate Professor—sorry, yes?

LELIA GREEN: Sorry, I just wanted to add that there's two forms of accidental. The accidental exposure from the teens that actually saw it accidentally is to be differentiated from the exposure that sometimes they are deliberately shown material they've never seen before, because an older child will think it's funny to watch their reaction and will then make fun of them. In some cases, it's really an example of interpersonal bullying, which has significant overtones of image based sexual harassment and abuse.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: And are there overtones of grooming in that, Professor Green?

LELIA GREEN: Well, not necessarily. I mean, certainly there can be, and we know that's a known technique for groomers and paedophiles to desensitise children and attempt to make it normal for them, but often, as we indicated, it can be a slightly older child who really—when I say isn't old enough to know better, we obviously treat a 12-year-old doing this in a very different category from a 22-year-old, but this is often the situation. A 12-year-old may be the person—not necessarily an older sibling, but it may be an older sibling's friend, and they're being inappropriate and also potentially damaging. The best way to protect against those sorts of things is, in our opinion, and in the opinion of the teens who could now look back on it, was education and for them not to leave so much information in the hands of children who don't know better how to handle it.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Associate Professor Lim, do you have anything to add to the issue of accidental exposure?

MEGAN LIM: I would also consider accidental exposure to be a child hears a word, they don't know what it means, and they google it.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Perfect world, crystal ball, if it was possible to delay accidental exposure, do you think that would have an impact on the age of likely intentional exposure to pornography?

MEGAN LIM: We don't have any clear evidence on that because the studies haven't been done, but I suspect that, yes, it possibly would.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: You gave evidence that often intentional exposure to pornography is pleasurable for the person. In terms in particular of children intentionally accessing, have you done any work? Are you aware whether, while it might be pleasurable for that teen or pre-teen, negative impacts that may have in terms of their attitude to consent, their attitude of what a sexual relationship should look like, consent, choking practices, all of those things?

MEGAN LIM: Absolutely. We've definitely spoken to people who are older teenagers or young adults who've looked back on their younger years, potentially, and noted that they acquired different attitudes or assumptions from that. That's the way we've been able to get the evidence from people who've kind of learned

and looked back on their own behaviour. Addiction also being something that people have noted that, while it's enjoyable, it becomes a bit compulsive.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Last question. Any evidence as to what age addictions to porn may start?

MEGAN LIM: No, I haven't seen that evidence.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Thanks so much for making time to give evidence today. Earlier on, there was a mention that the current syllabus or formal education for young people, in terms of their access to pornography, often is delivered too late, that it can be up to years after people have accessed pornography. In your view, when should explicit mention of pornography in sexual education start?

MEGAN LIM: That's a difficult question. I think parents and teachers are reluctant to tell children about pornography if they think that they haven't heard about it, but what we found is that parents especially are delaying too long in talking to their children and assuming that they haven't seen it. I think with younger children, it definitely can be framed around things that you've seen online that might bother you. I don't know exactly what the age would be that it's appropriate to start using the word "porn" for those who aren't aware of what it is.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I'm pausing in case either of the witnesses from Edith Cowan wanted to respond at all.

The CHAIR: I think Miss Woodley is indicating. Yes.

GISELLE WOODLEY: We did actually ask teens specifically about this, and teens relayed that around 10, I would say, on average was their ideal age to start talking about these issues, but keeping in mind that some of the teens that we spoke to had access to pornography at eight or nine, so 10 is also, for some teens, too late. Really, it's really context specific. It's really age and stage. It's developmentally appropriate, and developmentally appropriate really depends on the young person themselves. I would say as a general rule, the teens that we spoke to relayed that 10 was sort of a great time before the likelihood of them having received images without consent and without having access to content, and they would have preferred to be equipped and know what it was before they had seen. A lot of teens we spoke to didn't know what they were looking at when they saw it because they had had no introduction, no discussion, nothing about it. For some teens, without that consent, that was what was more distressing.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I had two more questions, if I may, Chair, for Professor Lim. You've tabled this document about The Gist program. Has that been evaluated, and what evidence have you got to support it?

MEGAN LIM: We've done a trial in 10 schools around Victoria and an evaluation of that and found quite positive results. We got qualitative feedback which was almost all positive. We also were able to show that there were some increases in knowledge around sexuality and sexual behaviour and relationships, and there was no change in how frequently people viewed pornography, which is what we wanted to see, essentially—that it didn't encourage people to view more pornography.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I wanted to give all of you, if you'd like, an opportunity to respond to some criticism that we've received in submissions from other submitters to the inquiry. There's been an allegation that any evidence supporting the concept that some pornography can have a positive effect is only written by academics associated with the pornography industry.

MEGAN LIM: I've never been associated with the pornography industry or received any money or anything else from the pornography industry.

LELIA GREEN: Same with me. As you may or may not have noticed, I took an oath at the beginning of this. I'm a long-term Anglican with some 12 years as a church council member. I see this as an important part of responding to people where they are in their needs at the time, and it's got nothing to do with any incentives or anything else. I've never received any; never been offered any.

GISELLE WOODLEY: I've also never received any funding from the pornography industry. Part of my research, I undertake reflexive processes to make sure I'm being open to the participants' views, because I'm highly committed to realising what the teens have to say. Everything that I relay is what the teens have to say and not my own views. I've never received any funding from the pornography industry.

The CHAIR: I've got a couple of follow up questions. One is just a general request on notice about any academic articles that you've published which are relevant to the terms of reference would be very helpful. Professor Lim, there was some content analysis of pornography and what young Australians see, but if there's anything else that we haven't come across, that would be great for all of the witnesses. The other thing I just want to ask about—I think it was from both of your submissions—is the role of parents or the role or the interactions between young people and adults, and the sort of the shame and stigma and guilt around that. We've heard ideas

about education for children. What should we be doing with parents who perhaps just don't know, don't understand? They think, "At 10, my kid couldn't possibly have had exposure to this. It would never happen to my kid. They wouldn't look for it." How do we engage? Have you: one, any research; and, two, any thoughts on that?

MEGAN LIM: Yes, we've done quite a bit of research with parents. Parents have also never received any education about pornography. Most of them didn't even receive any sexual education at school. What we consistently find is that parents believe that they should be having discussions with their children about pornography, but they don't want to until they're sure that their child has seen pornography. Most believe that their child hasn't seen pornography unless they find direct evidence or their child tells them. Parents certainly do need more education.

We've found that the main thing that parents will say in a discussion, if they do find out their child has seen pornography, is just kind of a simple—there's two avenues. One group will say, "Don't watch porn. It's bad. We'll stop you from watching it." Many will also say, "It's normal for kids to be curious. Just know that porn is fake. Don't believe what you see in it. It's all fake." That's the extent of the information that children get from parents. That's all parents know to say as well. They don't know how to talk about positive sex and relationships that are good and ethical and how to consent to sexual acts. Parents are also lacking this knowledge. They don't know how to talk to their kids about it either.

The CHAIR: Without wanting to be controversial, given the statistics it's very likely that the parents are consumers of pornography as well. That might muddy the waters a bit. Professor Green or Ms Woodley, have you got any comments on that parent side of things?

LELIA GREEN: I'd agree that our research also indicates that parents feel unable or unprepared to have these conversations with children. I think they don't realise how protective it can be for the children if the parents do have these conversations. The children can then raise issues with the parents and be confident that they're not going to be punished for often something that is not in their control, particularly where they've been shown or sent something on a phone or personal device. We found that parents did want to be better equipped for these conversations, but the overwhelming message in the media is that children shouldn't see them. There's very little balance in this, so parents feel that they have in some way left their children exposed if their child manages to see porn, which is one of the reasons why phones and suchlike are often confiscated in response to it. That's seen as parents doing now what they feel should have been done before because they think their child may have been harmed.

When we talk to older children—15, 16, 17—they don't see porn as harmful, but they do talk about how it would have been helpful to talk about some of these things, how they didn't realise then what they realise now. We do believe that parents need a lot more support. They need to be encouraged to be more confident and keep conversations going, start them early and keep them going. We've got a very well-known health education booklet, *Talk soon. Talk often*., from the WA Health Department, which essentially says that it's protective for children to know names of body parts right from their first words. Then they can tell a parent or a trusted adult if someone is behaving inappropriately with them, apart from anything else.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much to you all for the research that you do, the submissions that you've made and the time you've made to speak with us today. You have taken a few things on notice. It's possible that we might have supplementary questions that the secretariat will be in touch with you about. Thank you very much again for appearing today.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Dr MARSHALL BALLANTINE-JONES, Secretary, NSW Council of Churches, sworn and examined

Mrs JULIE KARAKI, Director, Shia Muslim Council, sworn and examined

Dr DEIRDRE LITTLE, National Bioethics Convener, Catholic Women's League Australia Incorporated, for Catholic Women's League - NSW, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for appearing today. Would any of you like to begin by making an opening statement?

MARSHALL BALLANTINE-JONES: Thanks for the opportunity to speak today. I'm here to address the growing concerns surrounding the early exposure of our youth to pornography and the profound impacts that it has on their development and wellbeing. The issues we raise today are of great concern to the NSW Council of Churches and its eight denominations. The relationship between harmful pornography and its impact on young people is highly relevant to our communities, which collectively represent tens of thousands of young people across our schools and churches in New South Wales.

What is clear is that parents and carers, teachers and leaders are all grappling with the impact of internet pornography on our young people. We want a society where young people are safe, well-informed and supported as they navigate modern life. Unfortunately, the pervasive exposure to pornography threatens these efforts and undermines the positive development of our young people. Our quantitative studies and onsite consultation reveal a confronting picture of confusion, hypersexualised behaviours, harassment and abuse. We are also deeply concerned about the broader societal impacts of pornography.

Our member denominations have generations of investment in the betterment of society, and we believe harmful pornography is a significant threat to that good. Numerous stories and studies highlight the devastating harm porn causes to individuals and to communities. Firstly, we must acknowledge the alarming trend of early exposure to pornography, which is becoming more common. This exposure influences young people's understanding of sex, relationships and consent, often leading to risky behaviours, body dissatisfaction and a distorted sense of self-worth.

Secondly, the media by which pornography is accessed, which is primarily the internet and mobile devices, means young people can have easy access to explicit content without safeguards or parental oversight. This raises questions about the effectiveness of current restrictions on access and whether stronger measures are needed. Thirdly, there is a disturbing relationship between pornography use and the understanding of respect to consent. Mainstream pornography often normalises aggression and misogyny, distorting young people's views of healthy relationships. Violent and misogynistic content perpetuates negative stereotypes and disrespect towards women and vulnerable individuals. Fourthly, AI-generated porn and deepfake technology add another layer of concern, allowing explicit content to be created, often of underaged people and without consent, raising significant privacy and ethical issues.

Fifthly, we believe to address these challenges there are multiple strategies that are required. We must invest in effective education programs. Current sex education often fails to address the broad risks of pornography. There are initiatives, like DigiHelp, which I developed in my PhD research with University of Sydney, that are examples of effective options for consideration. We must provide better education and support for parents and carers, to help them navigate their children through the online challenges. We must also empower young people themselves to be critical of their world and to find their meaning outside of the sexual norms promoted through pornography and the internet at large. We must work harder at reducing the amount of exposure to pornography, both in terms of first-time exposure, and also ongoing prevalence. Stronger access controls and regulation are essential to ensure that the online environment is safe for young people. By addressing these concerns, we can foster healthy attitudes towards sex, relationships and consent.

JULIE KARAKI: Firstly, I'd like to thank you for inviting the Shia Muslim Council of Australia to present to this important inquiry. The Shia Muslim Council of Australia represents 37 organisations across Australia, from all States and Territories. We advocate for policies that protect our community and the wider Australian community, particularly our children and young people. Pornography is often framed as an individual choice, but its widespread accessibility and influence have far-reaching consequences on mental health, relationships and societal values. It's not just a religious or cultural issue, but it's a broader social concern affecting public safety and wellbeing. Today we will highlight why stronger regulations are necessary. As part of our submission, we conducted a focus group involving males and females aged 15 to 21, from culturally diverse backgrounds within the Shia Muslim community. The insights from this focus group—a summary of it is as follows. The Shia Muslim Council found that all forms of pornography were harmful to these particular groups, and the distinction between harmful and non-harmful pornography was misleading.

Research and focus group findings indicated that exposure even to soft pornography often escalated into increased consumption of more explicit and harmful content. Early exposure and mental health risks—studies show that a significant percentage of Australian children are exposed to pornography before the age of 16. Early exposure distorts body image, fosters unrealistic expectations and increases the risk of addiction. The slippery slope from sexualised content to pornography—young people frequently begin with exposure to non-pornographic sexualised content in movies, TV shows and music videos, which desensitises them and often leads to seeking explicit pornography. A review of the rating system for mainstream media is necessary to reduce exposure to sexualised content. Lastly, undermining consent and respect education—pornography portrays relationships devoid of mutual respect, reinforcing gender stereotypes and normalising aggression, which contradicts educational efforts on consent and healthy relationships.

DEIRDRE LITTLE: As Catholic women, we regard all forms of pornography as harmful and that so-called standard nonviolent pornography is not harmless. This accords with the deep tradition and teaching of the Catholic Church. Children are immersed in increasingly sexually explicit media. This may contribute to normalising of pornography in Australian society. Pornography itself is a major global business—available, accessible, anonymous, affordable and poorly regulated. As we evidenced in our submission, early exposure to pornography predisposes to frequent pornography use in adults. There's a trail here, which we also will be outlining at this moment. Frequent pornography use in adults then predisposes to normalisation of pornography use. Progressive normalisation of pornography use in adults leads to progressive normalisation of violent sexual practices in Australia.

Children are more likely to experience a broken home and parental disharmony in a home where there is repeated adult exposure to even non-violent standard pornography. It is associated with reduced valuation of marriage, regarding extramarital affairs as normal, associated with a mounting use to addiction, associated with escalation to more deviant pornography, the trivialisation of rape and behavioural aggression. Sixty-two per cent of marital lawyers report internet pornography plays a role in divorce. With the increasing acceptance and use of pornography, society and culture become more hypersexualised—hence, the developing phenomenon of sexting. The burgeoning social shift, and the addiction it facilitates, can increase the demand for the sex trafficking of women and children, and other forms of exploitation. Research over recent decades since the advent of the internet has consistently shown that pornography usage is associated with individual dysfunction, sexual deviancy, and behavioural aggression and violence.

The Catholic Church specifically is concerned, as well, about other spiritual effects of harms on children from pornography. Sex can be begun to be viewed as a commodity that can be bought. The demeaning nature of pornography is not only portrayed to children as something which could be considered as gradually normalising acceptance, but also is gravely injurious to those who are portrayed in the filming and depiction of these events. The Catholic Church and Catholic Women's League recommend that civil authorities should prevent the production and distribution of pornographic material. Our recommendations are that the State would assist with the education of parents in monitoring the home environment regarding screens and books, so that computers are in a family space, no cell phones are in the bedroom, there are family charge stations and parents are familiarised with the use of filters.

Some parents are not as IT-savvy as their kids. Parents need to be familiarised and helped with the use of filters and blocks, especially for older children. They need to be facilitated to discuss with their children in advance to tell a parent if something they have viewed has upset them. We believe that tech platforms should be answerable in their role in exposing and cleaning up the internet from the harms this pornography is causing, including internet grooming of children and all the resultant effects.

The CHAIR: Thank you for your submissions and your statements. I wanted to ask a general question, to begin with, of all of you. I think consistent across the three submissions and statements is an idea of restriction or regulation of pornography online. We've had other submissions, and I guess kind of life experience, which says that that's an incredibly difficult thing to do, including because we can't keep up with the ways to get around regulation. So I wondered, given that seems to be something you're all advocating for, perhaps in different parts, if you could explain a bit more how you would imagine that practically working? We might start with Dr Little, if you had a response.

DEIRDRE LITTLE: I know that there has been discussion about limiting access, but we would maintain that the technological platforms bear a lot of responsibility, accountability and answerability for this. We would be looking to have the tech platforms accountable to what they display on their platforms.

The CHAIR: Are you talking just in social media or are we talking Google searches, games?

DEIRDRE LITTLE: I was speaking, particularly, of the internet. As pertaining to our submission, I was referring to the internet.

The CHAIR: So search engines are responsible for that?

DEIRDRE LITTLE: I think there should be some accountability within the search engines of platforms and those tech companies that are deriving profit from that, yes.

JULIE KARAKI: I agree as well. Some of the recommendations we had listed was to hold some of the content distributors legally accountable. Right now, it's very easily accessible and it's quite anonymous. From the focus groups that we ran, many children just mentioned it was too easy to get around because the age was a simple yes or no, so they could just click on yes, that they were over 18. So maybe looking at banning AI-generated deepfake pornography, something that maybe our Government could hold to account these people that are doing AI. Also increased platform responsibility, so maybe putting the onus back on the producers of it or making it so easily accessible, whether that be through forms of social media or other aspects. I think instead of looking at what can we do to stop the child from accessing it, well what can we do before it even gets to the hands of the children?

The CHAIR: With that, at the end of last year there has been an amendment to the Criminal Code about deepfakes and making that explicitly illegal and distribution of them. I guess I'm just trying to be very practical about what we take out of this is the interjurisdictional issues, the not all porn is distributed by big companies with production units that you can find. I'm just trying to get to the practicalities of it. I understand the principles of what you're saying. I'm just trying to imagine that looks like for regulators or policymakers. Dr Ballantine-Jones, do you have a response?

MARSHALL BALLANTINE-JONES: The question being some suggestions about how to reduce access and restrictions?

The CHAIR: I think in one of the submissions you're associated with, maybe the one for DigiHelp, that you're supportive of digital restrictions on access. I wonder if you could speak to that?

MARSHALL BALLANTINE-JONES: That's certainly one of the strategies that you would need if you were going to get some effective restrictions. I don't think a one-size-fits-all solution is going to work. In terms of access to the actual content themselves, how they're getting it? They're getting it from, generally, the internet. What does that mean? Are they going to websites? Are their devices allowing easy access there? It raises questions of whether or not there are some device-specific blockers that can be put on. Who's going to control them? Is it parents, is it schools? Who owns the devices? There's certainly some areas which we'd want to look at in terms of immediate limitation to the potential of seeing pornography through a device that's possessed by the child. But there's some other questions which we could ask around this, and that is to what extent have we informed or educated the parents about the risks to start with, and what advice and training can we provide for parents and carers to be more proactive at home about their kids' use of technology? When, where, how often, the frequency and the need.

In terms of schools, whether the access is through school-provided device or it's a bring-from-home device. What are the policies around devices in general at the school will make a big difference because if it's bring your own device and kids can have phones, well, it doesn't matter if there's a good proxy server at the school network, kids can just hotspot and jump that and get onto whatever they want, anyway. We're now looking at school policies about general technologies and what's available, and when and how it can be used. We can look at other ideas, including at the ISP level. To what degree are they going to be held accountable for or required to limit the access to certain materials? That can be anywhere in the arena of age verification type of limitations, or it could be that they censor access to sites in an opt in, opt out way, which has been canvassed in other jurisdictions around the world.

It's broad, and my general response to the question of how do we actually practically reduce the frequency, I think we need a multi-pronged approach, and we've got to be real, knowing a lot of the providers of pornography are active in trying to reach people. So people have it against them if they're young and naive and don't understand the world that they're in. But, being kids, they will be motivated to see it themselves quite often. We're both trying to limit the accidental exposure, but also reduce the intentional accessing as well, and that takes different things.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I have a question that's a direct follow-up from your question. I'd be interested to know if there's any other Australian jurisdiction or overseas jurisdiction that's successfully restricted or reduced access to pornography in a way that's been effective that you could point us to?

MARSHALL BALLANTINE-JONES: I know that the UK have passed legislation some time ago—at the end of David Cameron's period—to require the ISPs to enable an opt in to see porn environment. I don't believe they actually enacted that, so we can't evaluate whether that happened. Then age verification is the next round, which has been passed as a requirement to access adult sites, not just there, but also in various jurisdictions.

I can't state the exact places off the top of my head in the US, in states, and I think it's early days to evaluate whether or not these are effective. I would suggest that they're not foolproof anyway. I think that kids will find ways around them, particularly if they've got VPNs. So we can't think that's a one-glove-fits-all solution; it's not. It's just, as a researcher in the harms of porn on young people, my concern would be doing our best to increase that first-time age of exposure because that makes a massive difference to the correlation of negative attitudes and behaviours that flow on in them in a few years time after that first exposure, so part of it is we're trying to hold back the dam and also make it harder for them to see it if they don't want to see it.

The CHAIR: You've spoken a bit about the responsibility and education of parents. We've heard today from the Department of Education about the new syllabus, which is to come in 2026 or 2027. I wondered what you see the role of that syllabus and that in-school education of children about pornography?

MARSHALL BALLANTINE-JONES: Not speaking exactly to the specifics of the new NESA syllabus, but, in general, education's massively important. It's one of the essential parts of how we can produce protective factors for the children because their advanced awareness not only of the risks of negative online content but also positive and healthy relationships and sexuality is vital. This has been shown through many international studies on sexual education, where kids have had a good, sound sexual education, it's increased their wellbeing factors and it's reduced their objectification desires of one another. It's also increased their self-esteem and it hasn't incited negative acting out. Good education is certainly one big part of the chessboard, but parents are also a big part of the chessboard.

The CHAIR: Can I ask just for a very brief response from Mrs Karaki and then Dr Little, and then I'll pass over?

JULIE KARAKI: Just considering that most of the youth that were exposed to it their first time, it was accidental, and the presenters before us mentioned that sometimes they didn't know what they were looking at. I guess that fear of not knowing what you're viewing may lead you to not want to discuss it with an adult. Even if they do, sometimes parents don't know how to react to that, so education on both parts. It's a little bit tricky because, as the studies have shown, some children are exposed to it at eight, some at 15. If you bring that conversation into a classroom in year 3, that could be very scary and daunting and may even lead to them going and trying to explore.

In saying that, however, if a child is aware of the dangers of pornography, or at least aware of what it is through sound education, through the schooling system, at least they're a little bit more aware of it. Looking at some of the focus groups, things like sexting, if a child's aware of what it is before it happens to them, they're a lot more likely to speak to someone that's maybe more aware or in a position to support, whereas if they're not, they would just keep that to themselves. So, definitely, whether it be parental understanding and education, not so much that their child is seeking it but they may be exposed to it and, if they are, how can we try our best to restrict it? Many of the children that were spoken to in the focus group spoke about it coming through games. It's just a very innocent game and a pop-up ad pops up. Sometimes they'll shut that down, but if they're alone in their room, curiosity might lead them to look into it a little bit further—so definitely in terms of education is important.

The CHAIR: Dr Little, do you have any response?

DEIRDRE LITTLE: Thank you, just a couple of follow-on points of issues there. The first thing is that, because there seems to be an assumption that standard non-violent pornography is harmless, we have to keep this in mind when we're talking about and acknowledging the fact that for most children either accidental or deliberate exposure is within the home. Especially, I suppose, for the accidental exposure, there is a lot of acceptance in the community that pornography can be harmless. It's actually something that an older sibling or a parent might even be viewing that the child will inadvertently then access. I'm wondering, and we're proposing, in fact, that most adults are not aware of the harms that can attend even so-called "standard non-violent pornography".

In terms of the effect—it has been published and researched, and we did reference this in our submission—of this standard non-violent pornography on family life, we are aware of the effects on marital breakdown, of the effects on disharmony in the home, on the effects that one partner, usually the woman, will feel demeaned by the husband's or the partner's preoccupation with internet pornography, and this causes a level of disruption and disharmony in the home. Further to that, when they are consenting, themselves, to watch this pornography, are the parents aware of the harms they could be inviting upon themselves, upon their relationship, upon their home and upon their children?

It becomes an issue very much of consent and what are the elements of a valid informed consent there. We already saw, for example, with cigarette smoking, how it went on for over a generation, two generations, before there was a warning, "Well, hang on. This could actually be injurious to your health." At the moment,

because there is this acceptance that standard non-violent pornography is harmless—that there's harmful pornography and there's good pornography—tends to normalise it, and we know that normalising pornography leads to an escalation in use, and that also leads to an escalation towards other deviancy and violent forms.

The CHAIR: Sorry, Dr Little, I might stop you there. I'm not in any way trying to—

DEIRDRE LITTLE: I'm sorry, I can't quite hear.

The CHAIR: I was saying I might just get you to stop there for that answer, not for any reason other than I'm aware that I've taken a lot of time for that. Perhaps you could pick up the threads of that through the answers given to my colleagues.

DEIRDRE LITTLE: Sure.

The CHAIR: My apologies.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Dr Ballantyne-Jones, if I could just quickly ask you—and I realise this is a piece of string argument, given all the work you've done on your PhD—and following on from Dr Little in terms of harms of pornography, we've heard evidence that often children will access pornography intentionally for pleasurable reasons. I understand that you've looked at the recent neuroscience research. I wonder if you could just outline briefly the effects on the brain of pleasurable access of pornography, whether that continues to be pleasurable, and then the impact on impulse control and therefore the social impact of use of pornography.

MARSHALL BALLANTINE-JONES: Yes, sure. There's an emerging large body of neurological research now that's been examining the impact of particularly pornography on development of the brain. When we talk about kids intentionally accessing porn for pleasure, 99 per cent of males who will do that will do it for the purpose of masturbation, and to a lesser extent females. But when it's used for arousal purposes, we know that the brain unleashes a vast volume of neurochemicals associated with that process and pleasure, one of which is dopamine, and dopamine has a very powerful effect on changing the neuroplasticity of the brain.

We know, because of a recent discovery of a protein called DeltaFosB, that when you repeat a pleasurable experience regularly, your brain will lay down new neural pathways to reinforce your interest in that activity that's generating the pleasure. And so, over time, if you keep repeating it, you become more preoccupied with that behaviour and you become more sensitised to that behaviour. Your cues that trigger interest in that become faster and require less to be triggered. That's the first arena of neuroscience that we know you become hypersensitised to the stimulus from the sexual arousal.

Secondly, you also over time become desensitised. What happens is when your brain is saturated in high volumes of what we call supernormal stimuli, which is the type of dopamine that's produced in sexual arousal to pornography—high volumes of immediate access without any effort to get there—the brain sort of switches off from the volume of dopamine. The receptors shut down, which means while they're getting more sensitised, they're getting desensitised. To generate the same pleasure they had before they have to change or alter the content that they're looking at. This actually drives interest into novelty. Novelty is the concept of heightening titillation and the sensation of arousal. This invariably drives them into content which is morphing into more confronting.

We also know that the brain in other areas changes the prefrontal cortex, which is the mechanism of executive control and delayed gratification. In the short term it's inhibited when you have spikes of dopamine. The capacity to actually think clearly and regulate self-control when you are under arousal is reduced, which means if kids have regular access to triggers then it diminishes their capacity to concentrate and focus on other things. But over time the brain changes and what happens is that it diminishes in grey and white brain matter, and the neural connectors to the limbic system—which is the emotional system and impulse system—get reduced as well, so that basically they suffer what they call a condition of hypofrontality or diminished prefrontal cortex functionality. It just means that they can't regulate as much self-control, not only over the issue that they're getting stimulation from, but that actually widens out to other arenas in their life as well.

We know in the broader behavioural addiction sciences, which essentially focus on gaming, gambling, pornography and social media, that people who immerse themselves in regular compulsive behaviours in that degree lose self-control across the board. That diminishes academic outcomes, capacities to concentrate, capacities to even enjoy other things. We see that under MRI scans, the types of changes to the brains. Many neuroscientists have come to the conclusion that porn addicts, like social media and gaming addicts, have brains that, over time, start to resemble substance abuse disorders as well, like alcoholics and heroin addicts and so forth. The brain changes are now demonstrably serious, and they've got the concerns of many researchers around the world.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: And what impact would that have on the ability of people with that addiction to recognise the importance of consent in personal relationships?

MARSHALL BALLANTINE-JONES: The more compulsive you are, your capacity to think rationally about wider relational issues is diminished, partly because we just know that the more that you are embracing a certain topic content, the more you're thinking, your attitudes and your behaviours align with that. We know that the more people look at porn, the more sexual risk-taking they become, the more sexually insecure they become, and this flows on to problems with their relationships. They also start to adapt the interests and the themes and the ideas and the content that they consume. They start to see it as normal and expected, and they start to think that other people will think the same way as them. That means that their lines for respect of other people's boundaries gets blurred.

Also, as I said before, when you're under a dopaminergic high your capacity to think then and there about how to act is immediately limited. We know that with alcohol, when you're under alcohol consumption states, you don't think and act clearly, which is why, when it comes to consent, someone can't give consent while they're under the influence. When you're under a dopaminergic high, you also can't think straight. In those circumstances, people don't act as rationally, and that limits their ability to act consensually and respectfully in their relations.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Not all 13-year-olds who access pornography will become addicts, will they?

MARSHALL BALLANTINE-JONES: "Addiction" is a clinical term. We've got to be very careful when we're talking about porn addiction. In America under the DSM-5, they don't even use that term. It's under the World Health Organization ICD-11, where we see the definition of addiction relating to sexual compulsive behaviours, of which pornography is a subset. When we talk addiction, we're talking clinical. It's a split view there. I like to use the term "compulsive", which you can measure on a scale. We know that 13-year-olds who have a high volume of consumption and started earlier will be higher on that compulsive scale than others who haven't. If you want to talk about addiction in that broader sense of compulsivity and capacity and limited ability to reduce the behaviour when you want to, that certainly is present in young adolescents who have been consuming this frequently.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: What would be the best intervention to limit, manage or moderate that compulsion?

MARSHALL BALLANTINE-JONES: If someone has a compulsive behaviour in pornography, they need to have immediate withdrawal from access to it to allow their brain and their mind to have a break from the triggers. They also need to go through some processes of replacing their avenue of pleasure into other things. What happens when you get compulsive is that you get triggered by all sorts of moods and emotions, and you want to default to the thing that gives you relief. Computer gaming is the same. Social media is the same. With all neurological-replacement behavioural change, you need to divert it with new activities and interests to create new dopamine-generated pathways that are healthier and more balanced. You need support, education and awareness, and you need to also have a conviction. If they don't have a conviction that this is unhealthy and they need something different, it's very difficult to get them to change.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: As a practical thing, is this an area that schools intervene with education? Is this parents? Is this therapeutic? Is this law? Is this shutting down access through regulation? What are the practical measures that we can engage with?

MARSHALL BALLANTINE-JONES: For people who have problematic behaviours?

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Ideally to stop those problematic behaviours occurring in the first place.

MARSHALL BALLANTINE-JONES: You stop the problematic behaviours occurring by reducing or limiting the option of being able to engage with pornography. It's simple as that.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Would delayed age of access to pornography have an impact?

MARSHALL BALLANTINE-JONES: Yes, it does. You are less compulsive as an 18-year-old if you had later access to pornography than early access.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: If we could delay age of first access to pornography, that would have an impact?

MARSHALL BALLANTINE-JONES: Age of access and also frequency of engagement in those earlier years makes a big difference. We need to do more research here to understand just what the impact of these dopaminergic experiences are on early adolescence. All the evidence is pointing both to social media and gaming and other areas as well as pornography. That is such a critical age.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Mrs Karaki and Dr Little, you both mentioned young people being exposed to pornography accidentally through pop-ups in games and other activities they may be using on the internet. Do you have any recommendations as to how we can stop those pop-ups occurring?

JULIE KARAKI: One of the issues is a lot of these games are free. If you wanted to remove ads, you can purchase the game, but some of these games can't be purchased. For many families, depending on their demographics or their ability to purchase games for their children, it's a fun game, it comes up as an ad, they download it, but they don't have an option to purchase the game. It's just free, and these ads pop up. If we could have some regulations in Australia where any game could be downloaded, at least have that option, if parents wanted to remove the risk of a pop-up ad coming up. Also, making games, if they are targeted at a certain age group, restricting the ads that are allowed to be on these particular games. At the moment, I'm not sure if there are regulations around that. By the amount of people that are exposed to it in that way, it appears not, or maybe they're not strongly enforced. That would probably be one of the recommendations.

DEIRDRE LITTLE: I would add to that that perhaps there could be some technological monitoring of algorithms that permit those pop-ups to appear randomly. When they're unsought, that is of concern. Catholic mothers and grandmothers, we're strong believers in not necessarily having computers tucked away in bedrooms. In the design of the family layout of the lounge room, there could be provision made for the computer to be in a family space, as opposed to in the bedroom. Even if the technological platforms are not monitoring the pop-ups and the algorithms are not in place yet, because we've only had internet for less than a 40-year customary description of a generation, that could be monitored by the family in the family environment. The children would be aware of that. Parents who see things popping up can report them and know the avenues to report such things, which comes back to the parental education we advocate strongly that the State provide parents.

JULIE KARAKI: It was a brilliant idea, "Report this ad". I don't know if that's available at the moment in terms of gaming. Sometimes online you can report an ad and say why you don't wish to see it, but in the gaming industry I don't think that's available. Even if that were available and our children were educated about, "You might see something that you don't really feel comfortable with. If you do, you can report it," and if there was a system to regulate that or to screen, that could be something that could help.

The CHAIR: Dr Little, you talk about the home environment. It's a tricky one when you're a policymaker. We don't reach our hands very far into a home environment. You talk about educating parents. Where do you imagine that that might take place?

DEIRDRE LITTLE: There are many avenues for that from experience. In some ways, and this might sound unusual, it starts with parenting classes that a lot of parents, especially first-time parents, will attend. There are even parenting classes conducted in the antenatal context. There are very many parenting opportunities that come through P&F groups, Parents and Friends, and from schools; they'll be notified of parenting courses. Burnside run them. Lots of organisations run them. There could be a staple feature on the agenda for all parenting courses to prepare and equip parents to deal with the possible problem that might develop and its ramifications. That's something we haven't looked at yet in terms of what the Government can do.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: In terms of education taking place in schools—perhaps this is a question for Mrs Karaki and Dr Little—what would you see as being advantageous or ways to build relationships between schools and parents so that everybody's working together on the same issue? Do you think those communications work well between schools and parents, or are there particular strategies that you could recommend?

DEIRDRE LITTLE: Catholic Women's League would advocate for the involvement and the presence of parents at any such discussions with children. The children see it as something that parents are involved in, the language is the same, it's a common language, and the children perceive that everyone agrees with this and that they are not unusual if they report it or want to talk about it. Certainly I would involve parents in those discussions so that parents know what's being taught and what the language is.

JULIE KARAKI: I think just realistically, it's a very difficult thing to touch on. Which parents are we talking about? Which community? Who is exposed to it? What are the parents' opinions of it? I definitely think with running school seminars about the awareness. A lot of parents may just see it as, "It's just what teenagers do." Maybe they don't know the ramifications, as Dr Jones was mentioning a bit earlier. Having that parental education and awareness run through schools—through parent-led education, the P&F, P&C or directly from the school—if this was something that we rolled out and said, "If all schools can at least notify parents of the risks," the parents are well informed, and through PDH, subjects at school where children can be exposed to the harms of it.

I will just quickly go back to the focus group. One particular teacher mentioned that over three years 50 students had admitted to addiction. That's because they had a good relationship with this teacher. That doesn't

happen across the board. It's a very touchy subject, I do understand that, but I think starting somewhere, and to begin with education, would be beneficial.

The CHAIR: Thank you all very much for your submissions and for taking the time to appear today. If you've taken anything on notice, or there are supplementary questions, the secretariat will be in touch with you in the coming days.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Ms ALICE DOLIN, Researcher, National Youth Officer, National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, affirmed and examined

Ms PARIS McMAHON, National Youth Officer, National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, affirmed and examined

Ms RENATA FIELD, Policy Manager, Our Watch, affirmed and examined

Dr EMMA PARTRIDGE, Special Adviser, Our Watch, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: To begin, would anyone like to give an opening statement?

ALICE DOLIN: My name is Alice Dolin and this is my colleague Paris McMahon. We are both members of NAPCAN's youth advisory council, and so we speak to you today on the topic of pornography as young people who have grown up alongside a rapidly changing and often unregulated internet landscape as a core part of our lives. NAPCAN is a leading organisation in the prevention of child maltreatment and the delivery of respectful relationships education. NAPCAN believes that young people should be at the table with decision-makers and given a meaningful say in the decisions that affect us. So we are grateful to the Committee for this opportunity and to NAPCAN for the support. The perspectives and insights we share today are a collection of the diverse opinions of the young people from our youth council, the experiences of NAPCAN's trainers delivering respectful relationships education, and the current research out there on pornography. The main arguments we present to you in our submission are that young people are accessing pornography early, frequently and easily. Young people want good pornography education, because they believe that pornography is harmful, and they feel shame and fear of repercussions.

PARIS McMAHON: While stronger policies are needed to limit access to harmful pornography, our key message today is that education is essential. Young people deserve comprehensive, evidence-based education on relationships, intimacy and consent, with a direct focus on pornography. We believe the best outcomes will be achieved by giving young people critical analysis skills and an informed choice over what role pornography will play in their lives. NAPCAN does not have a dedicated policy team. Alice and I wrote this submission ourselves, in consultation with other young people because we are passionate about this issue. I am a full-time student with a completely different job that I work four days a week, and this submission was pieced together over many lunch breaks and after work. We're here because we're proud of this submission and we feel really strongly about this issue. We're looking forward to the discussion today. Thank you for having us.

EMMA PARTRIDGE: I begin by acknowledging the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and paying my respects to Elders past and present. Our Watch is the national leader in the primary prevention of violence against women. Our submission focuses on the impacts of pornography on young people, and the opportunities to support young people to develop respectful relationships, as part of our national violence prevention effort. Our work includes a national role in primary prevention in the education system through Respectful Relationships Education. This helps students learn how to build healthy, equal and respectful relationships. Our work also includes The Line, an always-on campaign online and on social media that engages young people aged 14 to 20 on topics like sex, dating, consent and healthy relationships. The Line supports young people to build the skills they need to think critically about pornography, its portrayal of gender roles and relationships, and its impact on their lives.

Our Watch has made contributions to the body of evidence on pornography, including developing background papers, collecting online survey data and evaluating primary prevention in schools and online settings. Not all pornography is problematic, and not all pornography use is harmful. However, we do know that the representations in some pornography can have harmful effects. Some pornography includes depictions of violence against women and stereotypical representations of women as submissive and men as dominant or aggressive. We also know from the Man Box research that young men with the highest levels of endorsement of those Man Box rules about rigid ideas of masculinity are more likely to use violent pornography and have more violence-supportive attitudes, as well as more likely to have perpetrated violence themselves.

Pornography plays a role in shaping expectations and understandings about gender roles, sex, power and consent—particularly for young people who are still forming their ideas and attitudes about these issues and who are often accessing pornography years before they begin sexual relationships. Our Watch is realistic in our assessment that young people, and people generally, will continue to view pornography, and it will be one of the sources young people go to for information about sex, sexuality and relationships. Our focus is on equipping young people with the tools they need to help them critically engage with the messages they encounter in pornography. This Committee has an opportunity to make recommendations that empower young people to

navigate the digital world with critical thinking, respect, empathy and resilience. This can support the development of healthy relationships and is an important part of the overall goal of preventing violence against women.

Our key recommendation is that pornography and its impacts should be part of a much more comprehensive approach to respectful relationships education and comprehensive sexuality education in a structured and age-appropriate way that meets the needs of young people. A specific recommendation to further resource teachers to do this work more effectively would support the New South Wales Government's Pathways to Prevention strategy which already commits to RRE in schools. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

The CHAIR: One of the things we've heard a lot about, and is present in a lot of the submissions, is about education. You have mentioned that in your opening statements as well. I'm interested, though, in NAPCAN's submission, which talks about the ways that young people prefer to receive their information and how they learn, and also about current approaches which can emphasise illegality of sharing information and the trouble that you might get into if you're found out. I wondered if you could speak a bit more about what the experience and preferences of young people are with regards to how they're educated in this space.

ALICE DOLIN: We can see that, from what we've heard from young people on our youth council, from young people undertaking that education, is that they really want to have these open, honest and detailed conversations about pornography. As we know from the eSafety survey that many submissions quoted, young people already feel high levels of shame and embarrassment about their consumption of pornography. They already feel afraid that they're going to be getting into trouble if they do discuss it. They think that they might be breaking the law. They just don't have any clear information. This just creates a culture of shame and fear that prevents young people from accessing help. So, as a result, they don't feel comfortable talking with parents, don't feel comfortable talking with teachers, and also they don't believe their teachers feel comfortable either. When we are delivering this education we find that young people actually quite respond really well once they realise that we are having these open, frank and honest conversations.

Some of the key principles behind NAPCAN's delivery of pornography education is that the conversation will be facilitated by the adult but the actual content that comes up will be led by the young people. The facilitator, for example, will ask, "What sort of things have you heard about pornography?" and then base the conversation off what the young people already know. Because we can assume young people are chatting to each other in the playground about this anyway. We take an approach that, for the young people, there's no right or wrong answer, that they will lead the discussion, and we unpack the ideas with adult guidance. We unpack them to discuss themes of harm and consent. We find that, once young people see this, they actually really open up to having this conversation.

The CHAIR: Thank you. If I could ask Our Watch, I was interested—because we're trying to gather as much evidence as is out there—you did mention and I noted that you have undertaken evaluation of primary prevention strategies in schools and online. I wondered if you could tell us more about the evaluations and what you found that works better or worse. That would be very helpful.

RENATA FIELD: Absolutely, and we can certainly provide on notice some further details about the pilots that we've conducted. There was a pilot conducted in 2017. Some of the findings around that demonstrated that people's understandings around attitudes were significantly improved due to the work that was done. The research certainly supports a whole-of-school approach. So that's not just working in a classroom, it's not just one off-programs, but ensuring that it's supported by a whole-of-school approach that includes teachers, it includes school staff, admin staff, and it includes parents and family members as well, so that the messages that are shared with young people and students are supported by families once they get into the home environment. That approach was supported by our research, but it's also very well supported by other international research.

EMMA PARTRIDGE: If I could just add, one of the other things the evaluation found is that teachers were reporting improvements in their relationships with students through delivering this material. That goes to some of the issues Ms Dolin is talking about, that relationships are key between young people and adults. Young people need those trusted adults who they feel are not embarrassed or uncomfortable talking about these topics, that they can really open up, that the kids can share what they've seen. Our evaluation did point to that as a benefit of this approach too, that it improves the rapport between students and adults in talking about these topics.

The CHAIR: I want to just follow up on that. Your recommendations do talk about the respectful relationships education, and we heard this morning about and we're going to get further information about the incoming curriculum. Are your recommendations based on what's there now or based on that incoming curriculum? Because if it's the one that's incoming and there's potential to improve, that's one thing. If it's what's there already, that's another. What point in time are we talking about with your recommendations for that curriculum?

RENATA FIELD: Whilst I would say it would work for both, there's still substantial opportunities to improve the new curriculum that's coming in. My understanding is that, compared to the national curriculum, gender and sexuality are mentioned much less frequently and there's much less emphasis on power and control, the gendered nature of violence, those kind of topics. So there's certainly some opportunities to improve it. We did quite a bit of work supporting New South Wales in the development of the primary prevention strategy. There is an action within that to review the curriculum, but we also certainly want to emphasise that the work that needs to be done is beyond the curriculum. Whilst the curriculum is important, it's not the only piece of work. The whole-of-school approach looks beyond the PDHPE curriculum and at other opportunities to support children and families to understand respectful relationships education throughout their whole schooling journey.

The CHAIR: I just want to ask, and it's a question that will cross over with NAPCAN as well—I'm pretty sure you mentioned that not all pornography is necessarily bad, but you have a particular focus on, I guess, misogynistic porn or porn that's harmful to women. That's key to my concerns. I wondered if you could talk a bit more about that and the research that supports that, I guess, would be helpful, and why that's of a particular concern.

EMMA PARTRIDGE: Yes, we do have a focus on that. In some ways it's like any form of media that portrays misogynistic representations of relationships between men and women, non-consensual relationships that normalise violence. Now, that can be in a mainstream movie, and it can also be in pornography. That's our focus, because we know that it has an impact on young people's developing ideas about sex and gender and relationships, but particularly around gendered power relationships. Particularly for young men around their development of ideas about what it means to be a man, what masculinity is and how you relate to women, it can be not the most healthiest ways when they're getting those ideas from pornography because so much of it is containing those representations—not all of it, and that's why we say it's not all harmful.

LGBTQ young people find particular benefits, some of them, in accessing porn that they can see themselves in, so we wouldn't say all porn, but you're absolutely correct that that's our reason for focusing on pornography, because of those misogynistic representations that are fairly common in it. Young people will continue to see those, as they see them in the broader world around them. So Our Watch is focused on giving young people the tools to critically engage with those messages, whether they're seeing them in pornography or in a movie or in the attitudes of their friends. That's why we work across the whole society to address those misogynistic ideas and representations.

The CHAIR: If you have any academic papers or research, particularly with regard to that area, if you could provide them on notice, that would be appreciated. I wanted to ask NAPCAN, in your submission you talk about the importance of young people being able to access pornography to be able to learn things, explore their sexuality and understand various topics. Why is pornography an appropriate way to do it, and are there other ways? Can you talk a bit about that? Because we've heard a lot about why young people shouldn't look at pornography.

ALICE DOLIN: Overall we don't actually think that pornography is the best way for young people to learn about this. We think that sexual health and relationship education is where to go. However, it's just acknowledging that because young people are seeing it and, effectively, they're inevitably going to see it, it's worth acknowledging that some of the reasons behind it and then some of the outcomes can be beneficial. I think, as Our Watch just mentioned, particularly LGBTQ people can get particular benefits out of it, and other certain marginalised groups. It can be helpful for young people in exploring their sexuality and forming their identity because it does still provide information. We just want to make sure that they're being provided with the same critical analysis skill to be able to sift apart what's harmful and what's not.

PARIS McMAHON: As we've discussed in our submission, we didn't discuss harmful pornography specifically but we mentioned that, in isolation, viewing pornography can be harmful without that adequate education. So having that education and the ability to analyse what consent means and what a respectful relationship should look like can also help a young person have those skills to understand what they're seeing and whether it's realistic or not.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I asked the same question of some of our earlier witnesses, but I'm interested in experiences from either other Australian jurisdictions or overseas in terms of the types of programs that you're recommending. Has it been done anywhere else and been shown to be effective?

EMMA PARTRIDGE: respectful relationships education is most wholly implemented in Victoria, and our evaluations and our evidence comes from the experience of schools rolling that program out in Victoria, which we can share or provide. That's probably the main evidence that we have on respectful relationships education.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Your written submission talks about The Line campaign as an online resource that you provide, and it mentions evidence-based content discussing pornography, consent and healthy relationships. Can you provide the Committee with some of that content? What does that educational content actually look like?

EMMA PARTRIDGE: The Line is freely accessible, and it includes fact sheets, resources, video clips, TikTok videos. Much of it is youth-produced. It's young people talking about what respect means to them or consent or tricky issues in relationships and how they navigate them. The strength of The Line is that it's very much co-designed with young people and produced with young people so that it meets their needs. It talks in the language that makes sense to them. Adults viewing it probably may not understand how powerful it is because it's produced by young people. I think that's probably the key strength of the content that's on The Line.

RENATA FIELD: I'd also add to that, whilst there's some content that's specifically about pornography, a lot of the content is about the broader analytical skills that people need to be able to support them if they were to view it to improve their understandings about gendered stereotypes, to improve their understandings of different ways of being in the world, depending on your gender, your background, all those types of things. I think that whilst there may not be everything around pornography, that it does give you the background skills to be able to be better equipped if you were to come across it, but we can absolutely send some specific examples.

Dr AMANDA COHN: All four of you have spoken to the value of equipping young people with the analytical tools to assess the information and pornography that they find online. How young do you think it's appropriate to start having that conversation with children?

ALICE DOLIN: I think there's a number of different ways to be having the conversation and to do it at developmentally appropriate stages, and NAPCAN's respectful relationships education and youth conversations follow a principle that agrees with same principles laid out by Maree Crabbe and her "It's time we talked" pornography education material, because that's one of the few pornography-specific programs available in Australia. The idea is that you start by introducing just ideas around consent, not in a sexual way, but just consent around letting other people borrow your pencils, things like that. Start with educating people around being able to name their body parts and things like that—and that can be done in the primary school years.

Then in the early high school years, you start to build up to discussing pornography in the wider context of just possible online harms, and then it's in the later years that you start to discuss the actual pornography as the main topic and delve into the consent and respectful relationships. That's the way we address it, because there is that balance between not wanting to inadvertently expose young people to extra information that they might not have yet discovered on their own for several years, whilst also providing the necessary information to the young people who are already viewing the pornography. It depends on exactly what information you're giving young people.

EMMA PARTRIDGE: Our answer is much the same, and that's the evidence that we've provided on respectful relationships. When we're working with the New South Wales Department of Education in building that into the curriculum, it's about starting in kindergarten with those very simple ideas about respect and consent, and then building up through to year 12, where obviously it becomes a lot more specifically focused on sexual relationships, sexual consent, and that would include pornography. The key point is that pornography is one topic in a whole broad range of other things that need to be talked about in context, otherwise it's not meaningful and useful to talk to young people just about that one topic. You need to have built a foundation for that understanding and a foundation for that relationship with the education system that is trusting, and that has those key concepts in place before you introduce that topic when it's appropriate.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: My question really follows directly on from that. We've heard evidence today that median age of exposure is about 13, but certainly there are enough children aged eight and nine who've had a serious exposure to pornography and are manifesting problematic behaviours because of that that there's intervention required. If we've got those programs starting in kindergarten—and I understand your discussion about development of critical analytical skills. What's your experience of the age at which those critical analytical skills might be able to be developed by children? I guess to anybody or to everybody, please.

EMMA PARTRIDGE: I think children are always developing critical analytical skills when they see pictures, when they read stories. Parents and teachers are always working with them to help them understand what it is that they're seeing, what the meaning of it is. Do they interpret it differently to the person next to them? I think that's a standard educational tool that you use with young children to help them interpret and understand the world around them and develop their own response to that. It's not something that suddenly you introduce when you're talking about pornography. I think it's from the beginning.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: In this specific context, for children to have sufficiently developed critically analytical skills to be able to understand what they were seeing in pornography and question the respect, question the lack of consent, question the violence, question the male pleasure dominance that is typical of pornography—and bearing in mind the programs that you're both involved with—is this going to be effective for eight-year-olds? Are we looking more at 13-year-olds being able to critically evaluate what they're seeing? Do you have any comment on that?

RENATA FIELD: I would just reinforce the previous comments of starting early and reinforcing those messages throughout the years, and then making sure that they're also reinforced by parents so that we're teaching educators, we're also teaching parents to share those key messages and skills. In the teaching that happens in Victoria, they really support a peer approach where it's not just the content that you're teaching; it's the way that you're teaching it. It's about critical analysis skills and to be able to develop those, and I think you can do that even in preschool. You can do it from a very early age to develop those type of skills.

I'd also reinforce Emma's point around the evaluation that we did that, in teaching this type of content and ways of respecting each other and improving relationships, you're, in essence, improving the relationship between teachers and children, between parents and children, so that there's more respect and there's more ability to have stronger conversations. Most young people in the surveys that we did said that they didn't feel comfortable broaching these topics with their parents because they felt embarrassed. If you have a good relationship, then you build that strength and trust so that you're more likely to be able to have challenging conversations.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: With respect to the Victorian evaluation, did you evaluate whether there was less use of pornography, whether there was less acting out, whether there was less absence of consent in sexual relationships, whether there was less violence against women?

EMMA PARTRIDGE: No.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: What was evaluated, then?

EMMA PARTRIDGE: It's an evaluation of the impact of the teaching and learning that was done in that program: Were the children learning the things that that were intended to be taught in that program? Were relationships improving? Did their understanding of the key topics improve over time? It was evaluating the delivery and the impact of that program on young people's understanding, and on their relationship with teachers, and also on teachers' confidence in delivering that material. It wasn't looking at those other issues, and I'm not 100 per cent sure how you would even be able to do that from a research perspective.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: I think respect education is vitally important. I suppose the question that I'm struggling with is, given the power of the visual and given the impact of pornography on non-consensual sexual models, what sort of education do we need to be able to successfully challenge that in young people's thinking about sexual relationships?

EMMA PARTRIDGE: That's why the education in respectful relationships education that we propose is very much focused on those questions of power and consent and respect and empathy for other people, so where you see violations of those things, you can identify them and you can think critically about this not being the kind of material that you want to access or that you want to share, because it does violate those key principles that you've been helped to understand.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Unless, as the neuroscience teaches us, the prefrontal cortex has been so compromised by exposure to pornography that you can't think clearly about those issues. It's something we need to struggle with, isn't it?

The CHAIR: For NAPCAN, you talk about potential difficulties. We've had some suggestions about age restrictions or access restrictions. In your submission you talk about the problems with that. Why can't we just say "under-18s, no access"?

ALICE DOLIN: Yes, that would be the ideal situation, if we could do it that way and ensure it worked perfectly. But there are a number of issues with this sort of mandatory age verification. There are five main ways that mandatory age verification has been proposed to be carried out. The first one, which is already in place, is just self-declaration, where you enter a pornography website and you tick a box to say, "Yes, I'm over 18." That's already widely in place across many pornography websites and it does nothing to prevent young people from accessing it. All the other proposed methods are much more invasive. They require providing some sort of ID to verify your age directly either to the pornography site or to a third-party verification service, cross-checking the user's identity in another database—checking that the person is already on the electoral roll, for example; that would prove that they're over 18—and things like that. The last and most invasive proposed method is biometric testing, where some sort of computer program tries to estimate your age based off the photo.

All these have problems with the data being misused from either the pornography company itself—it's quite a dangerous thing to have your own ID tied to your pornography viewing habits. There's a great risk of data misuse by the pornography companies, who will sell that on to advertisers, and also the potential risk of data breaches and data leaks. In our submission we referred to the case of Ashley Madison, which was an online dating service specifically designed for people to have affairs. That had a big data breach in 2015. Tens of millions of accounts got leaked. That led to all sorts of issues around relationship breakdown and even several suicides as a result. We see that having sensitive identity information tied to pornography is a very dangerous invasion of privacy, which we don't think is just. Additionally, we just don't think it will be effective. What's to stop a young person using a different device, using someone else's account or these sorts of issues? While it's a nice idea and it has large support from the Australian public, we don't recommend it and nor does eSafety.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Any law that an Australian jurisdiction puts in place on either internet service providers or pornography websites is going to require that website or that internet service provider to recognise that you're accessing that site from Australia. I know that some people use VPNs to get around that. How easy is it for young people to use the internet through a VPN?

PARIS McMAHON: Very easy. Young people have grown up in an environment that is surrounded by technology. They know how to use this stuff. They know how to use it maybe to access certain websites at school that they wouldn't be able to, so they can definitely do that with pornography. We go back to our point that you can't easily ban this, but you can educate on what they are seeing, what role that plays in their lives and what that means.

The CHAIR: Thank you all so much for your appearance today, your submissions and for the other information we've asked on notice. We very much appreciate it.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)

Ms MELINDA TANKARD REIST, Movement Director, Collective Shout, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

Ms LAUREN STRACEY, CEO, Youth Action, affirmed and examined

Miss VERONICA GORDON, Youth Participation and Sector Development, Youth Action, affirmed and examined

Ms MELISSA ABU-GAZALEH, Managing Director, Top Blokes, affirmed and examined

Mr DANIEL ALLARS, NSW State Manager, Top Blokes, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome to our hearing this afternoon. I note that the Committee has formed a subcommittee for the afternoon session so that if the Hon. Anthony D'Adam needs to go, we will still have quorum. Thank you so much for joining us. Can I ask if any of you have opening statements?

MELINDA TANKARD REIST: I do. The pornography industry is significantly responsible for the harmful sexual socialisation of a generation of young people. The world's largest department of education has contributed to rising rates of violence against women, harmful sexual behaviours and peer-on-peer sexual abuse at levels never before seen. A generation of boys are being exposed to rape porn, sadism, torture, and incest porn at the click of a button. The French equality watchdog has found 90 per cent of porn features violence against women, with much of it amounting to torture.

Thirty to 60 per cent of all incidents of childhood sexual abuse are carried out by other children and young people. Data from the landmark Australian Child Maltreatment Study states child sexual abuse by known adolescents is by far the single most common category of offending. Professor Michael Salter, in his Childlight submission, says the widespread availability of pornography appears to be driving the increased perpetration of sexual violence by children, particularly boys. Girls report routine sexual harassment and abuse by male students—touching, rape threats, sexual bullying, body shaming, sexual moaning, sexual gestures and boys trying to choke them. Boys commonly share porn at school, airdropping it to kids on the bus, sending girls live masturbation videos.

As documented in our *Sexual Harassment of Teachers* report, released late last year by Collective Shout and author and parenting expert Maggie Dent, 79.9 per cent of teachers were seeing more sexualised behaviours in school from students as young as year 12, including children simulating sex acts on other children. Many teachers identified pornography exposure as a significant driver of the rise in harmful sexual behaviours in schools. One said, "I believe there is an increasing disconnect between women as human beings and women as objects," and I attribute this corrosion of respectful and boundary-driven relationships to unfettered access to pornography. We urge you to use every lever at your disposal to ameliorate these harms.

LAUREN STRACEY: Thank you for inviting us to speak today on Gadigal land. I pay my respects to Elders past and present. My name is Lauren Stracey, and I'm the CEO of Youth Action. I'm here today with my colleague Veronica Gordon. Youth Action welcomes the opportunity to appear before the Standing Committee on Social Issues inquiry into the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional and physical health. We're the peak body that represents young people and the services that support them in New South Wales. It's important to note that the extent of pornography's influence on young people's beliefs and understanding of relationships and sexuality really requires further investigation. Noting that young people are not a homogenous group, and their own unique circumstances and identities determine how they consume and interpret information, it's important that all future decisions relating to pornography in young people are made collectively with them and, where possible, educational and support programs are youth led.

We therefore make the following recommendations for your consideration: that the New South Wales Government undertake a review of the existing programs in New South Wales that address pornography use by young people and the way that it influences their approaches to respectful relationships; that the NSW Education Standards Authority review the current syllabus in New South Wales as it relates to consent and respectful relationships education to include content about pornography; that the New South Wales Government strengthen and expand State funding for accessible resources for parents; and that provisions are made to ensure that young people are given sufficient opportunity to advise Government on issues relating to them, that their voices are heard by decision-makers, and that their experiences are considered essential in the decision-making process.

In consultation with young people, we've heard that pornography and other highly sexualised images are being shared via messages from peers and occasionally from people that they don't know on media platforms such as Snapchat. They also told us that they're viewing pornography inadvertently through pop-ups and advertisements in video games and social media sites. In our consultation with the youth sector, representatives emphasised that

pornography is really easily accessed. It's often being viewed prior to a young person's first sexual experience and is unrealistically and at times negatively colouring young people's perceptions of what healthy relationships look like. To quote some of our members from our consultation:

> Easy access to pornography has shifted perceptions of privacy and normalised the idea of monetising one's body among young people.
>
> The portrayal of sex and relationships in pornography can distort young people's understanding of healthy interactions, leading to misguided beliefs about consent and sexual norms.

Thank you again so much for having us here today.

MELISSA ABU-GAZALEH: Good afternoon. My name is Melissa Abu-Gazaleh, and I'm the founder and managing director of the Top Blokes Foundation. I work closely with teachers, parents and our team of youth workers to deliver mental health and wellbeing programs directly to young males. I'm joined today by my colleague Daniel Allars, New South Wales State manager. We welcome the opportunity to appear before the Committee as part of the inquiry into the impacts of harmful pornography. Top Blokes is a youth mental health charity supporting young males aged 10 to 24 years. Our qualified youth workers deliver three- to six-month mentoring programs across schools and communities. Since 2006 we've worked with over 25,000 young males across New South Wales and Queensland, including 2,500 in New South Wales last year alone, providing a safe space to explore identity, relationships and the challenges they face in today's digital world.

Through our work, we've seen firsthand how pornography is shaping young males' understanding of sex, relationships, masculinity and consent, often before they've had any real-life experience. Many of the young men we mentor tell us they want to talk about pornography but shame, stigma, and a lack of trusted adults make it difficult. Without open conversations, they struggle to separate fact from fiction and the unrealistic expectations set by pornography can impact their mental and physical health, their relationships and their understanding of healthy intimacy. They tell us that pornography isn't showing them the whole picture. It distorts their understanding of consent, boundaries and emotional connection. Many admit they've never seen a conversation about consent in pornography, and they express surprise when they learn about its potential impact on their mental health, sexual expectations and relationships.

Every day we see young males show up with curiosity and enthusiastically engage in conversations around the harmful impacts of pornography. They don't want judgement. They want guidance, education and a space to ask questions. Importantly, young males have unique perspectives and insights that can help solve the challenges of harmful pornography. Their voice is valuable, and they make meaningful contributions. While we are here today representing the voices of young males that we work with, we're delighted to help connect you directly with young males on this issue. Young males are ready to talk—to share their experiences, their ideas, and to help design solutions that reduce the harmful impacts of pornography on the next generation of young people. Thank you. We look forward to your questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you all for those statements, and for appearing today. I will start with Top Blokes. We've had discussions in earlier sessions today about accidental exposure versus deliberate exposure to pornography. Is that something that features in your discussions with young men? Are there differences in how you approach the conversation, differences in what they're talking about or what their concerns are? If you could talk a bit about that, that would be helpful.

MELISSA ABU-GAZALEH: I'll hand it over to Daniel in a second. What has definitely come through very clearly is young males sharing often the first times that they have come across pornography, and it often is accidental. It may be accidental as part of their use of online games, but also in the playground with older teens and older siblings, and older cousins as well. We've got to look at it both from an online perspective—being accidentally exposed—as well as to those that are around them in their personal lives.

DANIEL ALLARS: I think the way we go about that, talking to young men about the online space as a whole, not just around pornography as well, but certainly violent content or content that's maybe against their values—it is really important that we have that conversation and sort of go back to what are our values. What are the things we want to be seeing? I think it's the same with pornography and relationships, when we dive down into what do you actually want to get out of these experiences of being online. You want to be educated, you want to have fun and you want to feel safe, whereas if you're starting to click things where you're feeling unsafe or you're feeling like it's not somewhere you should be then talking to an adult about this, talking about your friends, blocking, being curious about what people are actually sending you and not just clicking links—this is all part of a broader conversation with our young men.

The CHAIR: Youth Action, you engage with young people. You recommend investment in programs which are delivered by independent facilitators. We've heard a lot about education delivered through the school curriculum by teachers. Are you deliberately calling that out as something different, and if so, why?

LAUREN STRACEY: I think one of the things that we're really wanting to ensure is that all young people have access to this information. This would be really critical to ensure that we're connecting with those young people who may have disengaged from mainstream schooling or are somehow missing that school-based curriculum. It would be about looking at how we actually invest in both things. What we're hearing from the sector—with the youth workers, particularly, who work specifically with these kinds of young people who may not be engaging in mainstream schooling—is that they're really needing support to be able to deliver information to them as well. It's really just about ensuring there's a cross-section of information that's accessible to all young people.

The CHAIR: I note that in your submission you indicate that people from the youth sector have raised concerns about the normalisation and casualisation of certain language being used by young people, particularly young men and boys. This might be something I ask Collective Shout in a minute as well. Can you tell us more about this and how you feel that relates to pornography, and how youth workers are addressing that?

LAUREN STRACEY: What we're hearing from the sector and from youth workers is that there has been a change in the way that they are speaking about sexual activities and that kind of thing, and that there's a connection to their capacity to engage with pornography. We would be really keen for further investment in being able to understand the nuances of that. The youth sector is really needing some support to support young people to navigate that so they're able to ensure that young people have appropriate language, are able to make meaning of what they're seeing more broadly and have that critical lens to what they're seeing.

The CHAIR: When you talk about the type of language, you're talking about what exactly? Disrespectful ways of referring to certain groups? What in particular?

LAUREN STRACEY: What the youth sector is talking about is the casualisation of it. That would be something to really unpack with the youth sector specifically about what the nuances are that they're hearing. What we've heard directly from them so far, though, is that it's been a language change. We'd be really keen to understand how that is changing and in what ways is that impacting the way that young people might be thinking, feeling and behaving.

The CHAIR: I might go to Ms Tankard Reist on this issue of changes in social norms and what you think harmful pornography contributes to that, but also what you describe as harmful. Is that something that you separate from pornography that's not harmful?

MELINDA TANKARD REIST: I might just start with that one and then get on to the core issues. We don't make that distinction, certainly not, and I don't know how many men are currently googling so-called ethical porn, dolphin-friendly porn. It's likely to be tiny. I have looked at some of that content. I've examined what some of the so-called ethical porn producers produce, and I personally do not think that mother/daughter incest lesbian porn constitutes ethical. I'd like to share some stories that teachers have shared with us in the report that I've already referenced, the *Sexual Harassment of Teachers* report. This came about as a result of a conversation between myself and the author and parenting expert Maggie Dent. We were seeing a rise of harmful sexual behaviours and sexual harassment in schools and Maggie proposed the idea of a survey. A thousand teachers responded, and we published the findings late last year. Interestingly, not one survey question specifically asked about pornography as a potential driver, but teachers themselves identified it. I thought it might be useful if I shared what some of the teachers said:

> 11 years is the standard answer for regular porn viewing - airdropped to devices on public transport … to achieve child watching extreme sexual violence in seconds.
>
> Year 7 students are accessing porn online and it seems to be normalising sexualising harassment behaviours.

Another states that behaviours are:

> becoming more covert, deviant and expressed digitally using graphically violent and pornographic videos on simple group chats that start as homework groups and descend as the year wears on.
>
> Children showing other children pornography, sexual noises, children choking other children in the playground, children simulating sex from behind on other children from the age of 4.
>
> I've had to deal with an increase in sexual assault threats online, sexual images being shown and children being pushed to do sexual acts.
>
> Groaning. Pressuring girls to send nudes, "accidental" touching of breasts during sport, commenting on appearance.
>
> Students in grade 7 are coercing girls into sending child exploitation material.
>
> I've had boys in Year 7 confess to me they are addicted to pornography.

From my own experience addressing thousands of students every year, the stories are getting worse, and they're getting worse younger. There is more sexualised racist abuse of girls, including Asian girls, who tell me boys will

say to them, "You're my dirty little sex slave." There are more rape threats. Rape threats were a significant theme in our report, including predatory and threatening attitudes. It states:

> … girls in year 7 are being told by boys they will be raped.
>
> Older boys [state] they intend to rape their future partners when they grow up.
>
> I had a student tell his girlfriend about his rape fantasies involving me. He also threatened to rape his girlfriend if she told anyone.

They are just some of the examples that are in our *Sexual Harassment of Teachers* report. Pornography is identified as a driver of these behaviours.

The CHAIR: Can I go to Top Blokes again? You said, from your submission and from your opening statement, that young men are talking to you about it and recognise it. What's your response to, particularly, that last bit of evidence from Collective Shout about that survey? What are you seeing? What are young men saying in terms of how they feel about being involved in that kind of activity?

DANIEL ALLARS: When we talk to young men about this, what we find is a lot of the times they're parroting what they've seen—as we said, the drivers being pornography. What they're seeing in pornography is what they're copycatting. With our program, for example, we spend a lot of time talking about what is a healthy relationship and, more importantly, what do you want from your relationship. When we start to talk to the boys about them wanting connection and to build trust, we can break this down and say, "When you're displaying these sorts of behaviours, do you think you're actually showing respect? Are you building trust? Are you building a connection?" We can really start to break that down, and those walls fall down pretty quickly. The boys are very, very curious about this. They're very quick to parrot what they're seeing around them. What we really have to do is give them a mirror to say, "Is this behaviour you're doing actually working for you and helping you build those connections?"

The CHAIR: I have a question which any of you could answer, but we'll keep with Top Blokes for now. Because this behaviour, according to the survey that we just heard, is being seen, how do you walk that line between—punishment is the wrong word, but at least admonishment for what is unacceptable behaviour and getting an understanding of what to do differently? I presume at school you're not going to let students behave that way if you hear about it. How do you walk the line between "This is not okay" and still getting students to be receptive enough to an alternative view?

DANIEL ALLARS: It really comes back to curiosity. You have to be curious about why. Obviously we have to call out bad behaviour when we see it, and we will, particularly when we're seeing really negative comments from boys. But if we really break down and say, "Why are you saying this? What are you trying to get, and why do you believe that?" then we can get to the root cause. Particularly when we're talking to boys and young men, trying to be trauma-informed and thinking, "Why is this behaviour happening?" and starting to ask them and getting them to explain to us why, then they really are starting to think about their own behaviour.

MELISSA ABU-GAZALEH: We all have the goal of wanting to achieve behaviour and attitudinal change. I think it's really important to acknowledge that doing that can't just happen over one conversation or a short period of time. When we start to think about solutions or encouraging or helping young males to adjust their behaviour or their attitudes, that has to be an ongoing conversation that takes place over time. As to what Daniel said, by the time our program gets to the workshop that centres on pornography, we've had two months already working with these young males. We've also got to meet young men where they're at. For us, where we find it to be particularly impactful is when we start to help young males understand the impact that it's having on themselves.

I think what's really interesting is that young males shared, as part of the focus group that we ran, that even though they may be parroting what they're seeing, often when they actually start to think about it, it might not be something that they personally desire doing either. When we meet them where they're at, that is the best opportunity we have to break down some of these barriers, build the trust with them but help them then to adjust and form healthy habits over the next little while. What has definitely come through with the focus groups that we ran is that young males do want to adjust their behaviours, they can, and they do report back that their consumption of pornography does change after learning more about its impacts.

MELINDA TANKARD REIST: Can I please add to that? I agree with everything just said, but I'd also like to look at the legal obligations of schools who have a duty of care to provide a safe educational environment. Unfortunately, and frequently, that is not being met. Schools have become sites of abuse. There is not one school that I go into and work with where girls do not report being subjected to daily sexual intrusions, demands for nudes, sent dick pics, threatened with rape if they don't send nudes, subjected to moaning and groaning noises in the classroom, in the schoolyard, at the school camp, on the school bus. I talk to eight- and nine-year-old girls who say, "I do not feel safe at school", because the sexual harassment has become so rife.

The teachers in our sexual harassment report said there were not enough consequences, there weren't clear policies and procedures, and there weren't clear frameworks for addressing harmful sexual behaviours. As a result, girls were disempowered, and boys were emboldened. The teachers in our report wanted to see intervention at much earlier stages before the behaviours escalated. It doesn't serve boys to allow them to engage in routine sexual harassment at school. It's not setting them up well for life either. Schools do have this duty of care, but teachers testified to a lack of consequences. As a result, we are seeing more girls saying they don't want to go to school. I believe that these behaviours are a significant factor in the rise of absenteeism and school refusal in girls.

Because I've had girls—they say to me they experience school as a hostile environment. More female teachers are leaving the profession. I spoke to three in a row last year, young teachers fresh out, freshly graduated. They haven't lasted six months. They're propositioned, they're sexually groaned at and moaned at, they've had photos taken down their blouses, under their skirts. They've been turned into AI deepfake image-based sexual abuse, deepfake sexual abuse, and those images are being shared. This is also happening to girls. Boys are creating these images using social media profiles of girls and female teachers, but also the school photos, and morphing those into porn and selling them. Schools have become an unwelcoming and hostile environment for many female teachers and many girls. Schools need to be reminded of their duty-of-care obligations to provide safe educational environments.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: I have a follow-up question on that, Ms Tankard Reist. We've heard a lot of evidence today that education is key, and we've heard evidence of new curricula that have been developed by NESA and the Department of Education. If, as your survey reports, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, is a reality for teachers in many of our schools, does that compromise the teacher-student relationship? How would teachers go about teaching respectful relationships and teaching appropriate attitudes to porn, if they're not being respected in the classroom because of the consequences of porn?

MELINDA TANKARD REIST: That's exactly right. Teachers over and over again said they could not do their job. They could not execute their role as educators because of the highly sexualised environments in which they were trying to teach, and which had eroded respect for them as teachers. They felt ill-equipped to teach respectful relationships and consent programs because they said that too often porn wasn't addressed. They lacked confidence to teach in an authoritative way, because they often felt that one of the key drivers fuelling harmful sexual behaviours wasn't being addressed, but their own authority was being undermined all the time by boys wolf-whistling, propositioning them, following them, stalking them and turning them into nudes. These highly sexualised behaviours eroded the teachers' ability to teach. Even the best consent and respect program cannot compete with the largest department of education in the world, which is the global porn industry. It's too much responsibility just on parents or just on schools. This needs a whole-of-community approach, and it needs the reining in and the regulation of an industry which has caused this level of harm.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: If teachers have difficulty addressing it in schools, how do we proceed? What are your recommendations for appropriate measures we should be putting in place?

MELINDA TANKARD REIST: You'll find our recommendations in our submission. I also commend to the Committee the recommendations in the Childlight submission by our colleague Professor Michael Salter. In addition, we recommend the just-released recommendations of a UK report, *Creating a Safer World—the Challenge of Regulating Online Pornography*, by Baroness Bertin, which was released just last month, 27 February. We did produce a link to that. Those recommendations cover tackling violence against women and girls; creating a culture of positive masculinity; increasing accountability and onus on platforms for harmful pornographic content; protecting those most vulnerable to exploitation and harm; strengthening enforcement of pornography offences; futureproofing against tech-enabled harms; and strengthening governance and oversight.

If I could break it down into some really specific things that, in my experience, need to happen really quickly based on my engagement in schools, there are gaps in policies, procedures and protocols. There are gaps in codes of conduct. There need to be clear expectations set so that students know what is inappropriate behaviour, what is appropriate behaviour, what the school expects of students. The other big gap is that schools have sexual harassment policies, but they apply teacher to teacher and teacher to student; they don't apply peer to peer and student to teacher. Rarely do I find a school that has that kind of policy. That's a big missing piece.

There are also barriers to reporting. Students do not feel safe to report harmful sexual behaviours. They don't feel that either they are believed, and they don't feel that they can do it anonymously. They're afraid of punishment, pushback and penalties. Female teachers were afraid of that as well, in our report. We're not even really getting close to the extent of harmful sexual behaviours, because many girls don't even report those in the first place because they fear the consequences. So many things need to be done. We are on the stakeholder advisory group for the age verification trial. Collective Shout spearheaded an open letter to the Federal Government with 50 leading child safeguarding and women's safety experts to reverse the Government's previous decision against

an age verification trial. That's part of it, but it really needs an entire societal reform if our young people are going to have any hope at all, including boys who are being preyed on and groomed by a predatory, profit-driven global industry.

The Hon. WES FANG: Ms Tankard Reist, thank you very much for appearing today. Thank you to all the witnesses for appearing today. I was listening to the evidence you gave to one of my colleagues earlier and I wanted to come back to some of that evidence, if you wouldn't mind, because it's slightly concerning. Did you say you were sitting with three teachers and that they indicated that they had been, effectively, sexually assaulted by their students?

MELINDA TANKARD REIST: There has certainly been a proposition. They've been threatened with rape. They've been told, for example, "Miss, why do you love pot so much?" or "Miss, you've got a mouth that belongs on Pornhub," just to give you a couple of examples. I've had teachers tell me they're called the c-word every day and when they reported that to the education department in your State, they were told that that was beneath the level of reporting; that was below the reporting threshold. I've just given you examples of three young female teachers, but there are vast numbers of female teachers leaving this profession, which is in our report. They were leaving, in the process of leaving or had already left.

The Hon. WES FANG: In relation to the evidence you gave earlier, you said that sexually explicit images were taken of them, but also that those images were turned into deepfakes, in effect. Were those the three teachers that you were referring to?

MELINDA TANKARD REIST: No, that wasn't all of those teachers. One of those teachers told me that she discovered that her image had been turned into a deepfake. These aren't sexual explicit images to begin with. They are images taken from social media or school photos, and they are morphed into pornography, which we call deepfake sexual abuse, image-based sexual abuse, through using easily available AI tools. There are 127 nudifying and undressing apps, which will nudify any woman or any girl. There's no regulation; there are no laws. They're advertised on social media and then those images are shared. I was in one school where those images were being sold to boys in other schools.

The Hon. WES FANG: Just in relation to—

The CHAIR: Sorry, Ms Tankard Reist. It's very hard with the delay.

The Hon. WES FANG: It's very hard with the delay.

MELINDA TANKARD REIST: Yes, I'm sorry. I can't hear you properly.

The Hon. WES FANG: I wanted to dive down a little bit into what you indicated. There were three teachers that had photos taken either down their tops or up their skirts et cetera. Was that the three teachers you indicated that had occurred to?

MELINDA TANKARD REIST: I've heard that story more than once.

The Hon. WES FANG: But in relation to the three women that you spoke of earlier, was that the three of them?

MELINDA TANKARD REIST: Those three—I can't recall if that had involved an upskirting or downblousing issue, but I've certainly spoken to teachers that that has happened to.

The Hon. WES FANG: What concerns me is that if that is the case, that's obviously effectively sexual assault. Those matters are effectively police matters now and they should be reported. I was trying to just dive back into that. I can see you're unsure about your answers now, but I was interested more about the response in relation to that, because obviously, if those things are occurring to a teacher and they're not reported, it's almost a an affirmation to the young men to say, "Well, we've got away with this now." Is this going to be a problem? Will it compound later if it's not brought to attention in the school?

MELINDA TANKARD REIST: That's exactly the case. I hear hundreds of accounts, hundreds of stories, and often nothing is done. We know this generally with survivors of sexual assault.

The Hon. WES FANG: But who's not doing these things? Who's not taking action here? If it's teachers that are having this action done against them, they should be, in effect, taking action, because otherwise if they don't, it will allow the problem to compound, will it not?

MELINDA TANKARD REIST: I agree with you a hundred per cent. There are many systematic problems which contribute to women and girls either not reporting or not being believed, or not getting the necessary action at some schools. Sorry, I have COVID, by the way. If I need to take some questions on notice, I may have to do that. It's why I'm not with you.

The Hon. WES FANG: Given that you have COVID, would you mind just taking on notice and providing some details about the three teachers that you referred to?

MELINDA TANKARD REIST: I can take them on notice. I can certainly say generally that our *Sexual Harassment of Teachers* report documents that teachers often did not feel safe to disclose. They were told, "Boys will be boys. Just ignore it and it'll go away. Don't make a fuss about it or it'll get worse." There's a continuum of behaviours, but all of it constitutes sexual harassment—all of it.

The CHAIR: I might take the chance to stop you there to give you a second, because I can see the pressure on your throat, but also because I need to give my other colleague an opportunity to ask some questions. I hope you have some water handy.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Particularly to the witnesses talking about young people today, I'm aware there's a risk that well-intentioned interventions for young people can have the unintended consequence of actually increasing stigma or discouraging young people from then reporting to a trusted adult if they come across something that's unsafe or dangerous. How do you recommend we go about engaging with young people in a way that won't increase stigma?

LAUREN STRACEY: I'm happy to address that one. I think what we would recommend at Youth Action is really taking a rights-based approach to any of this, so making sure that whatever reform policy decisions we're making and whatever of programs we're wanting to engage with or develop, it's really having the young people's voices centred so we can actually hear from them directly. What would be the things that might be a barrier to you being able to authentically share your position? What would kind of facilitate that?

One of the things that we know is that our relationships with young people are going to be the biggest and most powerful way to make any of these sorts of changes. So being able to centre their voices in it and then also being able to wrap around that the voices of the youth or sector that is supporting them—parents, teachers, carers and also education. I think we would be able to then best address the nuances of both being able to ensure that we're creating systems, processes and programs that are going to elevate their needs, and being able to really engage with those quite difficult and challenging conversations, while also being assured that we are able to have that being supported by a really well-informed and educated support system around them.

DANIEL ALLARS: One thing to add, particularly with young men, is each interaction you have with a young man when they come to you and tell you something that's important to them, how they feel when they walk away from that conversation is really important. If they don't feel like they were safe in telling you small things or little things or pieces of information, when it comes to something big that they've experienced online or things that are happening to them, they're not going to then come back to you. What's really important is building those relationships little by little. For us, part of our program of sending text messages to parents to say, "Today we spoke about alcohol. Have a chat about this. Today we spoke about mental health." It's building up almost a muscle in that relationship between parents, so that when something big happens or something really makes them feel unsafe, they're going to be able to come forward and share that. We're really taking every opportunity to make sure they felt like they've been heard, listened to and trusted.

Dr AMANDA COHN: We've also heard a lot of evidence about the value of schools-based education, with strong evidence from other States. In addition to that, both of you have advocated for supporter education that's provided outside of schools. I'm hoping you could speak to that.

LAUREN STRACEY: Can I just clarify the question?

Dr AMANDA COHN: We've spent a significant portion of the day talking about schools-based education programs, and we've had some really strong evidence about that. I'm interested in the need for, in addition, educational support for young people outside of schools.

LAUREN STRACEY: Yes, sure. One of the things that we're hearing from the sector really strongly is that they need greater support to be able to do that education piece with young people that don't necessarily engage in mainstream schooling, or maybe on top of it as well. There's some really wonderful work happening in schools and there's some opportunity to elevate and develop that further, but there's also a whole other place where education and that sort of cultural change essentially that we're talking about could occur. That's where the youth sector, in the way that they engage with young people in that soft entry, less formalised way, has some real power.

Then the other part is parents and carers as well, being able to have aligned conversations in multiple ways, in ways that are meaningful for young people. One of the things that we're hearing really strongly from the sector is that we really need to invest in some greater consultation to understand what we need to do, because it's just a constantly evolving space. It's a place where these changes are happening quite rapidly, and we have a lot of opportunity to have really positive impact through those relational places that we have with young people.

MELISSA ABU-GAZALEH: Definitely. Parents will often tell us that they lack the confidence and the skills, but they know the likelihood of their young male or their child accessing pornography is probably there. I think there is a real opportunity to increase the level of resourcing. There is some resourcing that already exists. There is more opportunity to do that. But I think in our experience, as well as running our mentoring program, we ask young men to identify a trusted adult in their life, who then receives a weekly SMS from Top Blokes, encouraging that person to have a conversation with their young men about the content or the topic. We have an SMS specifically around pornography.

What we do is we ask the trusted adult to ask their young men about the four Cs. It's a piece of content and what's most important about that is that it is building that level of respect and curiosity from the adult in the situation to the child and inviting that child into an open conversation. I think it is really important to be able to give young people the confidence that they can have a conversation with their parent. What's really interesting is that as a result, both parents and young males have shared that actually having that conversation wasn't as daunting or as awkward as what they felt. There's more work to be done. Being able to facilitate conversations between parents and young people so that all the resourcing we put around it means that we're not putting all responsibility on schools as the only avenue for education. It should be happening in the homes and at a much earlier age.

The CHAIR: We've reached the end of our time. We very much appreciate you all being here. I think we've had you as multiple offenders at various inquiries over the past six months.

The Hon. WES FANG: Contributors is a better word.

The CHAIR: Yes, excellent contributors. We appreciate that very much. Ms Tankard Reist, we appreciate you battling on there. We very much appreciate your contributions. I think there were some things that you undertook to give us on notice. The secretariat will be in touch also if there are supplementary questions. Again, thank you so much for your work, your time and your contributions today.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Ms GEMMA QUINN, Chief Executive Officer, Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales, affirmed and examined

Mr PATRICK DOUMANI, Member, Support and Research Officer, Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales, affirmed and examined

Ms ANNE FEHON, Chair, Council of Catholic School Parents NSW/ACT, sworn and examined

Mrs CATHERINE GARRETT-JONES, Executive Director, Council of Catholic School Parents NSW/ACT, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome to this session of the hearing for the day. Thank you so much for being here. Would you like to begin by making an opening statement, perhaps the P&C?

GEMMA QUINN: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, members of the Committee, for having us here today to address this critical issue. In today's digital age, pornography is only a click away for our young people. Whether we like it or not, access to pornography has become almost inescapable. Today's youth grow up in a highly sexualised online environment, where curious adolescents search for information about relationships or sex. They will often end up encountering pornography. This is a reality that we must confront head on. Harmful pornography can be having a negative effect on young people's development, their mental health and relationships. These harms are well documented, and they are well known, and they underscore the urgency of the response here today.

That said, it's also true that not all pornography is inherently harmful. There is pornography that is damaging to the young viewer, but there's also pornography that is consensual, ethically produced and even educational in its intent. This nuance means that our approach must be a thoughtful one. When we tackle this issue for our young people, we need to distinguish between healthy and harmful content. We must meet the reality of our young people's access to pornography with education, guidance and open dialogue. We strongly advocate for a comprehensive education about pornography, sexual health, boundaries, consent, media literacy and critical thinking. It's integral throughout the schooling journey.

We need to arm our young people and our adults with knowledge to navigate the digital landscape that we now thrive within. We adults must approach this uncomfortable topic openly and without shame. The responsibility is on us as parents, as educators, and as policymakers to foster an environment where young people feel safe discussing what they encounter rather than hiding it. It's not easy to talk about pornography with our children or our young people or our students, but it is necessary.

By investing in comprehensive sexuality education that includes frank discussions about pornography, by training our teachers and supporting our parents in this effort, and by addressing this issue without prudishness or panic, we can empower the next generation. We can give them the tools they need to critically evaluate what they see, to understand the concept of consent and respect, and to develop healthy relationships in spite of mixed messages online. In closing, I urge the inquiry to champion educational initiatives and policies that support open, shame-free dialogue about pornography and sexual health. Let us face this challenge together with courage and empathy for our young people.

CATHERINE GARRETT-JONES: Thank you for the opportunity to be here at this inquiry. We thank our parents and carers who've provided information to us for our use in sharing it with you at this inquiry. We believe strongly that parents and carers are the first educators of their children, and whilst we acknowledge and support the increase in support for educators in their role, we also want to focus on the role of parents and carers in this space and what is and isn't happening to support them. We have provided information in our submission about the general fears and lack of understanding, and the inability of some of our parents and carers to engage in this space with their children and young people. We would strongly endorse increased support for our parents and carers.

The CHAIR: If I can pick up on both the key theme today and also of your statements and your submissions, we're talking a lot about education and its role. We're hearing that there's a school-based part of that and then there's the role that parents or adults have. Both organisations have just spoken about this. One of the things I've been wondering about, though, is what is best? The school is obvious: the students are there, the teachers are there, the resources are there, and you can build it into the curriculum. What do you think are effective ways of getting parents to understand and engage? I suspect it's not just a question of giving them resources. There's also an issue of understanding what their role is. Do they see it as a problem? Maybe they don't because maybe they use porn themselves. How do we approach what is a much more diverse group of people in diverse settings than we have with children in a school, in a classroom? We might start with the P&C.

GEMMA QUINN: I think that's the advantage of using schools as a tool to communicate with parents. We know that in parents and citizens associations in schools, that aspect of community and discussion with a principal with leadership of a school results in parents having a deeper understanding not only of what their children are doing in school, but what role the parent has to play in complementing curriculum. I think that happens really effectively already. If we were to invest in supporting our educators to have greater time and greater resources at hand to have those challenging discussions with parents and to bring parents into the fold, we're going to see parents getting much more than they get from the online material that's currently already available. There is amazing online content available. The eSafety Commissioner does a fantastic job. Indeed, we've run webinars for parents, and they are hugely popular. But 2,000 parents attending an eSafety Commissioner webinar is a drop in the ocean compared to the number of parents we need to reach, and all of those parents have children in schools.

The CHAIR: Before we get to the Catholic School Parents response, can I get a bit specific? I always want to hear about engagement but tell me what that looks like. What does that mean? We want to engage with parents at the school. What does that mean?

GEMMA QUINN: I'll give you a concrete example. I was at a P&C meeting last week where they have a standing item on their agenda where the principal or someone in the school leadership will present on a topic to do with curriculum. Last week they were talking about the InitiaLit program. What the parents gained from that was an opportunity to discuss firsthand with the people who are educating their children what the program is, rather than just receiving a reader home at the end of the school week to read with their child over the weekend. It gave them the tools to better use the resource that's being sent home because they understood it more deeply, having been given a crash course of sorts, one on one in a small group with their teacher. That is something that we do have an opportunity to resource teachers to do, because it's what they're good at, and we see it now working in other areas. If we can equip them to have what can be really challenging conversations with parents, I'm sure they are going to be able to rise to that challenge.

CATHERINE GARRETT-JONES: I agree with a lot of what Gemma said, absolutely. But I guess my concern is whilst we talk about increasing resources for teachers, and as an ex-teacher myself, we know that teachers are already under the pump. They're already doing a lot of the parenting. We know that we've got issues with attracting and retaining teachers. To add this into their little platter of what they have to do, whilst I agree with it, I think it's going to be fraught. There are going to be concerns about how do we actually do that? I love the example you've given about a P&C, certainly from Catholic schools. Within our remit we have been working really hard to shift the focus away from traditional P&F associations, which is the equivalent to P&C. We've worked really hard to shift towards a model which authentically engages parents and carers in their child's learning by doing exactly that—by having an educative piece within a meeting where parents' capacity is built, and they're upskilled. Issues around consent, sexual relationships, absolutely could be dealt with in that space.

I guess the challenge is where does that information and where does that material come from? We too have e-safety. We had an e-safety last week and we had over 500. For one in five kids in Catholic schools, that percentage is pretty good. I thought we're probably on par with you guys in terms of the parents that we're attracting. But it's always the problem—I'm sure Gemma will agree: The problem is that group of parents that aren't engaged.

The CHAIR: That was my next question.

CATHERINE GARRETT-JONES: We can preach to the converted all we want, but what we're really concerned about is that group, that segment, of parents that are not engaged. How do we attract those? I listened to the previous speakers, and they spoke about talking to students about what they need, getting their opinion. It takes work to identify those parents and find out why they're not engaging. What are their barriers? We've actually done some work around that to identify those parents and find out what it is that's preventing you from engaging in your child's school. For many of them, it's time commitments. It's around child care. They're the sorts of things that are presenting them with problems and issues.

I dare say that this issue, the impact of pornography and actually upskilling and building parent and carer capacity in that space, will be like any other issue that we try to build capacity of parents in. We are going to have difficulty accessing those parents if we don't remove the barriers. I also agree that schools are that central hub in a community. They are the space that parents and carers go to because generally the majority of our kids are engaged, enrolled in schools, whether it's a Catholic, independent or government school. We have a small percentage who are homeschooled, but the majority of our children and young people are enrolled in schools, so it is naturally a hub. To engage with other youth services and bring their support in is fantastic, in much the same way as we'd engage eSafety or any other not-for-profit. But the challenge is always going to be engaging with those parents and carers, and how do we do that.

The CHAIR: Can I just pause you there? I'm sure you'll have an opportunity to keep going along those lines, but I'm conscious that my colleagues will want to ask questions as well.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Perhaps I can take you on a slightly different tack. We've heard a lot of evidence, and I think there's furious agreement, that this is an issue in which parents need to be involved. How you get all parents involved is a big question. Schools need to be involved and the appropriate model, how we find the time, how we resource the teachers to do it, whether we also invite skilled experts from outside to come in and do it. But there's a third piece, and I'm wondering what your views are on this. I think this would be a piece to stop or delay accidental exposure to pornography rather than intentional seeking it out—the extent to which some form of either regulation of pop-ups in games or regulation of the way in which certain material is delivered. Age verification—to what extent? That is also a piece that we need to be exploring.

CATHERINE GARRETT-JONES: I think they go hand in hand; so do our parents. They do believe that work goes hand in hand. We also are on the age assurance round table as well. We have representation at that. From the surveying of our parents, there was definitely support for further government regulation around access. That was clear. Parents wanted that support. I think the request for that comes from parents' own feelings of inadequacy around how to manage social media. It's growing at a pace faster than they can understand. Parents and carers feel helpless, in many ways, to actually do the regulating themselves. They're unsure of how their kids are accessing some of this material and need support. So, yes, I do think that parents, certainly from our perspective, are seeking that.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Ms Quinn or Mr Doumani, do you have a view?

GEMMA QUINN: Thank you for the question. I think that there is a call from parents to seek regulation to support them in this endeavour, but I agree that it is out of a sense of desperation. This issue is too big to tackle, and I think that there could be a danger when we do introduce additional regulation, that it becomes a false safety net. We know that there are plenty of children who have very strict restrictions on their devices at home that still access, accidentally, pornographic material. Their parents are unaware because they feel they have done everything within their power to stop that access occurring. I know in my own experience, I've grown up as a digital native, and my first exposure to harmful pornography was in the playground from someone printing it out and bringing it to school. I think that we have to acknowledge that children are going to be exposed. They're being exposed younger and younger to this content, and any regulation that goes hand in hand must be done coupled with education. I don't think we can escape that.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Do you have a view on whether parents feel that they can use the filtering devices and blocks that are available to be applied at home, or are they looking for the Government to be introducing age verification or blocking certain types of sites, or some other across-the-board regulation?

GEMMA QUINN: I don't think that we could speak with certainty about how parents feel about that beyond saying that, when we surveyed them, they wanted support.

CATHERINE GARRETT-JONES: I agree. I do think from the information we've gained that parents are lacking an understanding and don't feel confident in that space. Indeed, we've engaged with the eSafety Commissioner. We do a regular every-term webinar. One of our approaches is to actually do a live version where devices are used by parents and carers. We then, online, as we go, we're going to talk you through the process. I think the delivering of fact sheets are useful, but we also have parents—I spoke to a parent recently who is a professional. He recently immigrated to Australia, has a child in one of our schools and has absolutely no understanding that the eSafety Commissioner existed. The child asked for some particular technology. The parent had no understanding of what the technology was. We know that parents need to have access to information, but it's how do we deliver that that's most effective? I think that is the challenge.

The Hon. WES FANG: In relation to any technology filtering systems or methods of trying to suppress pornography to young people's computers, isn't it really the case that young people generally will find a workaround, probably quicker than the parents can actually implement a block? So, really, the only way that we're able to manage this is through either parents or teachers or sometimes peers—probably not the most ideal way—but those people talking to the young people about what it is that they're seeing or viewing or trying to understand it. It's an education problem; it's not a technology problem, because we're never really going to get ahead of them. This is an education problem. Is that a fair thing to say?

GEMMA QUINN: I would echo that.

CATHERINE GARRETT-JONES: I think there's some truth in that, but I would question the technology as well. I would question that. I think there is a possibility that we can. If we have parents who are unable or incapable of managing the technology and how to manage those filtering systems, then I suspect that

we've probably got a percentage of kids that are exactly the same—not all of them, but some of them. I actually think a combination is best.

The Hon. WES FANG: Would you put money on the fact that—

CATHERINE GARRETT-JONES: No, I'm not going to put money on it.

The Hon. WES FANG: That's the thing, isn't it? There's no guarantee that that's going to be the answer to it. Isn't it the case, then, that we need to make sure that the kids are armed with either the imagery, which they're seeing, or the information to process and maturely understand what it is they're watching on the screen—explaining to them that it's not real life and that those are the tools we need to have. Whilst you say a percentage of young children may or may not be able to get around a block, I think the vast majority will and they'll probably do it quicker than the parents can implement it.

CATHERINE GARRETT-JONES: Quite possibly, but what I'm saying is I think a combination of strategies is going to work best, rather than saying, "Forget about the age assurance technology and let's not bother looking at filtering and supporting that, let's just focus on education." Because, as we've already discussed, the education is not going to get through to every parent either. We know that.

The Hon. WES FANG: The last point I'd make on that, though, is that ultimately technology costs, and so technology implementation systems also cost. So where some parents are certainly well off, there will be other parents in lower socio-economic areas that won't be as able to perhaps invest in those systems. Don't we need to make sure that we're capturing all in any program that we roll out?

CATHERINE GARRETT-JONES: But I think this is where our parents are saying they would like greater regulation in that space. They would like government to provide greater regulation.

The Hon. WES FANG: Shouldn't parents be parents and not look to the Government always to—

CATHERINE GARRETT-JONES: Absolutely agree with you on that, but the reality is this is such a critical issue. These are children and young people whose mental health and wellbeing is being significantly impacted.

The CHAIR: I am going to pass over to Dr Cohn for some questions.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Thank you so much for being here today. I had a question about respectful relationships education. We had some evidence already this morning from the Department of Education. There's obviously an existing curriculum. We've heard about the ways that that's planned to be updated in the next couple of years. What's your view of, I suppose, existing respectful relationships education? I'm interested in how that's being delivered, particularly in the non-government schools, and whether most of the Catholic schools are actually implementing that curriculum.

CATHERINE GARRETT-JONES: There is work currently being done on that, and we are involved in that space as well, to be able to ensure that our students are receiving appropriate education, and what is required and needed for them. Our parents and carers would absolutely support education in that space, no issue.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I appreciate this may need to be taken on notice, but do you have any understanding, for the elements of that curriculum that are optional—

CATHERINE GARRETT-JONES: I'd take that one on notice.

Dr AMANDA COHN: —what proportion of the Catholic school sector is actually opting in to those parts of the curriculum?

CATHERINE GARRETT-JONES: I would take that one on notice.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Thank you. A similar question to the P&C: What's your experience of the way that's been implemented?

GEMMA QUINN: I think that it's been effectively implemented for what it is. I think the changes that we're going to see are positive. We were really pleased with the announcement. I think that something we can always do better is—and I hate to use the term "engagement" again, but I do think it's true. There is always, in an education space, for us as parents, a role for parents to play in supporting what's occurring in a school, and I also think for children to be engaged in what they are learning in school. I think there is a really positive thing that comes out of—notwithstanding the press this week—early childhood. I look to that sector, and the way that it has championed the voices of parents and children in rolling out educational frameworks in service. I think that we can learn a lot from what comes out of that early childhood sector in terms of the benefits that there are from

understanding from the people who are receiving of content, what they are getting from that content and what they want to feed back into that content that they're being taught.

The CHAIR: Ms Carter or Mr Fang?

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: I have got no further questions.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'll just return back to some of the questions I was asking earlier, just in relation to education of students and what it is that they're seeing. I guess from both perspectives, both the public system and private systems, that would require the students to actually be attending school. What we've seen recently is an increase in the number of students that are actually not attending school for any number of reasons. They're also the ones that are likely at home, perhaps using technology when parents aren't home. They're probably the cohort that is more likely to be impacted. How do we reach them? How do we ensure that they're not socially stunted in not only friendships but also further on down the track in relationships, given that they're already not attending school, not building those social interactions, and then learning about, I guess, unhealthy relationship interactions through online pornography?

GEMMA QUINN: I think we need to be agile and I think we need to utilise the spaces that children are in. I think the reality is a lot of young people consume content, and educational content, from places like TikTok. I think that instead of taking a "We'll build it and they'll come" approach, and come up with a new glossy app to sell them on education, we need to look at the reality of how they use technology.

The Hon. WES FANG: And you know exactly where I'm about to go now, don't you? What if we ban kids from using social media until they're 16? How do we reach them then?

GEMMA QUINN: That is a very good question. I think that I'm going to probably temper my response by simply saying that children need to have—as I believe it is a human right that children need to have access to safe spaces online. I think that we need to be addressing the spaces that they have access to and how they use and consume content from those spaces. Whether that means restricting children's access to a space completely, or addressing the content that comes through in that particular space, is an item for policymakers outside of the scope of my remit here.

The Hon. WES FANG: But you bring a wealth of experience to the inquiry. I guess I'm just posing these questions, not necessarily knowing the answers myself, but we've obviously spoken about trying to reach kids where they are. I think that's important, and the voice of children and young people is important. Probably I've learnt that more in the last couple of years than anything else. But I think that where you've got a cohort of students—I think there was half a million students—that are resistant in attending school, and where you might be reaching them is through social media, and there's now plans to block social media until 16, where do they find that safe space that you spoke about? Where do they build those relationships, those friendship groups, if they're not at school, not having those social interactions? Then how do we make that safe space somewhere that they can learn about healthy, respectful relationships into the future? And if social media is off the table, what then?

GEMMA QUINN: I think that something will fill the space of social media, if children don't have access to it. We were involved in the Federal consultations regarding online safety and our position was that restricting access was not the best model of addressing harmful content that children have access to on social media platforms.

The Hon. WES FANG: In that case then, what do you think will fill the void? Do you think it'll be that kids may work around any digital systems and either access social media through unauthorised ways, or do you think that they fill their time looking at things like pornography, or other things that are I guess more harmful than social media? Is that a possibility here?

GEMMA QUINN: I think that children crave socialisation, and I think that children will find a method to receive that. I think that there are means of accessing other people beyond your social circle, like chat forums, that are incredibly potentially dangerous and—

The Hon. WES FANG: More harmful.

GEMMA QUINN: —niche in content. I think that there is a risk that children will flow to those spaces. I think that's probably more of a risk than flow through to access to pornography to fill the space of a lack of access to social media.

The Hon. WES FANG: In the little bit of time that we've got left, there's the Catholic schools?

CATHERINE GARRETT-JONES: I think there's two issues here. The first one is school attendance, which is totally separate to, I think, the issue around pornography, apart from the link between access to pornography and when it's taking place. You're suggesting that it's taking place primarily for those kids when

they're maybe at home unsupervised by parents, which I grant it is possibly the case. I don't know. I don't have data on that. I think, firstly, the first issue is addressing non-attendance. Why are students not attending, and what can be done about getting students to attend school? How do we improve our attendance rates, which we know have never recovered since COVID. I think that's a separate issue, frankly.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. That brings us to the end of our time today. We appreciate very much you being here and your submission. We may have asked you for things on notice, or you may have offered, so the secretariat will be in touch, and we may have supplementary questions. Thank you so much again for your time.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Mr GRAEME DUNN, General Manager, Eros Association, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

Dr SEAN MULCAHY, Policy Adviser, Eros Association, before the Committee via videoconference, sworn and examined

Mx MISH PONY, Chief Executive Officer, Scarlet Alliance, Australian Sex Workers Association, affirmed and examined

Miss DARCY DEVIANT, Policy Officer, Sex Workers Outreach Project NSW, before the Committee

The CHAIR: Welcome to the last session of the hearing for the day. Miss Deviant, I note that you will give unsworn evidence to the Committee as you are appearing under your professional name in order to protect your privacy. Evidence you give today in this hearing will still be protected by parliamentary privilege. Do any of you have an opening statement to begin with?

GRAEME DUNNE: Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today. The Eros Association is Australia's industry association for adults-only retail, wholesale, media and entertainment. At the outset we are concerned that in the framing of this inquiry there may be a false implication that most pornography is inherently harmful or misogynistic, as suggested by the statements in the media release that this form of pornography is common and mainstream, and the statement from the Women's Safety Commissioner that pornography often contains harmful messages and representations that normalise violence against women. We support positive sexual expression. Consuming pornography is a healthy and normal part of human sexuality and does not deserve the moral condemnation it has received from some uninformed critics.

In a liberal and plural society, we hold to the principle under the national classification guidelines that adults should be able to read, hear, see and play what they want. We should add that children should not be exposed to pornography. We continue to advocate for measures to restrict children's access to pornography that are privacy preserving and do not amount to a de facto ban on adults accessing pornography. We also hold to the finding of the Stevens review of Australian classification regulation that restrictions on access to pornography should be based on harm. The recommendations in our submission reflect those principles and we welcome the opportunity to speak to them further.

MISH PONY: Scarlet Alliance is the peak national sex worker organisation in Australia, with members made up of individual sex workers, including porn performers, as well as sex worker organisations in each State and Territory. Pornography is not an exceptional form of media and must be understood in the broader social landscape. Concerns about its harm, both for young people and its impacts on domestic violence, mirror past moral panics over movies and video games, lacking strong evidence. Research does not support a link between porn and violence, and Australian research shows that young people do critically engage with pornography. Existing resources such as WA Health's *Talk Soon. Talk Often.* and resources from family planning organisations support them in doing so without shame or stigma. However, some other so-called porn literacy initiatives promote a sex-negative framework that misrepresents porn workers and reinforces outdated myths. Statements like "porn sex is not safe sex" or "porn bodies are not normal" fuel stigma rather than promote genuine health education.

There is no agreed definition of harmful pornography, and attempts to define it often target BDSM and non-heteronormative practices. Some submissions point to reported increases in certain sex acts as evidence of harm, yet the issue is not the act itself but the presence of consent and harm reduction strategies. Pornography is diverse, yet discussions remain fixated on a narrow subset of popular tube-site content, without evidence that this represents the majority of what is actually viewed. Porn is already highly regulated in Australia. The classification scheme restricts its sale and distribution, banning certain content, while the Online Safety Act grants the eSafety Commissioner broad powers to regulate online content. Further restrictions, such as age-assurance technologies, will disproportionately harm independent Australian content creators while entrenching monopolies, which is bad for both workers and consumers.

Claims that online pornography advertising is widespread are overstated and not backed up with evidence. In contrast, sex workers regularly face shadowbanning and deplatforming, which sex worker organisations also experience in sharing educational and sexual health content. At the same time, porn performers and sex workers experience financial discrimination, with targeted campaigns pressuring banks and payment platforms to deny services. Further regulation will not protect young people or reduce harm. It will only fuel stigma, harm livelihoods and consolidate existing industry monopolies. A harm reduction approach based on evidence rather than fear is essential.

DARCY DEVIANT: Thank you for having us here today. SWOP NSW are a peer-led organisation with the highest level of contact with New South Wales sex workers, including porn performers. We're grateful that

the Committee have invited us to give feedback to this inquiry, given it concerns members of our community. SWOP NSW have serious concerns regarding the terms of reference for this inquiry. Failure to define violence and harm invite subjective moral scrutiny. We have already heard discussions in the media that characterise common LGBTQIA+ sexual practices as harmful or perpetuate paternalistic ideas about what women ought to enjoy during sex. This then leads to legislative changes borne out of moral panic. Research about the impact of porn is flawed by problems with terminology, methodology and positionality. When porn is subjected to stigmatising policymaking and media coverage, these conversations damage public opinion of the sex industry and, in turn, the health and safety of our community.

After decades of research, a correlation between porn consumption and gendered violence has not been validated. In fact, pornography frequently offers an unusually diverse representation of ethnicity, gender, body types and sexualities. There is no evidence to show that the consumption of pornography has increased. Research refutes the link between porn consumption and addiction. Research suggesting that the consumption of pornography has a negative effect on body image is also highly contested. Sex workers are being used as a scapegoat for a national crisis of gendered violence. Sex and consent education for young people needs to be improved, and this responsibility should not fall on porn stars.

Everyone should understand that pornography is a crafted performance and be able to critically evaluate it, consider it in relation to their personal values and make informed decisions about their behaviour. Stigmatising and abstinence-based approaches to porn don't work and perpetuate harmful stereotypes about sex workers. Examples overseas show that age verification technology also doesn't work, as it's expensive to implement and young people can easily bypass it. The best way to respond to children's exposure to pornography is with open communication, discussion and fostering critical thinking. We see the New South Wales Government's financial commitment to consent education as a positive investment. SWOP NSW, too, has a responsibility to community health and safety outcomes, so we appreciate you valuing our feedback.

The CHAIR: Thank you all very much for those introductory remarks. I will ask a question about the sector or the industry itself. We've got the industry association here, but we also heard from Mx Pony about monopolies or quasi-monopolies. I'm not clear, and it hasn't been clear to me from the submissions. When we're talking about the content that's created, are we talking about how much of the content that you can access online is created by a production company that's doing this as a profession, and how much are amateur, semi-amateur or individuals uploading content? I'm not clear on that. I wondered whether anyone has any information.

MISH PONY: I'm happy to jump in and then maybe Eros has some clarifying remarks. Within Australia it's definitely small, independent producers creating their own content. There might be a handful of small companies within Australia, but the classification codes are so restrictive it basically prohibits really any large-scale porn production within Australia. When you're talking about porn consumption more broadly, including international content created, I don't know, and I don't think anyone can know. There is no way to capture who is watching what porn. Yes, you can look at one particular website like Pornhub and see what the most popular videos are, but that is no definitive answer as to what is actually being consumed around the world. People are consuming porn by downloading it illegally, by looking at it on X, looking at all these different sites that aren't captured, when you just look at what are the most popular videos on Pornhub or the next most popular porn website.

The CHAIR: Did the Eros foundation have anything to add to that?

GRAEME DUNNE: I would agree with those comments. The industrial production of pornography in Australia, as far as we're aware, is quite low. More recently we've seen an explosion or a growth in online content that is created by sex workers and will appear on sites such as OnlyFans or will appear as streaming services or cam services. That, as the Scarlet Alliance have pointed out, is a vast difference to international businesses such as Pornhub, Redtube et cetera that the Australian public and the wider world is familiar with.

The CHAIR: Can I ask a related question? In Australia there's not really an industry as such, or not a large one. I have a question for the Eros Association. Quite a bit of your submission was talking about industry codes and production standards, but that's something that's only going to apply to a very small amount of content. It's a very niche and very small amount of content, isn't it?

GRAEME DUNNE: Yes. The thing here is that the online safety standards and codes, which have recently been developed—the way that material is determined to be class 1 or class 1C, which is illegal pornography, or even class 2, which is legal pornography, falls over, unfortunately, into the online adult retailing sector where they don't have pornography as such on their sites. However, individual images, which might make up a tiny percentage of the products that they're selling online, which are mainly sex toys—a small number of individual images may constitute a rating by the current phase 1 guidelines, and the currently being reviewed phase 2 codes may fall into a category that's either illegal or X18+ or even R18+. The referral in the first part of

Eros's submission to making the sale of X-rated content legal across Australia refers to the current laws where X18+ in itself at a Federal level is legal, but the sale of that material, certainly in a hard copy form, is illegal in all of the States, including New South Wales.

Online content is totally different. Things are moving quickly. There has been a review into the changes to the Online Safety Act, which requires the classification guidelines to be changed. It also impacts the current, though still in existence, phase 1 codes and standards and the soon-to-be-implemented, I suspect, phase 2 standards. There's this knock-on effect to the Eros Association. These days 90 per cent of our members are retailers and wholesalers. Even though most of them might have a bricks-and-mortar presence anywhere within Australia, all businesses these days have an online business as well. That's where it mainly affects us. Dr Mulcahy, I don't know if you've got anything further to add there.

SEAN MULCAHY: Just to say that our submission points to a survey that we conducted previously that spoke to 26 participants within the industry, and it should be noted that a vast majority of those are women and LGBTIQA+ people. Our concern is that regulation in this space will disproportionately affect women and LGBTIQA+ people, and that that needs to be taken into consideration in any recommendations that the Committee may develop in regard to regulation of the industry at the New South Wales level.

The CHAIR: Something that has been at the crux of discussions today is that we haven't really spoken a lot about adult use of pornography. There's been a lot of concern and a lot of talking about education for young people, and age of first exposure to pornography. I'm interested in your opinions. I'm pretty sure in your introductions you were talking of concerns about young people, very young children, accessing. What are your thoughts about how that could be controlled or contained? What would be your responses to that concern in general?

DARCY DEVIANT: Young people's consumption, you mean?

The CHAIR: Yes. We've had quite a bit of research verifying the age of first exposure is 10 to 13 years, maybe younger. I think Ms Carter was talking about 13 being the median age. There's been concern about what do we do about that, because children aren't equipped to deal with things they don't understand. I just wondered what your response is to that being one of the greatest concerns about the pornography industry generally.

DARCY DEVIANT: I suppose the area of children is not my area of expertise, but I'm more concerned about the porn performers who will be affected. I worry about introducing new age verification technologies, because I think that it does more harm than good to porn performers and sex workers online. I also think that young people can easily bypass that. They're very smart; they can use VPNs. If it's like with a credit card, they can just take their parents' cards and bypass that. It's been shown to not be a very effective method of limiting people's exposure to things online. I think that I'd like to see just healthier discussions around this between parents and children. I don't think that the industry that I'm in should be affected by the way that young people are using the internet. I think that it's between parents and their children to ensure that they have locks on their devices, and they're responsible for what they're seeing.

MISH PONY: I'll admit that I was a 13-year-old who accessed porn. This is not a new phenomenon. I think there's a lot of panic around porn being more accessible than it's ever been. But, to be honest, I was 13 over 20 years ago and it was still very accessible back then. So these are not new issues; it's just getting renewed attention due to people's own agendas. I believe you might be speaking with Alan McKee at another hearing. His research shows that when it's young people accessing porn there's the unintentional access. If we want to deal with that unintentional access, we have all the content controls on social media, on Google, that should default to a "safe setting" so that you only come across porn if you intentionally go to that setting and change it, or you declare that you're over 18. Those controls already exist.

Then there's the other aspect of intentional access. Young people intentionally accessing porn are doing so because they're curious. They don't have people that are answering their questions about sex, and that's what we need to address within school curricula—the questions that young people will have about sex. I also know that you spoke with Giselle Woodley earlier today, and her research shows that 13-year-olds and under do have an understanding that when they come across porn, either intentionally or unintentionally, this is not real life. They're able to differentiate between fantasy and reality. I think in the same way that under-13s watch movies and consume other forms of media and are able to contextualise that, young people do have those skills. It's about making sure that all young people have those skills.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Before I lose my train of thought, I just wanted to follow up on Miss Deviant. When you were answering the Chair's question you were talking about age verification and the risk that, if poorly implemented, it could harm sex workers. I just wanted to specifically clarify my understanding. Are you talking

about age verification tools that require people to provide identification documents and other things that are violating privacy as the risk specifically?

DARCY DEVIANT: Yes. I think that there's a concern with users on either side, whether they're performers or they're consumers, that if they're providing ID to get into websites their data is not going to be kept safe. We don't know who will be holding this data if it's a large company like Pornhub or something, and there are risks of that data being leaked, which also I think creates shame. People don't want other people to know that they're watching porn, and then they may not be viewing it. I just think that, yes, there are overall concerns with how they're housing all of that and how they're going to deal with that, and if we can trust these websites.

MISH PONY: I'll just follow on from that. One of the main concerns is that if consumers want to access paid content and they're hit with an age verification wall, they have to provide identity documents of some kind. They're just going to go to some illegal site that has stolen that content that doesn't ask for their age verification, and then download it through torrenting or something like that. So sex workers' incomes will be directly impacted by implementing age verification measures.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: I'll just keep going on with the age verification and the identification. As I understand it, Pornhub, you pay to access most of the material. Most of those sites, like OnlyFans, people are paying for this material. Presumably to pay, nobody's posting cash through their computer. There would be credit card and other details that are already held. We've already got these companies having extensive financial records. Is there any concern that that data is insecure?

MISH PONY: In regard to that, a credit card isn't really an identity document. If someone steals your credit card number, they can't really effectively steal your identity or find out who you are, whereas age verification can't be done just with a credit card number. It requires some form of actual identity document like passport photo ID, so it is a more invasive practice. For Pornhub, it's a mix of free content where the revenue is raised through advertising before the actual clip. But with Pornhub, you actually can't use, I believe, Visa or Mastercard because they refuse to deal with Pornhub. There are other payment methods which are more discreet than using a credit card. That's part of a longstanding issue of financial discrimination against adult services. But, yes, to be honest, age verification will—

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: But in terms of data security, which was the concern that was raised, I think most people are very concerned about the security of their credit card, because significant amounts of money can be stolen if credit cards are compromised. If there isn't a concern about data security in relation to payment methods, I'm struggling to see why there would be a concern about data security in relation to any other details that might be provided as, frankly, are routinely provided for a host of other transactions that one conducts online.

MISH PONY: I might let Eros jump in at this point.

SEAN MULCAHY: Ms Carter, if I might just take us back for a moment, I think the concern is that age verification will be used at the point of entry to a website. So as opposed to a credit card that you would utilise when you're making payment for the content, people will be required to provide that data at the point of entry. We should say at the moment we've got a system that operates underage assurance where things are age-gated and people do not need to provide that identifying information at the point of entry. Our concern is around ensuring that whatever measures are put in place they be privacy protecting. We're particularly concerned by, for example, in the stage two codes that are now being considered by eSafety, proposed models like facial recognition because of two things. Firstly, it's privacy invasive, and, secondly, it creates a real honeypot of data that would be attractive to people that are seeking to utilise that data. We can point to Australian cases, for example, Optus or Medibank, where that data has been utilised previously. There are some real and legitimate concerns around collecting that much data at that point of entry.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Dr Mulcahy, can I take you to your submission where you discussed the Online Safety (Basic Online Safety Expectations) Determination 2022, which states that online providers will:

- take reasonable steps to ensure that technological or other measures are in effect to prevent access by children to class 2 material on the website.

How is it that 12-, 13- and 14-year-olds are able to access class 2 material on websites in Australia if that measure is effective?

SEAN MULCAHY: In our view, they shouldn't be able to, but I think as others have stepped you through, unfortunately, children are able to find ways around through VPNs and the like to gain access to this material. In our view, we want to ensure that there are protections in place to ensure that children can't access that material. That's why we support things like these age-gating mechanisms. It could be that more can be done within

the age verification place, but it needs to be carefully balanced to ensure that any measures aren't privacy invasive as well.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Dr Mulcahy, could you step us through exactly what the age assurance measures are that are in place now, and any strengthening of those that you would recommend to ensure that 12-year-olds can't be accessing class 2 material?

SEAN MULCAHY: At the moment, as we've set out in our submission, there's an age-gating process whereby a person who needs to seek access to that material has to submit a declaration that they're at least 18 years of age, that they're given a warning about the material that's on the website, and they're given information around how parents and guardians may control access to class 2 material. This includes things through filters and the like, and taking reasonable steps to confirm that person's age. We're in the process now—

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Sorry, can I just stop you there? What's a reasonable step to confirm the person's age?

SEAN MULCAHY: At the moment we're in the process, through the stage two codes that are being developed by the eSafety Commissioner, of working through what that might look like. There are some suggestions that have been put there—

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Does that mean that at the moment reasonable steps are not being taken to confirm age?

SEAN MULCAHY: Reasonable steps are being taken to confirm age, whether that be through—

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: What do they look like?

SEAN MULCAHY: They can include things like, as I mentioned, the declaration that the person's above 18 years of age, as you mentioned, through credit cards and the like to confirm that as well too. But now we're going into the stage two online safety regulations there's now this discussion between industry and the eSafety Commissioner around what that can look like. I would also note that this is in the context of the Commonwealth Government doing their age verification trials as well, so we're waiting to see what comes out of that. As I've been saying, it's really crucial that there be measures in place to be able to confirm that a person who's accessing this is at least 18 years of age, but also to protect people's privacy and their data, and to avoid the situation where data is being collected in a way that's privacy invasive and creates real risks or honeypots of data emerging.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: I understand that final draft codes were to be provided to the eSafety Commissioner by December 2024. On notice are you able to provide us with a copy of what was being provided to the eSafety Commissioner?

SEAN MULCAHY: Yes, happily, we can do that.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: That would be great. Thank you very much.

GRAEME DUNNE: I'd just like to add that there was a delay not caused by industry. I understand the eSafety Commissioner now has those codes. I understand there are eight different codes. They were delivered on or about 28 February, and they're under the consideration of the eSafety Commissioner. We're waiting for the eSafety Commissioner to provide feedback on all eight codes.

Dr AMANDA COHN: There was a comment made earlier in the day around this question of ethical porn, and whether or not there can be ethical porn. I'm interested in your understanding of what that would mean, if there was an ethical porn industry that really looked after sex workers and protected them from exploitation.

MISH PONY: I think it's an unhelpful demarcation. What is ethical porn? Porn where workers are paid, there are good industry standards and it's a good workplace. When you're watching ethical porn, you wouldn't necessarily be able to say, "That scene is ethical and that scene is not ethical," because you're not really aware of how something is produced. The same as if you go to a grocery store. You can't say, "That cucumber has happy workers and that cucumber doesn't have happy workers." But I think in order for ethical work practices and workplaces to exist, obviously, decriminalisation and effective workplace regulations that apply to any workplace equally. In New South Wales, for instance, we do have a decriminalised or largely decriminalised industry. There are those workplace health and safety measures able to be implemented and those industrial regulations. That to me is ethical. It doesn't matter if it's big porn—as people like to call it—or small independent operators. They can both be ethical, so long as workplace standards are good.

DARCY DEVIANT: I'd also like to add to that that we do have a largely decriminalised landscape in New South Wales. We are able to access our workplace rights in a meaningful way, but it comes back to the concern that we have about the nature of this inquiry, where we are perpetuating—we're having discussions that

pitch things as harmful, and then they create stigma. I think that when we do create that stigma, it creates barriers to people accessing their workplace rights, and they are less likely to report and to seek out help if they were experiencing any kind of workplace issue. If we really are concerned about an ethical porn industry where porn stars are treated with the care and respect that we want to see, we also need to not have such stigmatising conversations around the industry.

The Hon. WES FANG: It's been a day of definitions, almost. I've heard quite a few today. We've spoken about ethical pornography. One of the witnesses earlier was speaking about standard non-violent pornography. We've spoken about the different classifications, and the like. If we boil everything down and look at the title of this inquiry—"Impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional and physical health"—something you said earlier prompted me to ask this question. You believe the evidence shows that young people know that pornography isn't real life. I think this inquiry, if we boil it down and look at the title—I know there are the terms of reference—in effect, the concern is that young people are getting their first sexual education experiences through watching pornography.

How do you think we make sure that young people know that a respectful, mutually beneficial relationship between two people is not typically what you would see in pornography? Do you agree that the majority of pornography isn't always what happens between two consenting people in a sexualised manner? Also, how do we make sure that we do that in a way that connects to them and doesn't push them into other areas where they perhaps get misinformation, learn the wrong things, learn disrespect et cetera? I think that's the crux of what we're trying to do today.

DARCY DEVIANT: I'll start. I think that the idea of consent, what consenting adults would do, is a dangerous road to go down. Just because you or I might not consent to something doesn't mean that two other people might not. I think that what is described as harmful often is in kink territory, or is outside of heteronormative sex. Our submission discussed something which is called porn literacy, which I guess is just the same as media literacy but for porn. I think that young people should be taught that porn is for entertainment, like movies, like video games, which aren't suffering as much scrutiny. If young people are having their first exposure to sex through porn, I think that is a failing of the education system rather than a problem with porn. I think that parents and teachers should be making sure that young people are spoken to about sex so that they don't go, "What is this thing?", and then seek it out and find something that they don't understand.

The Hon. WES FANG: Do you agree then that pornography should be reserved for people that are over 18 and that the ability to access pornography under that age is potentially creating an unhealthy view of what a sexual relationship with another person might be?

DARCY DEVIANT: No. Whether or not someone should do something doesn't really matter because they're going to anyway. As someone who was a young person, it's natural for young people to be curious. I think that people can watch things healthily as long as they have a critical eye and they understand what's happening and that it's not real, and they know their own values and they're taught to consume things that align with that or see things that aren't in line with their values and understand that that's not within their values.

The Hon. WES FANG: When you gave evidence earlier to the Chair's question around some of the impacts that age verification might have—and my colleague Dr Amanda Cohn touched on it—you indicated that age verification could potentially have a detrimental impact on the earnings of some workers. I did wonder whether you meant that by people under the age of 18 not being able to access it would mean that there's potentially a financial impact as well. Is that what you were referring to?

DARCY DEVIANT: No. I see how that was a misunderstanding.

MISH PONY: If you're an independent porn performer and you want to sell your own content directly to adults, if you have to implement age verification, you're going to have to pay money for that. That's going to be a cost and maybe you can't wear that cost, so then you'll have to sell your content via Pornhub or OnlyFans, which take the cost of your earnings. So you're really squeezing out small independent producers with the cost of regulation. But then also adult consumers who have fears around their identity being stolen or that it's not secure will just not go through those paid sites and will use torrenting platforms, which won't have age verification, or use a VPN to circumvent that to go to some other free site that is essentially stolen, because there are lots of tube sites that steal the content of performers so people can watch it for free. You're redirecting people from the legal market into a black market of porn, essentially, I suppose.

The CHAIR: Could I ask a question from the performer's point of view, from the industry point of view? I hear what you've been saying about the framing, so I'm interested in that. Do you think there's such a thing as harmful pornography? If there is, what are the features of that that make it different?

DARCY DEVIANT: I think that if two consenting adults are doing something together, they've agreed to do that. I think that if there's not consent involved, it's no longer porn.

The CHAIR: That's about the consent between the two people, and that's one thing, but the pornography is pornography because it has an audience. Is anything that's consented to between two people not harmful? Is there nothing that enters that harmful arena if it's published or viewed? I hear what you're saying about consent between two people. Do you maintain that that's the same thing for the airing of those?

DARCY DEVIANT: I think that really what I'm more concerned with is that porn is being used to scapegoat a range of society's problems. If people are consuming what some others might consider harmful, I don't think that that's to do with porn; I think that that's to do with what's happening around us on a much broader scale.

MISH PONY: Any form of media can have harmful impacts, but that's not intrinsic to the media itself; it's what messages people take away. There can be harmful impacts of reality TV, harmful impacts of any mainstream media, but it's around making sure that we have frameworks in society that people understand. Just because you see someone in a high-speed chase in a movie doesn't mean you do that in real life. Having a society that normalises consent negotiations is how we can mitigate any potential harms of people watching porn.

The CHAIR: Can I ask—and these are genuine questions—in terms of that consent aspect, what proportion of porn would show the negotiation of consent between two people? Again, not disputing that there is consent, but how often is that shown in pornographic content? It's asking you to generalise. I'm just asking for your opinion.

MISH PONY: There is a very limited subset of porn that does show pre-scene negotiations and post-scene debriefing, and that's part of their marketing. But, really, nobody is accessing porn to watch the pre-negotiation and post-debrief. They are looking for the action. I don't think there ever will be a large market for porn that shows the pre-negotiations. But in the same way that porn doesn't show those negotiations that might happen in "real life", nor do movies, really. I've not seen a mainstream movie where people talk about, "Do you want to have sex? What kinds of things are you feeling like tonight?" It kind of happens magically. But what is often shown is mutual enjoyment. There's a New Zealand Classification Office report from not that long ago that shows that the most popular videos do show mutual enjoyment. I think shows of mutual enjoyment are a form of non-verbal consent.

The Hon. WES FANG: Part of the problem about education through pornography is that, while there is no discussion about consent in pornography, the other thing that isn't a feature of pornography is where people have a discussion about consent and agree to not have sexual relations or agree that there's a barrier or a reason to not do something, because obviously there's nothing happening. Any time that people watch pornography, there's obviously a level of action. If people view that as the mainstream, normal way of acting through achieving consent before sexual relationships, they're not going to get that other aspect because it doesn't exist in pornography. That's part of the problem, isn't it? There's a whole aspect of consent that isn't even broached in pornography. Does that make sense?

DARCY DEVIANT: I think that porn is very diverse. Maybe I misunderstood the question.

The Hon. WES FANG: You don't ever see somebody going, "Can we engage in intercourse?" Someone goes, "No, actually, I don't feel like it. I've had too much to drink. I don't feel like I can consent." And they go, "Okay, you're right. I should put you in a taxi. You should go home." You don't see that, but that is what society expects. If somebody is vulnerable and not able to consent, we would expect that those conversations would occur. They don't occur in pornography. We need to get ahead of that game, don't we? We need to say that pornography is so far on one end of the spectrum, but there's this whole other spectrum in relation to sexual consent—young people understanding what somebody else wants and consents to. That's not contained anywhere in pornography, is it?

MISH PONY: But I suppose, by that argument, you could say that people are watching porn, so they're just going to assume people are having sex 24/7 because that's all porn depicts. But people know that's not the case, and they understand in their own body as well, "I'm not wanting to have sex all the time," so they're able to critique that this is just video of people having sex if they want to have it.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: This is a different question to the one I was intending to ask. Everything you say sounds very sensible until I think that porn is being accessed by eight- and nine-year-olds. Do you think they have the critical faculty to say, "This is not life," and to be able to make those judgements?

MISH PONY: I don't think any of us are saying that eight- and nine-year-olds watching porn is a good thing, and we're not saying that porn is a great consent educator. It's not. But from the research that I've seen, eight- or nine-year-olds watching porn at that age, if it's unintentional, they might quickly see it and then close it

because they feel awkward and embarrassed and confused, in which case they should absolutely have an adult to talk to—"What have I seen? Why did I see that? What were they doing?" If there are eight- and nine-year-olds intentionally accessing porn, maybe they're very developed or there's something else going on in their life that is directing them there, in which case I would be very concerned. I haven't seen any research that's highlighting that as a major issue. I know it's probably an issue that family and domestic violence services are encountering, and that's probably happening within a domestic and family violence context or issues with development.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: It was brought to our attention by the New South Wales Government because of the programs they need to run.

The CHAIR: Our time has come to an end. I thank you all very much for appearing both online and in person today, and for your submissions. I don't know if any questions were taken on notice, but there might be supplementary questions as well. The secretariat will be in touch.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 16:05.