

Pornography,
young people,
and preventing
violence against
women



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About this paper

This paper explores the relationship between young people's use of, or exposure to, pornography, and the development of the kinds of attitudes and beliefs that are known to drive violence against women. These include attitudes about violence itself, as well as particular kinds of attitudes and beliefs about sex and relationships, men's and women's roles and identities, and masculinity and femininity.

The literature reveals that due to the nature of contemporary pornography it can contribute to the development of harmful attitudes and behaviours in relation to gender roles and relationships among those who watch it. This impact can be particularly significant among young people, because adolescence is a time when ideas and attitudes about gender roles, identities and relationships are being developed, and Our Watch's research shows that both young men and young women are accessing pornography years before their first sexual relationships.

The aim of the paper is to inform the development of an effective approach to working on this issue, with a view to reducing the underlying drivers of violence against women and assisting young people to develop positive, equal and respectful relationships by seeking to address pornography's influence. It draws on (largely international) literature on young people's experiences of pornography, together with new data from a 2018 Our Watch survey of nearly 2,000 Australian young people aged 15-20. This survey research with young people is an important addition to the literature because it asks young people not only whether they have accessed pornography, but also what they think and feel about pornography, and because it specifically investigates linkages between pornography use and attitudes relating to the gendered drivers of violence against women (as set out in *Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia*).

This paper brings together findings from the literature and Our Watch's research to identify a range of implications and opportunities for the development of an effective response to pornography's influence on young people's development of ideas and attitudes about gender roles and identities, sex and relationships. It identifies opportunities for policy interventions, systemic and cultural change, and for the development of practical tools and resources.

Ethics approval for Our Watch's research was obtained from Bellberry Limited and the survey sampled young people from all States and Territories. Quotes from participants in this survey research are included in italics throughout this paper.

A note about scope

There are many kinds and genres of pornography. Most of the available research on pornography analyses the most popular pornography, and focuses its content analysis on scenes that feature both men and women. The scope of our analysis of the literature on pornography reflects this. However, the paper briefly touches on how lesbian women are portrayed in porn in relation to the gendered drivers of violence against women.

Introduction

Pornography (sexually explicit media, primarily intended to sexually arouse the audience¹) is a powerful medium for conveying messages or ideas about sex, sexuality and relationships, men's and women's roles and identities, and masculinity and femininity. Like other forms of media, pornography both reproduces and helps shape broader social norms about these issues, including a number of harmful and limiting gender stereotypes.

The influence of pornography is of concern to those working to prevent violence against women and promote respectful relationships and gender equality, because the bulk of evidence identifies both frequent depictions of violence and typically stereotypical representations of men and women in pornography. For example, studies have highlighted the high frequency of specific violent behaviours, largely directed at women, including gagging² and verbally abusive language,³ and the more generally prevalent portrayal of male dominance and female submission.⁴

While the relationship is complex, research suggests links between people's pornography use, and their attitudes regarding relationships, sex, and men's and women's roles and identities. For example, research suggests greater pornography use is associated with less progressive attitudes about gender roles,⁵ a belief that women are sex objects,⁶ and rape myth acceptance.⁷ ⁱ

Particular concerns arise with regard to young people's use of pornography, due to the formative stage of their development. Our Watch's research identified that nearly half (48%) of young men have seen pornography by the age of 13 and nearly half (48%) of young women by the age of 15. On average, young men are viewing pornography for the first time 3 years before their first sexual relationships and young women 2 years before their first sexual relationship.ⁱⁱ This data suggests that there is a significant opportunity for pornography to influence young people's views and attitudes at a time in their lives when they are developing an understanding about sex and sexual relationships.

Given the potentially harmful messages and representations in much pornography, this is cause for concern. It suggests a need to find ways to effectively engage young people in critical discussions about pornography, the messages it conveys, and its potential impact on their lives and relationships, and those of their peers.

i 'Rape myth acceptance' refers to holding false and violence condoning beliefs about sexual assault which place blame on the victim and/or excuse the perpetrator. For example, a belief that if a woman wears revealing clothing or is intoxicated she is 'asking for it', or a belief that men sexually assault women because they 'cannot control their sex drive'.

ii 'First sexual relationship' was self-defined by survey participants.

Young people and pornography

Young people's use of pornography

Our Watch's 2018 survey of nearly 2,000 young people (aged 15-20) found that the median age of first seeing pornography is 13 for young men and 16 for young women.⁸ Among those surveyed who had previously seen pornography (78% of the sample), young men were more likely to have actively sought out pornography the first time they viewed it (50%) compared to young women (40%). In contrast, young women were more likely to have first come across pornography by accident (56%) compared to young men (46%). For those who sought it out, the primary motivation for first doing so for both young women and young men was curiosity (78%). Other motivations included sexual stimulation (26%), keeping up with peers (18%), and sexual education (14%).

The survey results show that young men use pornography far more regularly than young women. Over half (56%) of young men surveyed indicated that they viewed pornography at least once per week over the past 12 months, with over 1 in 6 young men (17%) indicating daily usage. Conversely, 15% of young women reported at least weekly usage, with just 1% of young women stating that they watch pornography every day. Of those who have seen pornography, 69% of young men and 55% of young women reported feeling arousal when watching it.

Young people's views about pornography

Young people have a mix of views and feelings about pornography, often holding conflicting views at the same time. For example, some report viewing pornography as entertaining or arousing, but at the same time express some concern or discomfort about what they are seeing. This conflict suggests that young people are beginning to consider some of the potential negative impacts of pornography but that they need more support and guidance to help them think critically about pornography's portrayals of gender roles and relationships, and the potential impacts and implications of this in their own lives.

While young people often expressed both positive and negative views and emotions in relation to pornography, young women were significantlyⁱⁱⁱ more likely than young men to feel negative emotions when watching or thinking about porn, including embarrassment, disgust, and degradation. Conversely, young men were significantly more likely than young women to experience positive emotions, including happiness, excitement, and arousal.

I love it – Young man, 18

It's fun but unrealistic and makes me feel a bit guilty – Young man, 16

There are various examples in the data of young people's emerging capacity for critical responses to pornography. For example, young people generally do not perceive pornography to be particularly educational (47% felt that pornography is not at all educational and only 3% saw it as very educational). Nor do many see pornography as a good way to learn about sex (48% think it is not at all a good way to learn about sex, and only 10% think it is at least a fairly good way to learn about sex). Pornography is also not

iii When referring to the 2018 Our Watch data, use of the term 'significantly' refers to statistical significance.

generally perceived as realistic, with this belief significantly more pronounced for young women than young men – with 62% of young women and 47% of young men reporting that they think that pornography is not at all realistic (with only 3% of young men reporting that pornography is very realistic).

I've learnt that porn is often unrealistic and as such, I use it for entertainment rather than educational purposes – Young man, 17

I understand that what is depicted in porn is often unrealistic, however I still watch it occasionally – Young woman, 15

Research conducted in New Zealand “tells us that young people are aware and thinking about porn, its influence, and the issues this raises”. Common themes raised by young people included “that porn promotes false expectations about unhealthy views about sex and relationships, and that it normalises violence and aggressive behaviour”.⁹

At the same time however, a high rate of young people reported that they had used pornography as a source of information to learn about sex and sexual relationships in the past 12 months (60% of young men and 41% of young women). Young people were also more likely to access pornography as a source of information on sex, than to get this information from their parents, healthcare workers or other family members. This points to a significant gap in the provision of appropriate information about sex and sexual relationships for young people, suggesting that young people are using pornography to fill this gap – despite many acknowledging that it is neither realistic nor a good way to learn about sex. Various studies have pointed to the need for comprehensive sexuality and relationships education that meets the needs of young people, including information on developing and maintaining respectful relationships, and responding to the influence of pornography.¹⁰

It can be educational and enjoyable too, once you can distinguish which parts aren't realistic/ are harmful – Young woman, 18

It provides deeper education than what you might get in school, but some people can't distinguish porn from reality – Young man, 15

While it is crucial to consider the role that pornography plays in young people's understanding of sex and sexual relationships, it is also important to understand the context in which young men and women access porn – that is, in many cases young people are not purposively accessing pornography as an education tool, but for arousal, curiosity, and entertainment.

A survey among young people largely from the United States, found that young people (both under 18 and 18-25 years) were more likely than older age groups to cite the following main reasons for viewing pornography: ‘When I feel horny’, ‘Sometimes I've nothing better to do’, ‘When I'm bored, can't relax, can't sleep’ and ‘for a laugh’.¹¹ Reflecting on the responses of young people under 18, the researchers said:

Porn provides ways of venting, soothing oneself, grappling with the experiences of growing up, with changes in the body, with the surges of desire and ‘hormones’, but it is also employed with some deliberation as part of a strategy for developing a sexual repertoire, a readiness for sexual relationships or a responsible approach to sex.¹²

Young people's views on the potential harm of pornography

Young people report various concerns about the pornography that they have seen or that their peers are watching, with 46% of young women and 37% of young men thinking that pornography is at least somewhat harmful.

Some videos where it is meant to seem non-consensual feel a bit too real – Young man, 16

Young women were significantly more likely than young men to report having seen something in pornography that concerned them (46% of young women, compared to 40% of young men). This could reflect that some young women are thinking more critically about the content they see, rather than that they are seeing a more concerning type of pornography than young men, or alternatively could reflect the gendered nature of the concerning aspects of pornography.

It is unrealistic and often enforces gender roles. It is not ok to treat people in certain ways without consent – Young woman, 19

Views about the potential for pornography to be harmful to women are clearly gendered, with women far more likely to report this type of concern. A majority of young women (53%) felt that pornography is at least somewhat violent towards women, a view shared by only 36% of young men. Similarly, substantially more young women (67%) felt that pornography is at least somewhat degrading to women, compared to young men (46%).

For many young women who described concerns about pornography in their own words, this concern was linked to the representation or treatment of women. Many young men's descriptions of their concerns about pornography tended to be focused on their perception that it was 'unrealistic' rather than because they were concerned about the treatment of women or the portrayal of male sexual aggression.

Every partner I've had has watched some form of porn that makes me feel uncomfortable. From domination sort of porn to porn that I have compared to consensual gang rape. I have walked in on them watching it or have found it in their search history. I to a degree understand sexual fantasies but some of these things made me feel very uncomfortable and made me question a lot of things – Young woman, 20

It's not realistic but hey still a good way to get off – Young man, 16

While there is little other research that explores young people's own views about pornography, recent studies that do explore this found that young people have concerns, including:

- the predominant representation of women in subservient roles, and how this may influence attitudes and behaviours that maintain men's power over women;¹³
- portrayals of sex in pornography that are primarily oriented towards male pleasure and could promote women performing or behaving in specific ways during sex to meet men's expectations;¹⁴

- that pornography could create uncertainty and demands around sexual relationships from their male peers and partners;¹⁵ and
- that young men may pressure young girls to perform unwanted, degrading, painful or violating sexual acts that they have seen in pornography.¹⁶

*I am worried about the effect porn has on boys my age
i.e. the expectations they will place on me and other women
as a result of viewing porn – Young woman, 17*

Pornography and the drivers of violence against women

Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia demonstrates how gender inequality sets the necessary social context in which violence against women occurs. There are four particular expressions of gender inequality which consistently predict higher rates of violence against women (summarised as the ‘drivers’ of violence against women):

- Rigid gender roles and stereotyped constructions of masculinity and femininity
- Men’s control of decision-making and limits to women’s independence in public and private life
- Condoning of violence against women
- Male peer relations that emphasise aggression and disrespect towards women

The next section of this paper explores the nature of contemporary pornography, and the ways in which young people’s viewing and use of pornography may contribute to and reinforce these drivers.^{iv} Before doing so, two caveats must be made.

Firstly, various correlational, experimental and longitudinal research has shown pornography use has an impact on subsequent attitudes regarding gender roles and relationships, and men’s use of sexually aggressive behaviour.¹⁷ However, it is likely that there is also a relationship in the other direction. That is, for some people exposure to pornography can shape or encourage violence-supportive attitudes, while other people may be drawn to highly violent pornography, because they already hold such attitudes.

Secondly, the influence of pornography consumption on people’s attitudes and behaviours is moderated by individual characteristics and circumstances, as well as affected by the broader cultural context (which itself includes gender stereotypes, sexism, sexual objectification and violence-supportive attitudes), meaning that pornography consumption is one risk factor among many others for the development of such attitudes and behaviours.¹⁸

Rigid gender roles and stereotyped constructions of masculinity and femininity

Pornography conveys messages about gender roles in sexual relationships and the ‘nature’ and meaning of masculinity and femininity. Typically these reinforce the rigid and stereotyped ideas about gender roles and masculinity and femininity that have been identified as a driver of violence against women, as described above.

iv Our Watch’s survey included a section with four scales containing attitudinal statements based on the four gendered drivers of violence set out in the *Change the Story* framework. These scales have yet to be validated, all have at least acceptable reliability ($\alpha > 0.7$) and two have good reliability ($\alpha > 0.8$). The four scales are all positively skewed and highly correlated. This section of the background paper includes comparisons between those who score highly on the gendered drivers of violence against women with the remainder of the participants. Specifically, due to the high positive skew of the scales, comparisons were made on the basis of membership in the top quartile of each driver, thereby highlighting the differences between the quarter participants who held the most harmful attitudes towards women and the remaining three-quarters. Non-parametric tests were used in the analysis.

Men are often depicted as aggressive, controlling and dominant in pornography.¹⁹ These types of depictions of men have been identified as consequences of sexist and stereotypical ideas about masculinity that may increase the probability of violence against women.²⁰

It can be useful when trying to figure out sexuality but at the same time it often communicates unrealistic expectations regarding looks and roles in the bedroom – Young man, 18

In contrast, women in pornography are often depicted as submissive, eager and willing to comply with the demands of male characters.²¹ Women are also routinely objectified in pornography, for example, close-ups of women's body parts occur significantly more often than close ups of men's body parts.²² Men's pleasure is valued over women's pleasure in pornography – for example, men are significantly more likely to be depicted experiencing orgasm.²³ This further objectifies women by depicting them as there to please men, rendering their own pleasure and enjoyment secondary or not relevant at all.

While content analyses find an over-representation of portrayals of male pleasure compared to female pleasure, Our Watch's research showed that young men and women noticed the experience of pleasure quite differently in pornography. Whereas young women were more likely to notice male pleasure than female pleasure (consistent with what content analyses suggest is most prevalent in pornography), young men were the opposite, stating that they noticed female pleasure significantly more than male pleasure in the porn they consumed.

I also think there is a lot of focus on the pleasure of men during sex. – Young woman, 15

Similarly, the portrayal of 'lesbian' scenes in pornography aimed at male viewers has similar effects – rendering women as there to perform such scenes for men's pleasure rather than their own, and contributing to the objectification of women. Male-created pornography depicting 'lesbian' women has been described by research participants as "completely stereotypical of [male] heterosexual fantasy" and misrepresenting lesbian sexuality.²⁴

Ideas that women are 'naturally' passive and submissive, combined with objectified and sexualised representations such as these, can cast women as targets for exploitation.²⁵ There is a significant relationship between exposure to sexually explicit online films and a belief that women are sex objects for example; studies have identified exposure to pornography as both a potential cause and consequence of viewing women as objects.²⁶

[I'm] concerned about the lack of passion or love, and how common male dominance is. This could convey misconceptions to young people about what love/sex is about, and maybe even cause them to objectify women or see them as sex objects – Young woman, 17

While women are not always depicted in a single way in pornography, different representations of women still conform to limiting stereotypes, including on the basis of factors such as age and race. For example, female actors in pornography clips under the 'teen' category have been found to be consistent with socially prescribed sexual gender roles and often depicted as having far less power than their male partners.²⁷ Meanwhile, female actors in 'MILF'^v category pornography videos are depicted as more aggressive in pursuing

v Commonly used acronym meaning 'Mother I'd Like to F***'

sex than the younger women in the teen videos are.²⁸ This illustrates the way that women are portrayed in limited and rigid ways, put into defined categories and roles based on their sex and age.

Racialised gender stereotypes are also frequently conveyed in pornography, with “implicit messages about race... inextricably intertwined with those about sex”.²⁹ For example, Asian women are typically depicted as sexually submissive and inactive,³⁰ black men dehumanised³¹ and Asian men feminised.³² In these ways, pornography reflects and reinforces broader social stereotypes about different groups of women and men, stereotypes that frequently involve the complex intersection of both sexist and racist ideas.

Research has found links between the use of pornography and less progressive attitudes to gender roles (eg. a belief in male dominance and female submission,³³ and a belief that women are sex objects).³⁴ Our Watch’s survey of young people also suggests a relationship between pornography usage and a belief in rigid gender roles and identities. For instance, young people who watched pornography more regularly were more likely to believe that men should not display their emotions and that it is more important for women to be pretty than smart.^{vi}

Men’s control of decision-making and limits to women’s independence

Men’s control of decision-making and limits to women’s independence is another identified driver of violence against women. Sexually explicit material that prioritises or exclusively depicts the preferences of male characters, and repeatedly shows men dominating women, expresses and reinforces this harmful social norm. Ideas about the legitimacy of male power and control contribute to violence against women by sending a message to both men and women that women have a lower social value, and are less worthy of respect, messages that may be interpreted as making them legitimate targets of violence.³⁵

General males’ treatment of females in a lot of porn feels very disrespectful and made me uncomfortable if people commonly feel this way about females and worried that others viewing it may begin to view it as normal – Young woman, 20

One expression of men’s dominance in pornography is that male characters direct the sexual encounter, with men typically depicted as being in control of the pace/direction of sexual activity.³⁶ Another expression of this driver is male characters forcing female characters to perform a certain sexual act, with women eventually appearing to acquiesce and enjoy the act despite not initially consenting to it. This can also be seen in women’s responses to violence in pornography; for example, one content analysis found that women who were gagged in a scene usually responded neutrally, positively, or with ‘mixed signals’ (that is, first appearing to dislike it and then changing their response to one of pleasure).³⁷ Such a script complies with perceptions of masculinity which require men to be ‘in charge’ and persistent, both during sexual encounters and more broadly in their relationships with women. Further, it reproduces the ideas that femininity is characterised by passivity or subservience, that women should not be in charge of their own sexual desires, and that consent is not necessary or valued.

vi Correlations were statistically significant ($r(1502) = 0.13$ and $r(1502) = 0.16$, respectively, $ps < 0.001$).

Results from Our Watch’s survey suggest a link between pornography consumption and the view that men should be ‘in charge’. For example, young people who watched pornography on a more regular basis were more likely than others to believe that women should learn to obey men, and that things tend to be better when men are in charge.^{vii}

Condoning of violence against women

Porn makes an emphatic and substantial contribution to an insidious kind of ‘cultural wallpaper’ that normalises and, indeed, eroticises, violence against women.³⁸

Maree Crabbe

Condoning of violence against women is another of the identified drivers of such violence. The condoning of violence against women can be through justifying, excusing, trivialising or downplaying it.³⁹ These representations occur frequently in pornography, in which portrayals of violence are highly gendered – that is, violence is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men and directed towards women.

[I’m concerned when I see] women are treated very harshly by male partners e.g. being slapped in the face, thrown around and don’t seem to be enjoying it or are crying – Young woman, 20

Sometimes I’m quite shocked by the amount of violence in it – Young man, 20

While specific frequencies vary depending on the methodology and interpretation,^{viii} overall and taken together content analyses have revealed frequent aggression, non-consensual behaviour and multiple forms of violence towards women in pornography.⁴⁰ These include physical aggression (eg. hitting, slapping, gagging) and verbal aggression (eg. name-calling). The frequency and eroticisation of such depictions may normalise and condone violence against women, in sexual relationships and more generally. Pornography may encourage these views and/or reinforce them where they already exist.

For example, pornography consumption has been found to be associated with both verbal and physical sexual aggression.⁴¹ Research has also found that men who are very frequent pornography users have sexual aggression levels that are much higher than their counterparts who do not consume pornography very frequently.⁴² The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children also found that more frequent consumption of pornography by young men is associated with greater likelihood of enacting sexual behaviour that is unwanted by the other person.⁴³

I love watching porn for the stimulation, but never as a means of education, because most of what is shown is either outright, or borderline rape – Young man, 17

vii Correlations were statistically significant, $r(1502) = 0.11$ and $r(1502) = 0.16$, respectively, $ps < 0.001$.

viii For example, some studies simply classify certain behaviours as aggressive while other studies classify behaviours based on an interpretation of how they are received (eg. verbal and physical cues for lack of consent).

*[I'm concerned when I see] how the women are treated roughly,
which makes viewers believe that it's how women
want to be treated – Young woman, 18*

Pornography use has been linked to 'rape myth acceptance'.⁴⁴ Our Watch's data reveal an association between pornography consumption and attitudes condoning of violence against women. For instance, more frequent consumption of pornography was associated with victim blaming attitudes, such as the belief that if a woman is affected by alcohol or drugs, she is at least partly responsible for whatever happens to her.^{ix}

Male peer relations that emphasise aggression and disrespect towards women

The fourth identified driver of violence against women is male peer relations that emphasise aggression and disrespect towards women. Consumption of pornography may intensify the investment of young men in such constructions of gender and (hetero)sexuality that are already part of some peer cultures, including pressure to gain masculine status through sexual achievement, a sexual double standard of female 'sluts' and male 'studs', narrow images of female sexual desirability, an obsessive focus on bodies and sexual acts, and tolerance for sexual violence.⁴⁵

My friends were talking about DVDs he found in his parents' room and occasionally we joked and pulled some porn up to watch online, I felt quite awkward and uncomfortable as I felt it was quite weird to watch with friends – Young man, 20

Watching pornography in a group can be a form of bonding between young men or a way to achieve status among male friends.⁴⁶ When male peer groups view pornography showing violence and aggression towards women, it may suggest or reinforce the perceived 'acceptability' or normalisation of such violence. This is particularly significant for young people who are at a stage of life where they are forming their ideas about gender roles, identities, relationships and sexuality.

Pornography may also depict – and in doing so, normalise – disrespectful and aggressive male peer relations, for example in scenes where groups of men are having sex with one woman and are portrayed to be bonding via their aggressive or degrading behaviour towards her.

The data from Our Watch's survey indicates a link between pornography usage and the condoning of male peer relationships that emphasise disrespect towards women. For example, young men who more frequently consumed pornography were more likely to believe there is no harm in men making jokes about women in the company of their male friends.^x

ix Correlation was statistically significant, $r(1502) = 0.14, p < 0.001$.

x Correlation was statistically significant, $r(1502) = 0.24, p < 0.001$.

Emerging directions for work on this issue

This is a complex and sensitive area, and there are a range of factors and influences on the development of attitudes and beliefs among young people in different circumstances and contexts. However, there is reliable evidence that pornography reinforces the underlying drivers of violence against women, is regularly accessed by young people, and is impacting on their attitudes, behaviours and experiences.

Many young people see a need for more reliable information and honest conversations about sex, sexual relationships and pornography. A majority (60%) of young people, including two thirds (65%) of young women and over half (51%) of young men feel that there is a need for a campaign or education program that could help manage any harmful effects of pornography on people like themselves.

Further education about sexual health and opening conversations about sex/porn/sexual health is needed! – Young woman, 19

There needs to be a particular emphasis on education of younger people of the unrealistic expectations porn imprints on today's younger and younger viewers – Young man, aged 18

Although enjoyable there are lots of blurred lines in what is real and fake, if younger people had better and safer education in and about porn it would help a lot. Telling people to stop watching porn or to never watch it can be almost as harmful as watching it. – Young woman, aged 19

Research has also found that young people want information about sex and relationships and pornography in ways that are safe, private and credible.⁴⁷

The findings in this paper suggest a range of implications for the development of an effective response to pornography's influence on young people's development of ideas and attitudes about gender roles and identities, sex and relationships.

Efforts to address pornography's influence should be informed by the following key findings:

- Pornography both contributes to and reinforces the kinds of social norms and attitudes that have been identified as drivers of violence against women. There is therefore a strong rationale for initiatives addressing its influence to be part of prevention of violence against women policies, programs and efforts.
- Research shows that many young people access pornography, and they do so at a time when they are developing their understanding of gender roles and identities, sex and relationships. For this reason, primary prevention efforts with young people must address the impacts of pornography.
- Young people access pornography for many different reasons, and pornography use among young people (and/or their peers or partners) is sufficiently widespread and common, that simplistic approaches that seek to simply ban or discourage them from watching it are unlikely to be effective.

- Young people have mixed responses to pornography – with positive and negative feelings and views about it sometimes coexisting. Some are aware of its potential for harm, or can critique some aspects of it, to some extent. But many young people are uncritical about what they see in pornography, and many – particularly young men – do not think critically about the portrayal of gender roles and relationships and the implications for how women are viewed and treated among their peers and in society more generally. This suggests young people would benefit from support, information and education to develop their capacity to think critically about the potentially harmful impact pornography may have on their own views, beliefs and relationships and those of their peers.
- The provision of information and education about pornography has the potential to help mediate its negative impacts on young people, their wellbeing and relationships. This is a key action recommended in research commissioned by the UK Government,⁴⁸ conducted by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner for England⁴⁹ and in UNESCO guidance on sexuality education.⁵⁰
- Work with young people on the issue of pornography should include honest conversations about the harmful messages conveyed in pornography, assistance to build knowledge and skills to think critically about these messages, and support to develop healthy identities and positive, equal and respectful relationships. Given the gendered nature of the research findings, this work needs to be sensitive to the varied needs, views and perceptions of young men and young women. It should also be sensitive to the way that pornography reflects and reinforces broader social stereotypes, including those that involve the complex intersection of both sexist and racist ideas.

Specific opportunities to address this issue in Australia include:

- Producing and providing information, practical tools, resources and other forms of support that help equip parents, carers and guardians to have conversations about pornography with the young people in their lives and support them to build critical thinking skills;
- Producing information and practical tools and resources specifically for young people, and making these accessible to young people, for example through online information and education forums;
- Including the topic of pornography, in an integrated, age-appropriate and sequential way, into respectful relationships education, comprehensive sexuality education and media literacy education;
- Professional education and development for teachers on the topic of pornography, to ensure schools are prepared to undertake this work effectively; and
- Resources and training for other professionals who work with young people (including youth workers, health promotion workers and others) to develop their understanding of the issue of pornography and support them to integrate appropriate actions to address its impacts on young people into their work.

Endnotes

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