



FACTS FOR PREVENTION: The Impact of Pornography on Children & Youth

For the purposes of this fact sheet we define pornography, "as sexually explicit materials (SEM) intended to create sexual arousal in the consumer. Nonviolent pornography is defined as sexually explicit materials without any overt coercive content, but which may sometimes imply acts of submission and/or coercion by the positioning of the models, use of props or displays of unequal power relationships. Violent pornography is defined as sexually explicit materials in which nonconsensual, coercive, and/or violent sexual relations are explicitly portrayed."¹ Nevertheless, researchers have not reached universal consensus on a definition of pornography. Studies sometimes employ other terms or make other distinctions. For a better understanding of each researchers definition of pornography, readers are encouraged to refer to the individual studies cited.

The impact of pornography is relevant to prevention of child sexual abuse and exploitation for a variety of reasons. Further, related research shows the impact of media on children and youth.

- Violent media impacts children and youth.^{2, 3}
- Sexual objectification – the portrayal of a child as a thing for others sexual use – impacts the mental and physical health of girls.⁴
- Sexualized mainstream media contributes to an earlier onset of sexual behavior in youth.^{5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11}
- Newer media appears to have an even greater impact.^{12, 13}
- The result of a recent meta-analysis shows a significant overall relationship between pornography consumption and attitudes supporting violence against women in nonexperimental studies. This relationship was found to be significantly stronger for violent pornography than for nonviolent pornography, although both types of pornography showed significant positive associations with attitudes supporting violence against women. This may translate into considerable social and practical significance when considered across larger populations.¹⁴
- A larger concern is the impact on children who grow, develop, and learn about themselves, their gender and relationships through the lens of pornified culture. This pornified environment paired with the lack of healthy messages and images affects their vulnerability to victimization, perpetration, and effective bystander action.^{15, 16}

“Pornography is influencing everything from how teens language and frame sexuality to how and why they pierce certain body parts to what they expect to give and receive in intimate relationships....after all, how bad can it be if the larger culture around you finds abusive and demeaning acts a turn on?” Jill Manning, PhD, Witherspoon Institute, 2008.¹⁷

Exposure to pornography is common in adolescence.

- Recent studies suggest that exposure to sexual material is common.¹⁸ Fifteen percent of 12–17 year olds report looking at X-rated material either online or through traditional mediums.¹⁹ When unwanted exposure also is included, 42% of 12–17 year olds in one nationally representative survey report any exposure to x-rated material online,²⁰ and 70% of 15–17 year old Internet users in another nationally representative survey reported accidentally viewing pornography online “very” or “somewhat” often.²¹
- In a study of 876 young people aged 15-25 years in Sweden who visited a youth center for a period of one year, “nearly all of the participants had viewed pornographic movies (among those 15 years of age, 98.9% of boys and 73.5% of girls). The majority of males (62.7%) responded positively toward pornography, describing it as ‘stimulating’ and ‘cool,’ but about all ‘exciting.’”²²

“Although prevention is needed, social change is needed even more to combat the normalization of demeaning, harmful sexual images. It is obvious that this change will be difficult to implement given the rapid and pervasive impact of internet-related technology.” Prentky et al. 2010.²³

Pornography is moving from an individual and couples problem to a public health problem, capable of deeply harming the emotional, sexual and relationship well-being of millions of men, women and children. Wendy Maltz, 2009.²⁴

Exposure to pornography has negative effects on healthy development and relationships.

- A study of 2,343 Dutch 13-20 year olds found frequent exposure to SEM (pornography) via the Internet was related to greater sexual uncertainty (i.e., clarity of one’s sexual beliefs or values) and more positive attitudes toward uncommitted sexual exploration (i.e., sexual relations with casual partners).²⁵
- Prolonged exposure to pornography leads to exaggerated perception of sexual activity in the populace (e.g. sodomy, group sex, sadomasochistic practices and bestiality). It also creates dispositional changes including diminished trust in intimate partners, the abandonment of hopes for sexual exclusivity with partners, and the evaluation of promiscuity as the natural state. It fosters cynical attitudes about love, and sexual pleasures are considered attainable without affection toward partners.²⁶
- A rigorous meta-analysis of 46 studies provides clear evidence confirming that pornography exposure is one important factor contributing directly to the development of sexually dysfunctional attitudes and behaviours. The adverse effects of pornography exposure identified include: developing sexually deviant tendencies; committing sexual offenses; experiencing difficulties in one’s intimate relationships; and accepting rape myths (e.g. a rape victim deserved to be raped because of how she dressed).²⁷

“A number of studies and surveys have shown that one of the initial impacts pornography has on a developing adolescent mind is that it evokes upset and distress when one is not psychologically able to process the images.” Manning, 2008.²⁸

“In-depth interviews with 458 Cambodian children 12.5 – 17.5 years old found that not only does pornography have a strong impact on the behaviors of the children who view it, but on other children as well, due to increased levels of physical and verbal sexual harassment of girls, and the general increase in sexualized discourse among children.” - Fordham, 2006.²⁹

Pornography exposure contributes to sexual aggression in some users.

- A study of 804 Italian males and females aged 14 to 19 found pornography use and sexual violence were significantly correlated. Females who watched pornographic videos were at significantly greater likelihood of being a victim of sexual harassment or sexual assault, while males who viewed pornography were significantly more likely to report having sexually harassed a peer or forcing someone to have sex.³⁰

- Among the 10-15 year old respondents surveyed nationally in the Growing up with Media Study, self-reports of intentional exposure to x-rated violent material are associated with significantly higher odds of reporting perpetration of sexually aggressive behavior. This association remains significant even after a range of risk factors... are considered. Importantly the relationship between x-

rated material and sexually aggressive behavior appears to be driven by the violent content of the x-rated material. When violent and nonviolent x-rated material are examined separately, consumers of violent x-rated material are almost six times more likely than non-consumers of violent ex-rated material to report sexually aggressive behavior. In contrast, consumers of non-violent material are statistically equally likely to report sexually aggressive behavior compared to those who report no consumption of non-violent x-rated material.³¹

- In a study of 483 seventh and eighth grade boys increased exposure to sexually explicit media at the study’s outset predicted more frequent sexual harassment perpetration two years later, even considering controls (i.e. demographics, pubertal status, and sensation seeking).³²
- A growing body of evidence indicates that high-frequency pornography use or consumption of violent pornography among boys and young men intensifies attitudes supportive of sexual coercion and increases their likelihood of perpetrating assault.³³
- Sexually reactive children and adolescents (SRCAs) are individuals who engage in sexually inappropriate and/or coercive acts with other youth and adults. Such children and adolescents are often victims of neglect, sexual, physical, and/or emotional abuse. SRCAs who used pornography were 5.1 times more likely to engage in coerced vaginal penetration, and 4.9 times more likely to have engaged in sex with animals than a nonusing cohort.³⁵
- In a sample of 312 juvenile sexual offenders and non-sexual offenders, more than 50% percent of both groups saw some form of pornography before age 10, and nearly all youth were exposed to pornography after age 10. Pornography was not found to have a correlation with the age at which sexually offending youth began abusing others, the severity of their offenses, the total number of their victims, or degree of force used in their offending behaviors. However, pornography exposure was significantly correlated with their sexual arousal toward males under 12, masochism, males and females aged 13-18, and sadism. Additionally pornography exposure prior to age 10 was significantly correlated with felony assault, general delinquency, felony theft, drug sales, alcohol use, drug use, robbery, public disorderly conduct, and property damage.³⁶

“Pornography is a poor sex educator. Most pornography is too explicit for younger children; most shows sex in unrealistic ways and neglects intimacy and romance; most pornography is sexist; and some is based on and eroticizes violence.” Michael Flood, 2009.³⁴

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