

'A lot of it is actually just abuse'

Young people and pornography

January 2023

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Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



This paper, the first in a series of research reports, makes clear the urgent need to protect children from the harms of online pornography. It is my duty as Children's Commissioner to champion young people's views and voices, and to ensure that all children enjoy the freedom to grow up safely and happily, both online and in the real world.

This report does not make for easy reading, but nor should it. I truly believe that we will look back in 20 years and be shocked by the content to which children were exposed.

Throughout my career as school-leader I have witnessed the harmful impact of pornography on young people, first-hand. I will never forget the girl who told me about her first kiss with her boyfriend, aged 12, who strangled her. He had seen it in pornography and thought it normal.

Let me be absolutely clear: online pornography is not equivalent to a 'top-shelf' magazine. The adult content which parents may have accessed in their youth could be considered 'quaint' in comparison to today's world of online pornography. Depictions of degradation, sexual coercion, aggression and exploitation are commonplace, and disproportionately targeted against teenage girls.¹

I am deeply concerned about the normalisation of sexual violence in online pornography, and the role that this plays in shaping children's understanding of sex and relationships.

Between 2021-22 I led a Government-commissioned review into online sexual harassment and abuse,² which involved speaking to children and young people about peer-perpetrated sexual violence. Young people told me, in unequivocal terms, that harmful behaviour is directly influenced by violent and abusive pornography.

This report draws together research from focus groups with teenagers aged 13-19 and a survey of 1,000 young people aged 16-21. Of the 64% who said that they had ever seen online pornography:

- We find that pornography exposure is widespread and normalised – to the extent children cannot ‘opt-out’. **The average age at which children first see pornography is 13. By age nine, 10% had seen pornography, 27% had seen it by age 11 and half of children who had seen pornography had seen it by age 13.**
- We also find that young people are frequently exposed to violent pornography, depicting coercive, degrading or pain-inducing sex acts; **79% had encountered violent pornography before the age of 18.** Young people expressed concern about the implications of violent pornography on their understanding of the difference between sexual pleasure and harm. Indeed, **this report finds that frequent users of pornography are more likely to engage in physically aggressive sex acts.**
- Pornography is not confined to dedicated adult sites. We found that **Twitter was the online platform where young people were most likely to have seen pornography.** Fellow mainstream social networking platforms Instagram and Snapchat rank closely after dedicated pornography sites.

At the time of publication, the UK’s landmark Online Safety Bill is making its way through Parliament. It holds the promise of, finally, regulating pornography sites and ensuring that they implement robust age verification to protect children. Now is a vital moment to ensure that we understand the impact of pornography on children’s lives, and to legislate for a commensurate response.

My thanks

I would like to thank the young people who participated in this research for their time, honesty and bravery in talking about this difficult subject. I very much hope that your voices will inform the development of legislation and regulation to protect children and make the online world a safer place.

I urge every adult reader in responsible position – whether politician or policymaker, parent or teacher – to listen and take seriously the views of young people contained within this report. It is crucial that we do not miss the opportunity to make the internet safe for all children, today and in the future.

Executive summary

This report is published as the Online Safety Bill passes through Parliament. The legislation, as currently drafted, imposes important age verification requirements (technical measures to establish someone's age) on platforms which host pornography to prevent under-18s from accessing adult content online.

The research contained within this report synthesises data from a nationally representative survey of over 1,000 young people aged 16-21 in England and two focus groups with teenagers aged 13-19. All research was conducted between November 2022 and January 2023 by the Children's Commissioner's Office (CCo) with an aim of understanding the prevalence of pornography exposure (both intentional and unintentional) among young people and its impacts on children's safety and wellbeing. Differences between groups are only reported where they were statistically significant.

The Commissioner intends for this report to aid Parliamentarians as they make crucial decisions about the protection of children from harmful content, including pornography, through the Online Safety Bill. The Commissioner also hopes that findings from this research will support the regulator, Ofcom, in their future enforcement regime, as well as parents, teachers and other key professionals, to understand and protect children from pornography's impacts. The main research findings are set out below. Unless otherwise indicated, figures refer to young people who have ever viewed pornography.

- **Pornography consumption is widespread among children.** The average age at which children first saw pornography was just 13 years old.
- **Many children are first exposed to pornography at a very young age.** A significant minority of children access pornography at very young ages: 10% had seen it by age nine, 27% had seen it by age 11 and 50% of children had seen it by age 13.
- **Children often stumble accidentally across pornography online;** 38% of 16-21-year-olds said that they had accidentally come across it online. In focus group discussions, young people told the CCo that accidentally viewing pornography for the first time made them feel 'confused', 'insecure', 'troubled' and 'curious'. Chillingly, some young people spoke about the role of sexualised cartoons, depicting popular children's characters and which appear in pop-up ads, in actively grooming young children towards adult pornography.

- **A significant minority of young people are sent explicit images involving a person known to them in real-life.** Girls are disproportionately the target of 'self-generated' pornography, 51% of girls aged 16-21 had been sent or shown explicit content involving someone they know in real-life, compared to 33% of boys.
- **Twitter is the platform where the highest percentage of children had seen pornography;** 41% of young people reported having seen it on Twitter. Dedicated pornography sites came next (37%), followed by Instagram (33%), Snapchat (32%) and search engines (30%).
- **Many young people seek out pornography online.** Half (50%) of survey respondents, 58% of boys and 42% of girls, aged 16-21 said that they sought out online pornography themselves.
- **A significant proportion of males are frequent users of pornography.** A fifth (21%) of males aged 16-21 viewed content at least once a day in the 2 weeks prior to the survey, compared to just 7% of girls. This is suggestive of a dependency which carries its own risk of interrelated harms.
- **Boys and those who first viewed online pornography at age 11 or younger were significantly more likely to become frequent users of pornography,** consuming it twice or more per week. Focus group participants told us that pornography was sought for several reasons; sexual gratification, curiosity and to 'learn' about sex, and pressure to 'fit in' with peers.
- **Children are frequently exposed to violent pornography.** The majority, 79%, of 18-21-year-olds had seen content involving sexual violence before turning 18. Early exposure to pornography and frequent consumption significantly increased the likelihood of viewing violent content. Young people are significantly more likely to see violence perpetrated against a woman (65%) than against a man (29%) in pornography.
- **A significant proportion of young people seek out violent pornography;** 36% of young adults had sought out content involving at least one act of sexual violence. Again, a young age of first exposure and frequent consumption of pornography were predictors in the likelihood of actively seeking out violent content for sexual gratification.

- **Through survey responses and focus group discussions, young people discussed the harmful impacts of pornography exposure.** Young people shared their thoughts on the implications of pornography in creating unrealistic expectations of sex, imposing unobtainable 'body ideals' and informing harmful attitudes towards women and girls. Of perhaps greatest concern, young people discussed the influence of pornography in informing real-life sexual aggression and coercion. Most young people, 58%, including those who hadn't seen pornography, agreed with the statement 'viewing online pornography affects young people's behaviours towards one another'.
- **Young people aged 16-21 are more likely to assume that girls expect or enjoy sex involving physical aggression than don't.** Among all respondents, 47% stated that girls 'expect' sex to involve physical aggression such as airway restriction or slapping, a further 42% stated that most girls 'enjoy' acts of sexual aggression. A greater proportion of young people stated that girls 'expect' or 'enjoy' aggressive sex than boys do.
- **47% of all respondents aged 18-21 had experienced a violent sex act.** Girls are significantly more likely than boys to have experienced a violent sex act which could be defined as aggressive, coercive, or degrading. Frequent users of pornography were also more likely to have real-life experience of an aggressive or degrading sex act.
- **Early exposure to pornography impacts upon young people's self-esteem.** Young people who had viewed pornography aged 11 or younger were significantly more likely to present lower self-esteem scores than the average young person.

The report concludes with a series of recommendations for regulating online pornography. However, the Commissioner is conscious that age verification will not be a 'silver bullet'. Although prevalence and exposure will be reduced significantly if the Online Safety Bill passes with robust age verification requirements, some children, particularly older teenagers, may continue to access online pornography.

Therefore, this report also makes recommendations for improved education and media literacy strategies, addressed to both schools and parents. It is vital that adults are fully equipped to minimise the prevalence and impacts of pornography exposure on children, and to support young people to have healthy, safe and respecting relationships.

Content warning

This report makes frequent reference to sexual harassment and sexual violence. This includes descriptions of pornographic content, language and discussion of sexual abuse. The CCo acknowledges that this content may be difficult to read. However, we think it is important to understand how pornography impacts on young people, in order that we may better protect all children from harm. We encourage you to take care of your own wellbeing when reading this report.

If you are affected by the issues discussed, the following organisations can provide you with expert information, advice and support:

childline

Childline is a free and confidential service for under-19s living in the UK: [childline.org.uk](https://www.childline.org.uk) | **0800 1111**



Shout provides 24/7 urgent mental health support: [giveusashout.org](https://www.giveusashout.org) | text **SHOUT** to **85258**



The Survivors Trust for victims of sexual violence: [thesurvivorstrust.org/our-helpline](https://www.thesurvivorstrust.org/our-helpline) | **0808 801 0818**



NAPAC offers support to adult survivors of childhood abuse: support@napac.org.uk | **0808 801 0331**

You can also contact **your local NHS urgent mental health helpline** or call **111** for 24/7 advice | [nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-urgent-mental-health-helpline](https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-urgent-mental-health-helpline)

Definitions

Legal and accepted definitions

Harmful sexual behaviour

A spectrum of adolescent sexual behaviours, ranging from inappropriate, to problematic, abusive and violent as established by the Hackett continuum of harmful sexual behaviour.³

Pornography

Content, images or videos, whose primary purpose is intended to be sexual arousal in the viewer.

Extreme pornography

As defined by Part 5 of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008,⁴ pornographic content which is grossly offensive or obscene, including acts which threaten a person's life or risk serious injury, necrophilia and non-consensual penetration. The possession of extreme pornography is an offence.⁵

Definitions for the purposes of this report

Frequent pornography use

For the purposes of this report; intentional access to pornography more than twice per week. This frequency has been associated with sexual health issues among adult men and women.⁶

Early exposure to pornography

A child first exposed to pornography at age 11 or younger. Exposure to pornography below the age of 12 has been found to hold a significant association with negative health outcomes.⁷

Degrading sex acts

Sexual acts which are intended to cause humiliation, shame or emotional distress.⁸

Physically aggressive sex acts

Sexual acts which carry a reasonable risk of physical harm, regardless of the perpetrator's intent and the recipient's response.⁹ Examples include airway restriction and slapping.

Coercive sex acts

Sexual activity which involves pressure or manipulation (in pornography this may be presented as real or simulated) and a persistent attempt to have sexual contact with someone who has already refused.¹⁰

Sexual violence

For the purposes of this report, any sexual act which may be considered, as per definitions above, as degrading, physically aggressive or coercive.

Chapter 1: The online pornography landscape

'I'm not shocked by stuff I see now' – Boy, 16.

Before exploring the impacts of pornography on children, it is essential to first contextualise the nature and scale of the online pornography industry. This Chapter presents a brief overview of the online pornography landscape and the business models which drive adult sites.

Parents' awareness of online pornography

In the last 20 years digital technologies have become an integral part of children's lives; in 2022 91% of 11-year-olds and 96% of 16-17-year-olds owned a smartphone.¹¹ Ubiquitous smartphone and internet access has coincided with the rise of a global online pornography industry. Internet users are one click away from an inexhaustible supply of pornographic content, in an array of acts and categories. This includes violent and illegal material;¹² a recent study by the Internet Watch Foundation found that 14% of young people in the UK had been exposed to online child sexual abuse material (CSAM).¹³

Put simply, the adult content which parents may have accessed 20 or 30 years ago, in magazines or videos, is unrecognisable to online pornography freely available to today's children.

Through research for a 2021 Government-commissioned review into online sexual harassment (OSH),¹⁴ the CCo found a disconnect between parents' perceptions of online pornography and the reality of the content their children are accessing. The Commission into OSH found that:

- Parents are often unaware that violent and degrading content can be found so quickly and easily on the internet. They are often under the false impression that online pornography is similar in tone to a 'top-shelf' or 'glamour' magazine.¹⁵
- Parents are often reluctant to discuss online pornography with their children, either due to embarrassment or a (perceived) lack of understanding and awareness of online pornography.

Research by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) and Revealing Reality found that parents underestimate the volume and frequency of their children's pornography consumption;¹⁶ 75% of parents felt their child would not have seen pornography but, of those children, over half had.

The online pornography industry

The online pornography industry is dominated by a small handful of companies. In 2020, the world's four largest pornography sites¹⁷ received nearly **11 billion visitors each month**; greater than the number of visitors to Amazon, LinkedIn, Netflix, Zoom and eBay combined.¹⁸

Porn 'tube' sites were introduced in 2006, the year after YouTube launched. Like their counterparts in the social networking industry, the online pornography giants exploited opportunities for data collection in the mid-2000s. Revenue is generated through advertising, which necessitates maximising user attention through data collection, analytics and machine-learning algorithms.¹⁹

'Gathering, storing, processing and analyzing billions of data points a day is a colossal challenge that MindGeek Engineering embraces ... MindGeek data scientists have developed sophisticated machine learning algorithms to mine the data and extract the meaning from the noise' – **MindGeek website**²⁰

Content on mainstream pornography sites

First time visitors to free 'tube' pornography sites are presented with an 'infinite scroll' of content. In an effort to maximise and maintain user attention, there is concern that pornography sites actively promote deviant content. Violent themes which would, 20 years ago, have existed on the 'margins' – for example, simulated depictions of incest, aggression, exploitation and coercion – are now front and centre of mainstream adult sites. For an exploration of the relationship between the business models of 'freemium' porn sites and promotion of deviant content, see PSHE Association *Fully Human* Issue 1.²¹

An analysis of content on mainstream pornography sites, conducted in 2021, found that one in every eight titles advertised to first time users in the UK described sexually violent or non-consensual activity.²² The most frequent form of sexual violence was found to be sexual activity between family members, followed by physical aggression, image-based abuse, exploitation and coercion. Youth descriptors such as 'teen', 'schoolgirl' and 'girl' were more common in titles describing sexual violence.

A further study of 4,009 scenes from two major free pornographic 'tube' sites (PornHub and XVideos) found that 45% of PornHub scenes included at least one act of aggression, 35% of scenes from competitor site XVideos contained aggression. Women were the target in 97% of the scenes.²³

Pornography on social media

Online pornography is not limited to dedicated adult sites. Adult pornography is permitted on social networking sites Twitter²⁴ and Reddit.²⁵ The minimum age for sign-up on both platforms is 13, a disturbing fact given porn-permissive content policies. Revealing Reality research found that teenage boys sign up for Twitter accounts with the express intention of sourcing pornography directly from porn actors, which they felt to be more 'realistic' than content on adult sites.²⁶ For a discussion of the survey findings on young people's exposure to pornography on Twitter and Reddit see Chapter 2.

Other popular social networking platforms, such as Instagram,²⁷ Snapchat,²⁸ TikTok²⁹ and Facebook,³⁰ place an explicit ban on the dissemination of pornographic content across their platforms. This demonstrates greater coherence with the minimum sign-up age, which is 13 across all four platforms. However, previous research by the CCo found that between 6-8% of children aged 8 to 17 had been exposed to pornography on these platforms in the month prior to the survey.³¹ Research by children's digital rights charity 5Rights supports these findings; a 2020 study involving fake under-18 accounts found that algorithms push adult content towards boys' accounts on Instagram, including invitations and direct links to paid-for adult sites and services.³²

Children's access to online pornography: legislation and regulation

As with many other aspects of online safety in the 'Digital Age', legislation and regulation have failed to keep pace with the rise of internet pornography.

In the real world, there are systems in place to prevent children from accessing goods and services which may harm them. In most cases, the merchant is responsible for preventing the sale of age-restricted goods to under-18s.³³ This includes the sale of pornography in 'physical' formats, such as adult magazines and DVDs, which must be classified by the BBFC before sale.³⁴

However, there is no legal requirement in the UK for online pornographic content providers to verify the age of users. Most major adult sites operate a simple 'tick-box' to 'check' that a user is over 18. The four dominant players, PornHub, XVideos, xnxx and XHamster require just one click to bypass the age gate on entry to the site. There is also no legal requirement to moderate user-generated content.

The research context

Primary evidence suggests that the rapid growth and development of the online pornography landscape has brought about radical shifts in sexual attitudes and behaviours among adults,³⁵ as well as among children. We are only now, almost 20 years after the launch of the first free 'porn tube', beginning to understand the full implications of pornography exposure on young lives.

This report sits within the broader context of research on young people's relationship with pornography, and the impact that early exposure to pornography has on their wellbeing and safety.

In the last decade, several longitudinal studies have sought to understand the impact of pornography on users' attitudes, behaviour, and self-perception. A Government Equalities Office (GEO) literature review found 'substantial evidence' of an association between pornography use and harmful sexual attitudes and behaviours towards women.³⁶ Specifically, primary evidence suggests that pornography consumption has a relationship with young people's propensity to:

- Hold harmful attitudes towards women and girls, including attitudes supportive of violence,³⁷
- Commit acts of sexual coercion³⁸ and aggression,^{39,40}
- Engage in casual⁴¹ and risky⁴² sex.

However, ethical constraints have largely confined research to pornography's impact on young adults. While informative, it is acknowledged that an individual's 'sexual script' (i.e. one's template and understanding of what is 'normal' and acceptable in sexual relationships) is largely formalised by the age of 18. Thus, the impact on young adults' attitudes and behaviour are likely to be minor in comparison to pornography's effect on a child. Indeed, a meta-analysis of 59 studies showed that the effects of exposure to sexual media on attitudes and behaviours were stronger for adolescents than young adults, and stronger for boys than girls.⁴³

For a review of the impact of pornography on children, see Hanson and PSHE Association (2020).⁴⁴

Chapter 2: Access and exposure

'Porn is the starting point for young people when it comes to sex' – Girl, 20.

This Chapter explores the age at which children first come into contact with pornography, why this occurs, common routes to access, and the prevalence of sexually violent content.

Most young people aged 16-21 (64%) said that they had seen pornography online.

At what age are children first exposed to pornography?

The survey found that, of the young people who said that they had ever seen online pornography, **the average age at which they had first seen it was 13.**⁴⁵ There is no significant difference by gender; girls are as likely as boys to have seen pornography at this age. This is consistent with BBFC and Revealing Reality research, which found a majority of young people had seen pornography by age 13.⁴⁶

'I think when you've got a phone you've got access to it' – Boy, 16, focus group.

Young people who participated in CCo focus groups agreed that children are likely to see pornography between the ages of 11 to 12, and that this is determined by the age at which children first have their own device (smartphone, laptop or tablet). One boy shared his concern that this age is decreasing:

'I think as time goes on it is going to be younger because people seem to get devices at younger ages ... I think the age is getting younger from when we were that age' – Boy, 17, focus group.

The majority (73%) of respondents who had seen pornography had done so by age 15. Focus group participants noted that the 'novelty' of pornography wanes with age. As one boy explained:

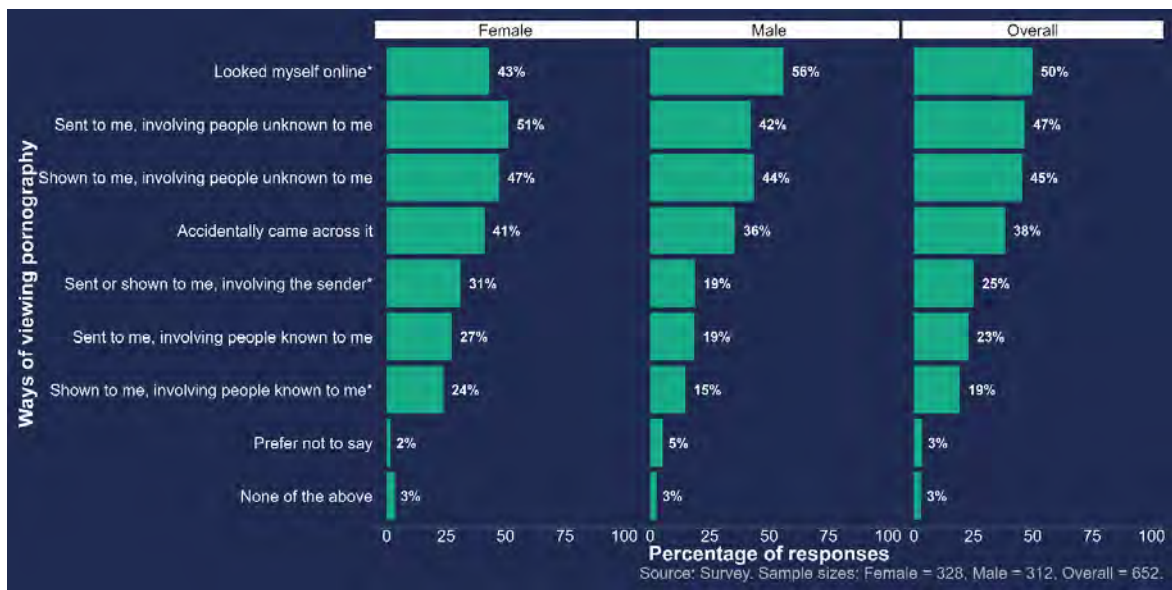
'[Pornography] is this new exciting thing and they're showing their friends and it spreads around ... But the older you get the less you share it because everyone knows that it's there' – Boy, 17, focus group.

A significant minority of children access pornography at very young ages; **10% had seen pornography by age nine, 27% had seen it by age 11 and half (50%) of children who had seen pornography had seen it by age 13.**

How do young people access pornography?

The survey asked 16-21-year-olds who had ever seen online pornography to list the ways in which they had accessed it. Respondents were asked to select as many options as applicable.

Figure 1: Percentage of respondents aged 16-21 who selected each route to viewing pornography. Includes only those who had ever viewed online pornography.



Note: An asterisk (*) denotes a statistically significant difference by gender.

Intentional access to pornography

Overall, 50% of respondents who had ever seen pornography reported having sought out online pornography and 47% reported having been sent or shown pornography involving unknown actors. Young people in focus groups described pressure among school peer groups to engage with pornography, as one girl told the CCo:

'In year 9, I remember people being picked on because they hadn't watched porn before, and that is kind of shocking thinking that now. So, I think a lot of people are peer pressured into watching it and thinking they're not cool or they're not up to date just because they haven't seen it before' – Girl, 16, focus group.

Focus group participants also discussed the role that age and power dynamics play in the pressure to watch porn. Girls spoke about children being shown pornography by pupils in older year groups:

'[It's] about culture, and at school with friends who are in older years ... something about culture and then older people showing younger people certain things' – Girl, 17, focus group.

Some survey respondents wrote about the motivations for seeking out pornography. Several felt that pornography filled a gap left by insufficient relationships and sex education in schools, as one 21-year-old reflected:

'Sexual education is lacking in schools and thus young people turn to online to learn about how to express themselves sexually' – Boy, 21, survey, first saw pornography at age 12.

Young people in focus groups discussed the role of pornography in learning about sex and sexuality. They felt that it could be helpful for some, particularly LGBT children, to understand about their own identity. However, they reflected that online pornography was not a 'safe' place for this exploration to take place and, instead, the RSE curriculum should better serve these children.

Survey respondents wrote about the distorted expectations which pornography instils, and the risk that this may prime younger viewers with an unrealistic and harmful understanding of sex.

'Pornography, especially when viewed at a young age, colours expectations and teaches children to view women as objects of sex rather than as actual people' – Boy, 20, survey, first saw pornography at age 12.

Unintentional exposure

A lot of children come across pornography online without intending to. In the survey, 38% of respondents who had seen pornography said that they had accidentally come across it online. Focus group participants discussed how accidental exposure may occur via social media and pop-up adverts.

'I think sometimes you can end up finding stuff like that without even meaning to. Whether it's social media and ads come up that you're not even looking for.' – Girl, 13, focus group.

Participants discussed how natural, childlike curiosity may drive a child to follow links to pornography, even if they have no understanding of what it is. They talked about the impact of seeing something explicit which you hadn't intended to at a young age, which could be shocking, scary and confusing.

Concerningly, some young people discussed the role of sexualised cartoons in attracting children towards adult pornography. Recent research by the BBFC found that children aged six to 12 are disproportionately exposed to pornography sites hosting non-photographic pornographic content featuring cartoons likely to appeal to children.⁴⁷ Focus group participants told us that this could take the form of popular superheroes, Disney characters and children's characters such as My Little Pony. There are very serious implications in the role of non-photographic pornography in grooming and child sexual abuse.

Nudes ('self-generated' content)

A significant minority of respondents had been sent explicit content involving a person known to them in real-life. **Girls who had seen online pornography are significantly more likely than boys to have been sent or shown explicit content of featuring someone they know; 51% compared to 33% of boys who had received pornographic content involving someone they know.**

This is consistent with research led by the UCL Institute of Education which found that girls are overwhelmingly the recipients of unwanted explicit images of male peers.⁴⁸ A large majority of girls reported feeling 'disgusted', 'embarrassed' and 'confused' on receipt of these images.

Under the Protection of Children Act (1978)⁴⁹ it is illegal to create or share indecent images of a child (even if the distributor is under 18) and the Sexual Offences Act (2003) criminalises 'sexual communication with a child'.⁵⁰ It is worth noting that these laws were designed before the rise of social networking platforms and smartphones, and without recognition of the significant role they would come to play in sexual harassment and abuse, as well as in consenting teenage relationships.

In 2016, the Home Office introduced 'Outcome 21' to allow police to respond in a proportionate way to youth-produced sexual imagery.⁵¹ However, the CCo have heard concerns from professionals about

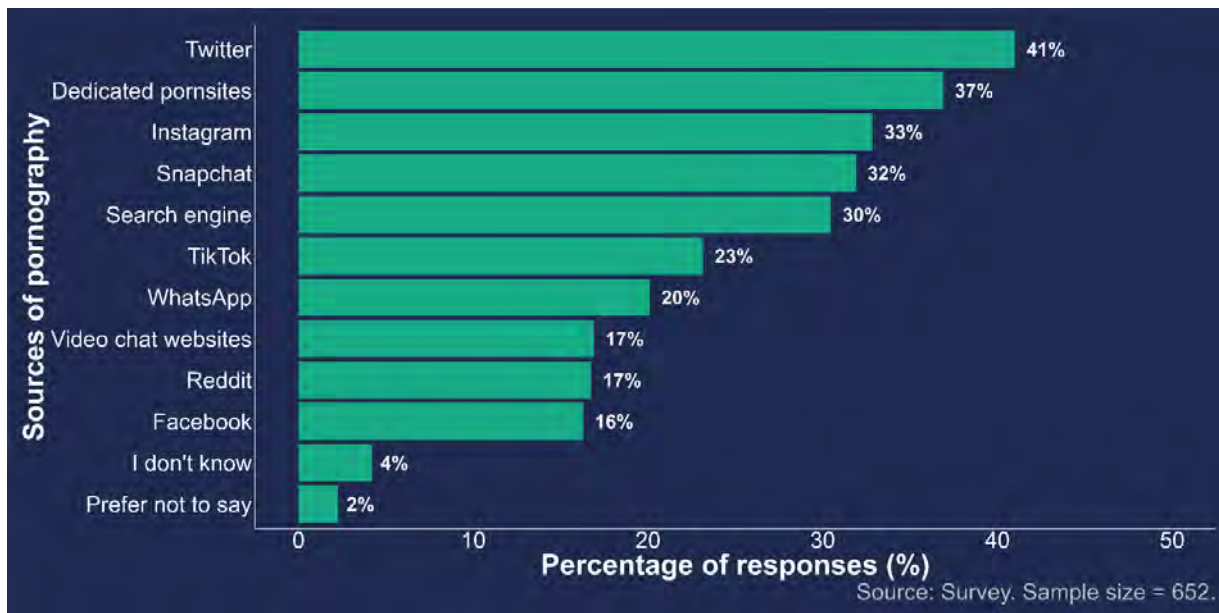
the use of Outcome 21 in practice and the potential, unintended, ways in which the Outcome may undermine safeguarding responses to peer-perpetrated intimate-image abuse.

The Online Safety Bill (as per drafting at time of publication) will introduce a new communications offence of 'cyberflashing' to cover the unwanted distribution of sexual images.⁵²

Where do young people access pornography?

Respondents to the survey who had previously seen online pornography were asked to select the portals through which they accessed it. Options covered dedicated adult websites, social media, and messaging platforms.

Figure 2. Percentage of respondents who selected the top 10 ways of viewing pornography. Includes only those who had ever viewed online pornography.



Tellingly, **Twitter is the only platform to outperform adult sites in exposing young people to pornography.** Twitter⁵³ and Reddit⁵⁴ are both notable in permissive policies to pornography. Internal Twitter documents, obtained by Reuters, suggest that 13% of content on Twitter is pornographic.⁵⁵

Prominent social networking platforms Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok also ranked highly in pornography exposure. This is despite the fact that all three platforms place an explicit ban on nudity, sexual content and/or pornography in published content policies and community guidelines.^{56,57,58}

Frequent pornography users (those who reported viewing pornography at least twice per week) were significantly more likely than other respondents to access online pornography through Twitter, Instagram or Snapchat (Table A1).

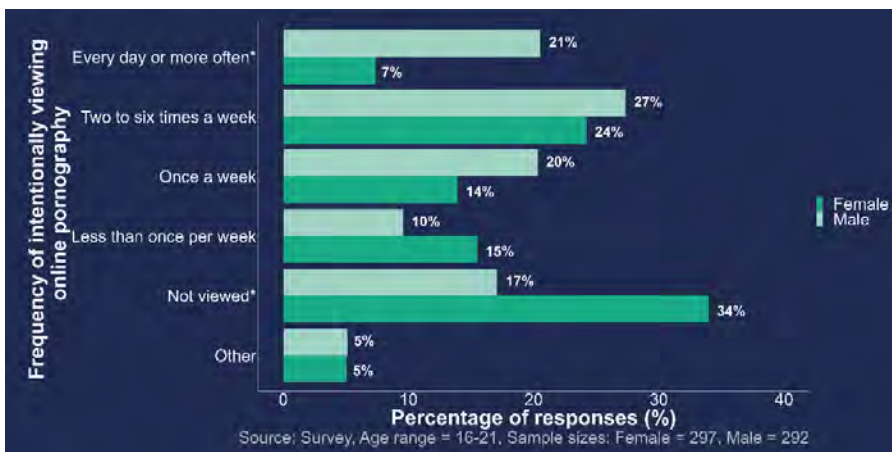
How frequently do young people access pornography?

Intentional access to pornography was more common than accidental access; 47% of respondents who had seen pornography said that of all the pornography they had seen it was mostly or all viewed intentionally compared to 22% whose exposure to pornography was all or mostly accidental.

There is a gender divide in intentional consumption of pornography. Among respondents who had seen pornography:

- **Boys were significantly more likely than girls to have intentionally viewed online pornography at least once in the two weeks prior to the survey;** 34% of boys had sought out pornography in the preceding two weeks, compared to 17% of girls.
- **Boys were also significantly more likely to have frequently and intentionally viewed pornography;** 21% of boys had intentionally viewed pornography every day or more often in the two weeks prior to the survey, compared to just 7% of girls who had done so (**Figure 3**).
- **Those who first viewed online pornography at age 11 or younger were statistically significantly more likely to access pornography frequently (50%),** than those who first watched pornography at a later age (32% - Table A2).

Figure 3. Frequency of intentionally accessing online pornography in the two weeks prior to the survey by gender. Includes only those who had ever intentionally viewed online pornography.



Note: An asterisk (*) denotes a statistically significant difference by gender.

How frequently are young people exposed to violent pornography?

Survey respondents aged 18-21 who had seen online pornography were asked if they had seen pornography before the age of 18 which depicted various acts which could be considered **physically aggressive, degrading or coercive**. Together, these acts are termed **sexually violent**.

Where they had seen an act of sexual violence in pornography, respondents were asked a follow-up question to ascertain whether it had been perpetrated against a man or a woman. Respondents were also asked if they actively sought out pornography containing acts of sexual violence.

Exposure to violent pornography before the age of 18

The majority of 18-21-year-olds (79%) who had seen online pornography had seen pornography involving at least one sexually violent act before turning 18. Of those who had seen online pornography:

- 74% had seen pornography involving at least one degrading act.
- 73% had seen pornography involving physically aggressive sex.
- 66% had seen pornography depicting sexual coercion.

Almost half (49%) of those who had seen online pornography had seen every example of sexual violence before the age of 18. Early exposure to pornography and frequent pornography use were significantly associated with viewing violent pornography before the age of 18.

- **Early exposure to pornography significantly increased the likelihood of encountering violent pornography as a child.** The vast majority (96%) of young people who had seen pornography before the age of 11 had seen a violent sex act portrayed in pornography before the age of 18, compared to 72% who first viewed pornography aged 12 or older (Table A3).
 - **Frequent pornography use also significantly increased the likelihood of encountering violent pornography as a child;** 90% of frequent pornography viewers had seen a violent sex act before 18, compared to 74% of infrequent viewers (Table A3).
-

Exposure to gendered violence in pornography

Young people aged 18-21 who had seen pornography were asked whether they had seen a series of sexually violent acts in pornography, and whether a man, a woman or both had been the recipient of these acts.

Young people were significantly more likely to see women be the target of sexual violence in pornography. Among respondents who had seen pornography, **65% of 16-21-year-olds had seen a sexually violent act perpetrated against a female actor, compared to 29% who had seen sexual violence perpetrated against a male actor.**

Active searches for violent pornography

A significant proportion of young people actively sought out pornography depicting acts of violence for sexual gratification.

Just over a third of young people who had seen online pornography, 36%, had sought out pornography involving at least one sexually violent act for sexual gratification. Among 18-21-year-olds 28% had searched for a physically aggressive sex act; and 18% had looked for pornography depicting sexual coercion.

Again, a young age of first pornography consumption and high frequency of pornography use were strong predictors in respondents' likelihood to search violent pornography for sexual gratification.

- **Around half (49%) of respondents who had first seen pornography before the age of 11 actively sought out violent pornography, compared to 30% of those who had first encountered pornography over the age of 12** (Table A4).
- **56% of frequent consumers of pornography actively sought out violent sex acts portrayed in pornography, compared to 25% of infrequent viewers** (Table A4).

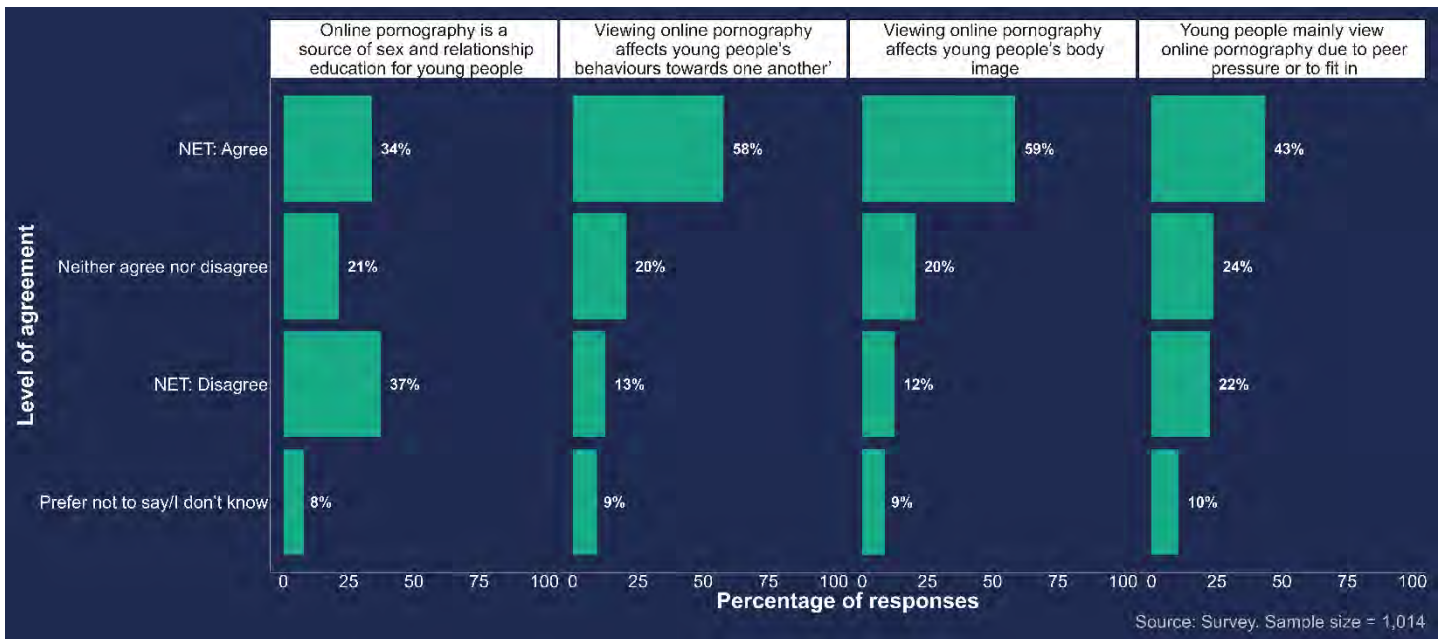
Chapter 3: young people’s views on pornography

‘It can lead you down dark paths’ – Boy, 21.

This Chapter describes young people’s own views on pornography and the impacts they feel that pornography consumption has on children’s attitudes and behaviours, their own self-perception and their relationships with others.

The survey presented all respondents with a series of statements about online pornography, each designed to understand young people’s perceptions of pornography’s impact. Support for each statement is visualised in **Figure 4** and discussed below.

Figure 4. Young people’s agreement with statements related to pornography and relationships.



Note that it is not possible to draw firm conclusions from degrees of statement support. Interpretation of the statements will have been personal and nuanced for each respondent [see Method limitations p.40]. Greater depth is added by qualitative data from free-text responses and focus group discussions.

Expectations of sex

'Viewing online pornography affects young people's expectations around sex and relationships' is the statement which received the most support from participants; 72% agreed and just 4% disagreed with the statement. Girls were significantly more likely to agree than boys (76% compared to 67%).

All survey respondents were aged 16 and over. Many felt, themselves, able to distinguish between the artifice of pornography and the reality of real sex and relationships. The most frequently used word, across all free-text responses, was **'unrealistic'**.

'A lot of online pornography can be unrealistic and some of it is rape content, so young people may think this is okay and realistic. When in reality it is not acceptable, it teaches incorrect and disgusting behaviours' – Girl, 18, survey, first saw pornography at age 12.

Some young people reflected on how their own perception of pornography had changed after they had sex:

'Younger people watch porn and don't understand that it's not real and its entirely fake ... Looking back on it even I did myself. You don't realise till your older that it's not real and real sex is nothing like pornography depicts' – Boy, 21, survey, first saw pornography at age 14.

Body image

A majority of male and female respondents agreed with the statement *'viewing online pornography affects children and young people's body image'* (59% agreement, 12% disagreement). Female respondents were significantly more likely than boys to agree with this statement (66% of girls agreed compared to 51% of boys).

The pressure associated with so-called 'body ideals' and the 'narrow conception of attractiveness'⁵⁹ promoted by pornography was discussed in free-text responses and focus group discussions. Young women in the survey reflected on pornography's role in fuelling body insecurity and anxiety:

'With women's bodies not everyone has big boobs, a nice ass, a pink pussy? Like women of colour have darker nipples and stuff and men don't understand that because it's all they see. You see a lot of stuff like barely legal teens on porn sites and it's not nice. They want us to act like porn models but we can't change who we are, what we like, what we are afraid of' – Girl, 19, survey, first saw pornography at age 10.

Male respondents were also attuned to the role of pornography in informing unrealistic and unobtainable body ideals:

'It makes them think that bodies in porn are bodies in real life. People in porn are actors and they are cast based on their unrealistic bodies, during sex people will be disappointed when not everyone looks like a pornstar' – Boy, 19, survey, first saw pornography at age 10.

Young people's concerns are supported by research on the relationship between pornography consumption and body satisfaction. Several longitudinal studies show an association between adolescent pornography use and self-critical evaluation of sexual performance and body image, among both young women⁶⁰ and young men.^{61,62}

'Children are being raised up to believe having a 10 inch is normal' – Boy, 21, survey, first saw pornography at age 11.

Attitudes towards women and girls

Young people also discussed the impact of pornography on perceptions of gender roles. Free-text responses highlight pornography's depiction of sex as a transactional, one-way interaction, in which women perform as objects for male gratification, as one respondent set out:

'Males can be led to believe women are purely for sex' – Boy, 18, survey, first saw pornography at 13.

It is important to acknowledge that pornography is not the only reason that harmful attitudes may develop and there are a number of reasons that a child may choose to perform a harmful sex act. However, it is clear, to young people's minds at least, that pornography plays a key role in normalising and condoning sexual violence against women.

Survey respondents discussed how sex in pornography is orientated toward male pleasure, and how this may shape regressive attitudes towards gender roles in real-life sexual relationships.

'Many heterosexual men grow up to have certain expectations of how to treat women when having sex, and in general. A lot of that is actually just abuse' – Boy, 18, survey, first saw pornography at 12.

This is at odds with young people's perceptions of healthy romantic and sexual relationships. When asked, in a focus group discussion, what constitutes a 'healthy romantic relationship', **trust** was the most frequent answer given by young people, followed by **boundaries, consent, comfort, honesty** and **communication**.

Each of these principles sit in stark contrast to young people's descriptions of relationships in pornography, which they characterise as impersonal, unequal and transactional.

'It reinforces negative ideas towards young people and children that women have a place below men, they are objects of desire, and can be hurt and sexually abused as long as it results in male gratification' – Non-binary, 18, survey, first saw pornography at age 7.

For this reason, young people expressed concern about the implications of pornography in distorting their understanding of the difference between sexual pleasure and harm, particularly for women.

'For example, a younger individual who is not fully developed could find pornography that reinforces abusing women and they might begin to think that is what women find pleasurable' – Girl, 21, survey, first saw pornography at age 15.

Some female respondents wrote about how pornography shaped their views on whether sex should be pleasurable for them and came, at a young age, to believe that sex should be for men's enjoyment, and not for their own.

'I was exposed to pornography at a young age and it's affected me in my adult relationships and my body image and how my sex life is currently' – Girl, 18, survey, first saw pornography at age 11.

Harmful sexual behaviour and intimate partner violence

Of perhaps greatest concern, young people discussed the influence of pornography in informing real-life sexual aggression and harmful sexual behaviour towards girls, as one boy put it:

'It can cause them to be violent and want to try it to see how it feels' – Boy, 21, survey, first saw pornography at age 15.

Most survey respondents (58%) agreed with the statement *'viewing online pornography affects young people's behaviours towards one another'*. Agreement for this statement was broadly consistent across age and gender, however young people who had never seen pornography were significantly less likely to agree than the average respondent (51% agreed compared to 58%, respectively).

Young people wrote about the consequences of pornography in fuelling cultures of sexual harassment among male peer groups. Some female survey respondents shared personal experience of this, for example:

'In high school I know among boys at least they'd act like animals with it and would find the most grotesque porn they could to show their friends and get a laugh but they airdropped like this video of two guys with whole arms inside them and their prolapsing anuses flopped out and honestly that scarred me lmao but yeah I also feel like porn might be a contributing factor to the oversexualisation of women and like the schoolgirl trope in porn led to me being sexually harassed often and it's just it affects young minds growth that's for sure' – Girl, 18, survey, first saw pornography at age 9.

Pornography can shape a person's 'sexual scripts', i.e. what they feel to be normal and legitimate in sexual situations. In turn, these influence behaviour. Given the high prevalence of sexual violence, predominantly towards women, in mainstream online pornography (see Vera-Gray, McGlynn et. al., 2021,⁶³ and Klaasen and Peter, 2015⁶⁴) there is serious cause for concern about pornography's role in priming sexual behaviour among children.

*'They will be more likely to interact in a pornographic manner with their peers (either **sending or saving nudes, groping etc**)'* – Girl, 19, survey, first saw pornography at age 12.

Survey respondents wrote about the re-enactment of sexually aggressive or coercive acts seen in pornography.

'Often times porn is not just sex, but showcases a range of violent kinks like choking and spanking etc, specifically with a woman being the recipient ... young children who come across porn are also more likely to try to recreate these sexual behaviours with their peers as they have been exposed to it' – Girl, 21, survey, first saw pornography at age 14.

Female respondents wrote about the pressure to perform acts which boys may have seen in pornography, including aggressive, degrading and pain-inducing sex acts. As two girls wrote in response to the survey:

'It makes boys think they can do everything they see in porn in real life. Some things like anal are everywhere in porn but most girls don't want to do that. Boys just think it's normal and expect us all to do it and it puts pressure on us' – Girl, 16, survey, first saw pornography at age 10.

'We don't want to be choked unless we consent, not everyone wants to have anal' – Girl, 19, survey, first saw pornography at age 10.

Chapter 4: the relationship between pornography exposure and sexual attitudes

'It alters their reality' – Girl, 18.

This Chapter discusses the relationship between exposure to pornography, in age of first access and frequency of use, and young people's sexual attitudes and behaviours. All findings presented in this chapter are statistically significant, meaning that there is high confidence that the difference truly exists in the population and is not the result of random chance.

Attitudes towards physically aggressive sex

The survey presented all respondents with a series of statements to understand attitudes towards physically aggressive sex acts, such as slapping and airway restriction. Young people who had never seen pornography were significantly more likely to answer *'I don't know'* in response to statements about physically aggressive sex acts. Whereas those who had viewed pornography were significantly more likely to express an opinion on whether these were expected or enjoyable.

Respondents were more likely to state that girls expect or enjoy sex involving physical aggression, such as slapping or choking, than boys do. This speaks to findings on females' response to physical aggression and pain in pornography. A 2019 analysis of Pornhub videos found that female 'teenage' performers were significantly more likely to express 'pleasure' following sexual aggression than older women and men.⁶⁵ The analysis found that sexual aggression is generally portrayed as consensual (i.e. men dominating willing young women) and 'sensual' (i.e. presented as pleasurable).

In terms of young people's perceptions of girls' expectations and enjoyment of aggressive sex:

- **47% of respondents stated that girls expect sex to involve physical aggression. A further 42% of respondents stated that girls enjoy physically aggressive sex acts.**
- Whereas 37% stated that girls rarely or never expect sex to involve physical aggression. A similar proportion, 38%, of respondents stated that girls do not enjoy aggressive sex acts.

Fewer young people stated that boys expect or enjoy sex which involves physical aggression, than girls do. In terms of young people's perceptions of boys' expectations and enjoyment of aggressive sex, either as recipient or aggressor:

- Among respondents, 39% stated that boys expect sex to involve aggression. A further 37% stated that boys enjoy aggressive sex acts.
- Whereas 44% stated that boys rarely or never expect sex to involve aggression. And 42% stated that boys do not enjoy aggressive sex acts.

Experiences of sexual violence

The survey asked all respondents aged 18-21 whether they had ever experienced an act of sexual violence, as either recipient or actor, before or since turning 18. For definitions of violent, degrading, aggressive and coercive sex acts used in this Chapter, see the 'Definitions' section.

Overall, **almost half, 47%, of respondents aged 18-21 had experienced a sexually violent act.**

- Among young people, **35% had experienced a physically aggressive sex act with a partner.**
- A further **24% had experienced a degrading sex act with a partner.**
- And **9% had experience of a coercive sex act with a partner.**

Experience of sexual violence was not distributed evenly among respondents. Girls and frequent consumers of pornography were more likely to have experienced a violent sex act.

- **Girls were significantly more likely to have experienced a violent sex act (48%) compared to boys (45%).**
 - **Young people who frequently viewed pornography, twice or more per week, were significantly more likely to have experienced a physically aggressive or degrading sex act (Table A5).** Among frequent users of pornography, 47% had experienced aggressive sex (compared to 31% of infrequent pornography users), and 35% had experienced a degrading act (compared to 21% of infrequent pornography users).
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Self-esteem and online pornography

The survey asked all young people a series of questions to measure their self-esteem (see Methodology for more details), in which higher scores were an estimate of higher self-esteem. Out of a maximum of 25, the average score for survey respondents was 17.

Of those who had watched online pornography, **young people who first watched pornography aged 11 or younger were significantly more likely to present lower self-esteem scores** (mean score = 16) **than those who first watched pornography aged 12 or over** (mean score = 18 – Table A6).

Chapter 5: The way forward

'Make porn sites prove that you're over 18. They can do it easily' – Boy, 19.

Almost 20 years after the launch of the first free 'tube' site, and six years since the Government first committed to age verification of pornography sites, the voices and issues highlighted in this report demand an urgent response to the impact of online pornography on children.

As the findings of this research demonstrate, consumption of degrading, aggressive and coercive pornography closely associates with real-life behaviours. Those who are first exposed to pornography at a young age appear to be more vulnerable to its impacts, as do frequent users of pornography.

This research also finds that the real-world consequences of violent pornography are felt acutely by girls and young women. Female respondents to the survey were more likely to experience a violent sex act before the age of 21. The survey finds that, among young people, girls seen as wanting and enjoying sexual violence, more than not, and more than boys.

For the last two decades, parents and teachers have carried the responsibility for protecting children from pornography and for managing and mitigating the serious consequences of sexual violence among peers. This must end. Addressing the harms of childhood pornography exposure requires a two-fold response involving both regulation and education.

The policy recommendations outlined in this Chapter focus primarily on regulation, i.e. measures to limit and, so far as possible, prevent children from accessing pornography. With the passage of the landmark Online Safety Bill through Parliament, now is an invaluable opportunity to safeguard children from online pornography, particularly early and accidental exposure.

The Commissioner also acknowledges the fact that while regulation will play a key role, age verification (AV) will not prevent every child from accessing pornography. Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and other technical barriers challenge immediate and universal application of AV, particularly for older teenagers. Therefore, this Chapter also explores the important role that schools, parents and carers will play in minimising the potential harms of pornography, and in equipping children to have healthy, safe and respectful relationships.

Regulation

Since her 2021/22 Government-commissioned review into online sexual harassment and abuse, the Commissioner has campaigned relentlessly for the passage of the Online Safety Bill. She has engaged with charities, thought-leaders, teachers, parents and children to understand the significance of the Bill, and to ensure that child protection sections are as strong as they can possibly be.

The Commissioner is very glad to be included on the face of the Online Safety Bill as a statutory consultee, alongside the Domestic Abuse and Victims' Commissioners, under proposed Government amendments.⁶⁶ In this capacity, she will continue to represent children's rights and views in regulation.

Recommendations

- The Online Safety Bill must pass through Parliament as an urgent priority. Risk assessment and safety duties relating to children are key. Recent amendments to name 'age verification' and 'age assurance' (Clause 11.3a & 4), as a means by which companies should protect children from harmful and inappropriate content, are essential to protect children from pornography.

'There are no like preventive measures in place [on pornography websites] to make sure that those people are over the age of 18, like for example in on YouTube, if you want to watch a certain kind of video like I'll say for example, I was trying to watch a video of a hip replacement surgery ... they asked me to prove I was over 18 by submitting a photo of ID, porn sites have absolutely nothing like that. They just say make sure you're over 18, but no one's obviously gonna follow that. And they know that themselves (sic)' – Girl, 17, focus group.

- However, time is of the essence. Under the Online Safety Bill, as it is currently drafted at time of publication, pornography will be named as a harm under secondary legislation in late 2023.⁶⁷ **The Commissioner urges Parliamentarians to define pornography as a harm to children on the face of the Online Safety Bill, such that the regulator, Ofcom, may implement regulation of platforms hosting adult content as soon as possible following the passage of the Bill.** The Children's Commissioner's engagement with adult platforms indicates that swift investigation and enforcement will be essential to maximise compliance.

- The addition of Part 5 to the Online Safety Bill is welcome. This makes provisions to ensure that commercial pornographic content produced by providers (i.e. non-user-generated content) is governed by age-verification requirements to prevent children from accessing these sites. **However, the Commissioner recommends that Part 5 pornography providers are governed by the same age verification Code of Practice as Part 3 platforms (as per Clauses 36-46), rather than guidance, to ensure consistent regulation. As with other Codes of Practice, the Children's, Domestic Abuse and Victims' Commissioners should be statutory consultees.**

Next steps

- The Children's Commissioner is glad to be named as a statutory consultee to Ofcom, alongside the Victims' and Domestic Abuse Commissioner, under recent Government amendments to the Bill. **The Commissioner looks forward to working closely with Ofcom colleagues to ensure that parents' and children's voices, views and experiences of pornography are central to the design of regulation.**
- In this effort, the Children's Commissioner will continue, with a relentless focus, to ensure that we understand the impacts of pornography on children. **The Commissioner will publish findings from analysis of Police transcripts and Sexual Abuse Referral Centre (SARC) case files, and from interviews with survivors of child-on-child sexual abuse to understand the role that pornography plays at the sharpest end of harmful sexual behaviour.**
- The coverage of social media sites which host adult content under the Online Safety Bill is also welcome, given the high prevalence of pornography on platforms which are popular among children, such as Twitter. **The Commissioner will continue to urge social networking platforms to protect children from harmful content ahead of the Online Safety Bill's implementation, through content moderation and effective age assurance and verification.** There is no reason for social media platforms to delay in the protection of children.

Education

The Commissioner is conscious that age verification is not a silver bullet. Although measures in the Online Safety Bill will dramatically reduce the frequency of early, unintended exposure to pornography, age verification will not prevent all young people from accessing explicit content online. Therefore, education will also play a key role in violence prevention and critical media literacy.

Pornography and sexual violence are confronting topics for many young people. These issues must be approached in an age-appropriate way, from the later years of primary school and throughout secondary school and college years, with an overarching objective to prevent harm and equip pupils to have healthy, safe and consenting relationships.⁶⁸

Approaches to teaching children about pornography should sit within a broader RSE strategy, ensuring that lesson plans are dynamic and relevant, fully informed by children's concerns and experiences, and involve meaningful communication with parents. It is vital that schools prioritise the development of high-quality materials and teaching skills to deliver meaningful education on these challenging topics.

As one young person during a focus group explained, it is not enough for RSE lessons to only focus on the 'practicalities' of sex, such as STIs, pregnancy and contraception. Young people also want education to cover the 'emotional' aspects of healthy relationships, and how these relate to a physical relationship:

'When they're teaching about the practical side of it, about preventing pregnancy, preventing STIs, they should also have someone there to talk to you about the emotional side of it, to talk to you and have activity ready about whether you're ready for something like that ... having somebody who's kind of like, trained for it in the classroom to help them would be a good idea' – Girl, 17, focus group.

The CCo will put forward full proposals for improving RSE delivery in a forthcoming report.

Parents and carers

Schools cannot tackle the prevalence of pornography exposure on their own. Parents and carers also have a key role to play in, so far as possible, preventing their children from encountering pornography through use of filtering and monitoring tools. Expert advice on setting up parental controls can be found online, such as Internet Matters' ['Set Up Safe Checklist'](#).⁶⁹ However, recent CCo research found that filtering and monitoring tools aren't infallible, meaning that children can still be exposed to harmful content online despite best efforts from parents.⁷⁰

Parents and carers should, therefore, also equip themselves to have proactive conversations about pornography with their children, ideally before they are given their first phone. The CCo has co-produced a guide with young people about online sexual harassment, including issues arising from pornography. '[The things I wish my parents had known: Young people's advice on talking to your child about online sexual harassment](#)' can be found on the CCo website.⁷¹

Key pieces of advice for parents, given by young people, include:

- Have proactive, age-appropriate conversations about pornography, ideally before your child is given their first phone.
- Keep abreast of new technologies and trends and know where to go for external support if you are concerned about your child.
- Ensure that your child knows that they can turn to you for non-judgemental advice and support if they come across something distressing online.

The National Crime Agency (NCA) also produces high-quality resources to support parents to navigate conversations with their child about online relationships, through the ['#AskTheAwkward'](#) initiative.⁷²

Next steps

- **The CCo will work with young people to produce age-appropriate guides to managing exposure to, and consumption of online pornography.** This will be intended for use by young people themselves, and as a conversation opener for parents, carers and teachers.
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Limitations

1. **Age of participants:** For reasons of ethics and safeguarding, the online survey was offered to participants aged 16-21; questions which asked about specific sex acts were posed to participants aged 18-21. On the one hand, the maturity of young adult participants is helpful, in that they are able to answer questions with a degree of distance, objectivity and self-reflection. On the other, retrospective views are limited by the quick evolution of technology and pornography platforms over the last 5-10 years, and by an increase in children's access to devices and pornographic content in this time. Furthermore, participants are reporting on early experiences of pornography, leaving us reliant on participants' ability to reliably recall the age at which they were first exposed to pornography.
2. **Survey data – response and reporting bias:** As with all surveys, particularly those focussed on potentially embarrassing, stigmatised or uncomfortable topics, we must account for a degree of dishonesty in self-reported behaviour. Participants were assured that their responses would remain strictly anonymous to mitigate this as far as possible. Nevertheless, statistics on pornography usage, preferences and sexual experience are likely to be an underestimate.
3. **Statement interpretation:** One section of the online survey asked respondents to state their agreement/neutrality/disagreement with a series of statements about pornography [discussed in Chapter 3]. There is a degree of personal nuance in respondents' interpretations of the statements. We have accounted for this as far as possible in the discussion, and further explored and tested reactions to the statements in focus group discussions.
4. **Causation:** We are unable to establish causation in respondents' access to pornography and their experiences of risky and harmful sex acts. We discuss correlative relationships between pornography use and sexual experiences where these are statistically significant. The findings from this paper sit within the broader research context on pornography's impacts on young people's attitudes and behaviour. Wider literature and primary research is referenced throughout to provide a fuller picture on the impacts of pornography.

Technical annex

Methodology

This report contains findings from quantitative and qualitative research conducted by the CCo from November to December 2022.

- Quantitative:** The CCo commissioned a nationally representative survey of 1,014 young people aged 16-21 living in England in November 2022. The questionnaire was designed to understand the extent of pornography exposure among young people, the age at which children first encounter online pornography and young people's attitudes towards it. A further series of questions, posed to respondents aged 18 and above, explored young people's experiences of risky and physically aggressive sex acts which are frequently depicted in pornography.
- Qualitative:** The online survey gave respondents the opportunity to answer, in a free-text response box, with their thoughts on the impact of pornography on young people's expectations of sex and relationships. There was a total of 500 free-text responses; 481 from young people who agreed that pornography impacts young people's expectations of sex and relationships, and 19 from those who disagreed with this statement.
- Qualitative:** The CCo held two online focus groups with young people aged 13 to 19 in December 2022 and January 2023 to explore the survey findings and policy recommendations in greater depth.

Table X provides the unweighted and weighted breakdown of the sample by age and gender. The data were weighted by age and gender to match nationally representative distributions.

Table X. Overview of survey sample size and respondent demographic characteristics.

Demographic variable	Unweighted count	Weighted count	Weighted percent of sample (%)	National population (%)
Age group				
16-17	333	339	33.4	33.0

18-21	681	675	66.6	67.0
Gender				
Female	519	511	50.4	50.5
Male	477	493	48.6	49.5
Non-binary or alternative identity	14	8	0.7	NA
Other	4	3	0.3	NA
FSM eligibility*				
No	525	525	51.8	74.1
Yes	434	433	42.7	25.9
I don't know	49	51	5.0	NA
Prefer not to say	6	5	0.5	NA

*National-level FSM estimates are reported for the Year 11 cohort for the 2021/22 academic year in England using the DfE eligibility for FSM at any time during past 6 years dataset.⁷³

The survey asked respondents about their exposure to online pornography. If respondents said that they had seen this type of content, they were then asked several follow-up questions about their experiences of exposure to this content. All respondents were asked a series of statements to ascertain their attitudes towards pornography, sex, and relationships as well as the adapted Rosenberg Self-Esteem model from the *#BeeWell* survey.⁷⁴

Where data is provided based on the subset of respondents who said that they have ever seen pornographic images or videos online this is clearly indicated.

The survey asked young people about topics which they may have felt uncomfortable answering questions about. At the start of the survey, it was clearly stated that the questions would be about the kinds of things young people might see online, specifically in relation to pornography. Respondents were given the information that they could exit the survey at any point, with instructions of how to do so, and all questions had a 'prefer not to say' response option. Respondents were informed at the start of the survey that their participation was completely anonymous. For the 16- and 17-year-old respondents the survey was sent to a parent or guardian, who was given the introductory information about the survey and asked if they were happy for their child to participate. The survey was sent to the 18 – 21-year-old respondents directly.

Responses have been broken down by characteristics including age, gender and whether they received FSM as a child. Differences by characteristic are reported where they are statistically significant at a 95% level of confidence. This means that 95 times out of 100 were the sample to be run again, the percentage of responses for the given group would be different to the average and five times out of 100 there would be no difference between the response for that group and the average for all respondents.

Regression analysis

The data were analysed using a statistical technique called regression analysis, to isolate the relationship between respondent demographics, exposure to online pornography and their sexual attitudes, including preferences towards online pornography, frequency of viewing pornography and experience of specific sexual acts. This analysis can identify characteristics that are associated sexual attitudes, but it is not possible to isolate whether these factors caused certain sexual attitudes or preferences. The full results tables for these analyses can be found in the Annex.

Focus group approach

The CCo spoke with 11 young people overall for this report. The CCo spoke with six young people aged 13-19 in the first focus group. Two more young people, aged 14 and 16, from that group, submitted their contributions in writing. The young people were part of the same youth parliament so knew each other well and felt comfortable speaking in the group. CCo then also spoke with 3 more young people aged 16-17 who were part of the same youth initiative and also felt comfortable with each other. The young people's youth workers were in attendance during the focus groups. The conversations were audio recorded and fully transcribed. The data naturally lent itself to a high-level exploration of key themes.

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