



COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
P O Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
ec.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretary

Re: Harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the internet

Thank you for the invitation to the Commission to provide a submission to the Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications' inquiry into *Harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the internet*. The Commission has long had an interest in the area of internet access by children, with a particular focus on the increased vulnerability of children who reside in out-of-home care. These children are inherently more at risk due to a combination of factors including their experience of trauma, which may have included sexual assault and exploitation, inconsistencies in adult supervision and transiency. The former Office of the Child Safety Commissioner (OCSC) sought to assist in addressing vulnerability through partnering with Berry Street Victoria in the BeNetWise initiative, funded by the Telstra Foundation, to aid those in out-of-home care and/or alternative education to learn how to use digital technologies safely. The Commission welcomes the establishment of the Office of the Children's eSafety Commissioner in promoting positive and safe online practices for Australian children and young people.

The advent of Smartphone technology means that children are no longer sitting at a computer screen, where their access to the internet may be monitored by an adult providing close supervision. Children now have constant access to the internet via their phone, ipads, notebooks and other devices, making it very difficult for even the most conscientious parent to provide continual supervision. The development of this technology is occurring so rapidly that strategies employed by parents and others to keep children safe must keep pace through adaptation of traditional methods using innovation. For example, carers need to be checking on a regular basis the search history of devices used by the child and legislators need to employ terminology to describe systems and devices that can survive the evolution of technology.

There is clear acknowledgment in the mainstream media, amongst concerned parents and schools that children have increasing exposure to online pornography and at a much younger age. This has come about due to the omnipresence of pornography on the internet (30% of all internet traffic is porn-related, Anthony, 2012) and children being exposed to it either accidentally or intentionally. Children may be exposed via unsolicited 'pop-ups' or text messages, emails, links or attachments, through posts made on social networking sites or internet games. Children may find it accidentally when searching for something else, being shown it by peers or partners, or intentionally searching on the internet themselves (Crabbe, 2014). Young men are more likely than their female peers to use porn, to do so repeatedly. Young people know how to access pornography and believe they have a right to do so (Horvath et al, 2013). The mainstreaming of pornography is evidenced by its presence and influence upon popular culture, as demonstrated in advertising, music videos, television programs, films and



fashion, even to the extent of logos on children's clothes and stationery (Crabbe, 2014). This infiltration has given porn a degree of legitimacy and fostered the development of "raunch culture" which promotes overtly sexual representations of women. The industry itself has acknowledged that there has been a shift in the nature of the most popular and accessible pornography towards content that is rougher and more aggressive towards women (Crabbe, Corlett and Goldman, 2013). Whilst mainstream heterosexual pornography normalises and eroticises gendered aggression, there are very similar messages conveyed in gay male pornography (Kendall, 2004).

Given these developments, it is extremely concerning so many young people are dissatisfied with the sexuality education they receive, presumably through their school and from parents, leading them to turn to pornography for sexual education and information (Horvath et al, 2013). Exposure to pornography, which is now so widely and freely available is in turn shaping young people's sexual expectations and practices (Haggstrom-Nordin, Hanson and Tyden, 2005; Crabbe et al, 2013). Young men are more likely to view pornography more positively than young women, who frequently express that it is unwelcome and distasteful, and has a negative influence on sexual expectations. Pornography is having the effect of normalising sex acts that many women do not enjoy and who may experience them as degrading, painful or violating (Haggstrom-Nordin et al, 2005; Flood, M, 2010; Crabbe, 2013).

This in turn has implications for young people's capacity to develop a sexuality that incorporates mutual pleasure, respect and the negotiation of free and full consent (Crabbe, 2014). When these young people have also experienced trauma, as part of abusive relationships, which may have included sexual assault and exploitation, the development of their sexuality may be further compromised. There is research evidence into the effects of pornography consumption that provides reliable evidence that exposure to pornography increases aggressive attitudes and behaviours towards women for some viewers (Malamuth, Addison and Koss, 2000). The consumption of pornography has also been found to be associated with sexual health risk-taking and can have negative impacts on body image and sense of self (Dean, 2007; Crabbe, 2013). In the apparent absence of research in this area, it might be expected that the impacts for those who have been sexually abused and exploited might be increased exponentially.

Maree Crabbe has done ground-breaking and very comprehensive work on the relationship between young people and pornography, which has resulted in the development of the documentary, *Love and Sex in the Age of Pornography* (2013), the secondary school resource, *In the Picture: Supporting young people in an era of explicit sexual imagery* (2014), and the *It's time we talked* website. It is argued that schools are an important context in which issues related to pornography can be addressed due to being an effective site for health promotion and violence prevention education, complementary work on respectful relationships, cybersafety and sexuality education, access to quality resources, partnerships with parents and community organisations, having a duty of care to protect students from any harm that is reasonably foreseeable, having to respond to incidents that can impact student wellbeing and school engagement, and being sites of exposure (Crabbe, 2014). Parents can lack confidence and capability in being able to address issues within sexuality education for their children, but the accessibility of online pornography means that their children are very likely to use this as an educative tool in the absence of other information. This can have serious implications for their developing sexuality, understanding of respectful relationships and prevention of violence, and associated criminal implications.

Parents need to become better informed, confident in understanding their child's world and the social pressures that are being exerted upon them. There are resources available and parents need to be encouraged to access these with support from their child's school. Schools also need to be required to comply with their obligations to provide a duty of care in protecting students from the physical and emotional harm that pornography presents. The government must ensure that schools have the mandate and resources to do this effectively. For those especially vulnerable children that are in out-of-home care, and who may disengage from education, in addition to having inconsistent care

arrangements, a particular focus will be required to develop a customised approach. The Victorian Policy Advisory Group on Sexual Health Education for Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care, which is chaired by the Parliamentary Secretary for Human Services, Sharon Knight MP, aims to investigate how best to promote better sexual health and relationship outcomes for this group. The work of this group has just commenced and may offer insights into effective approaches in the future.

The potential harm being done to Australian children through accessing pornography on the internet is multi-faceted and substantial. But it is short-sighted to imagine that it will recede of its own accord or that children's access to it can be prevented. Schools and parents need to collaborate in understanding the changing nature of pornography, to provide an informed critique of the behaviour and attitudes that are embedded within it, and to offer well-informed sexuality and health education that is engaging, interactive and bold enough to answer students' questions. This approach will need to be specifically tailored to meet the needs of children in out-of-home care whose trauma experiences mean they require additional support.

If you would like to discuss further any of the material raised in this submission, please contact me at the Commission on (03) 8601 5886.

Yours sincerely



Hon. FHR Vincent AO QC
Acting Principal Commissioner

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