

31 January 2025

Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues
NSW Parliament

Submission through Inquiry webpage

Dear Standing Committee members,

Inquiry into the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health

headspace appreciates the opportunity to provide input into the Inquiry into the impacts of harmful pornography on people's health.

headspace is the National Youth Mental Health Foundation, providing early intervention mental health services to 12 to 25 year olds. We provide holistic, individualised support to young people across four domains: mental health, physical health, work and study, and alcohol and other drug (AOD) services. headspace has 169 services across Australia in metropolitan, regional and remote areas, and offers online and phone support services and digital resources through our website and through eheadspace.

This brief submission documents some key themes and supporting input and testimonies from young people and family members to help illustrate real life experiences and impacts of pornography use.

headspace also respectfully refers the Committee to submission no.20 to this Inquiry by "It's Time We Talked" and the work of founder Maree Crabbe, which we recommend as leading thinking and practice in relation to young people on this issue.

Our submission aims to provide information that complements and adds to documented research by the eSafety Commissioner. It comprises responses to all but one of the Terms of Reference, with a particular focus on how each relates to young people.

Please do not hesitate to contact headspace National to discuss any aspect of our submission in more detail.

Yours sincerely



Jason Trethowan
Chief Executive Officer

Overview

This submission offers insights from young people, parents and service providers associated with headspace that ground and illustrate findings from contemporary research.

Research and insights are structured around the following Inquiry Terms of Reference:

- (a) age of first exposure to pornography and impacts of early exposure to pornography
- (b) media by which pornography is accessed and circulated
- (c) impacts on body image
- (d) the relationship between pornography use and respect and consent education
- (e) production and dissemination of pornography – no response
- (f) the impact of exposure to violent and/or misogynistic pornography on children, teenagers and young adults
- (g) impacts on minority groups including First Nations, CALD or LGBTIQ+ people and people living with disability
- (h) the effectiveness of any current education programs about use and misuse of pornography, and how these may be improved
- (i) the effectiveness of current restrictions on access to pornography and consideration of any need to improve these
- (j) the resources and support currently available to parents and carers to educate children about pornography, and how these might be improved; and
- (k) any other related matters.

The submission summarises findings from research comprehensively documented in publications by the eSafety Commissioner and within [submission no.20 to this Inquiry by “It’s Time We Talked”](#). In some cases, additional, contemporary research sources are provided.

The content reflects experiences and responses from the following groups, who were invited to consider and respond to the Inquiry Terms of Reference:

1. Young people who are members of the headspace Youth National Reference Group
2. Parents/family members of the headspace Family Reference Group
3. headspace National Clinical Practice branch
4. The headspace services Clinical Leads group (comprising representatives from across the national network of headspace services)

Reference group members quoted below provided separate, personal responses that have been de-identified and collated for inclusion.

(a) Age of first exposure to pornography and impacts of early exposure to pornography

headspace key messages:

- most young people will be exposed to pornography, both deliberately and accidentally, before adulthood
- exposure is near universal; people are impacted differently

Summary of research findings

Most Australian children are exposed to pornographic content by the age of 15, with many first seeing it when they are considerably younger (eSafety Commissioner 2023, Crabbe, Flood et al. 2024).

A national study of 15-20 year old Australians found that almost half of boys have seen pornography by the age of 13 and almost half of girls have seen it by the age of 15 (Crabbe, Flood et al. 2024).

Most children's first exposure to pornography is unintentional: through an accidental encounter or when they are shown or sent pornography without their permission (eSafety Commissioner 2023).

Children are more likely to seek out pornography actively as they grow into adolescence (eSafety Commissioner 2023).

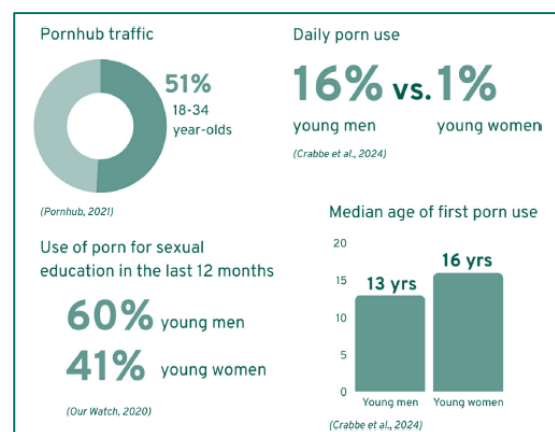
Children seek out pornography for a range of reasons, including curiosity, learning about expectations, pressure from peers, for entertainment, to address boredom, and for sexual arousal and exploration (de Souza 2023, eSafety Commissioner 2023).

Young men are more likely than young women to see pornography both intentionally and accidentally, and to view it more often (de Souza 2023, eSafety Commissioner 2023, Crabbe, Flood et al. 2024).

Porn is a mainstay in young men's lives: they watch it, they talk about it, they learn from it, and some even feel stress or stigma around their viewing of it (Benakovic et al, 2024; Crabbe, Flood et al. 2024).

In an Australian study of 15-20 year olds, over half (54 per cent) of young men reported viewing pornography weekly or more often and one in six (16 per cent) reported viewing it daily (Crabbe, Flood et al.

Key statistics on young people's porn use
(Source: Benakovic et al., 2024, Fig 8.1)



2024). This contrasts with 14 per cent of young women reporting weekly viewing and 1 per cent reporting daily viewing.

Many young people view porn as a positive source of pleasure, entertainment, and self-gratification (eSafety Commissioner, 2023).

Girls and younger children are more likely than boys and older children to report feeling upset by the pornography they have seen (Smahel, Machackova et al. 2020).

Young men who experience loneliness, social anxiety, and low self-esteem may use porn short-term relief, but this ultimately exacerbates these states of distress, leading to a negative spiral of further use and continued poor mental health and social wellbeing (Benakovic et al, 2024)

headspace insights relating to research findings

Almost half of boys have seen pornography by the age of 13 and almost half of girls have seen it by the age of 15. Many first see it when they are much younger.

The first ages I had access to porn was...around age 9/10 – young person

I first came into pornography earlier than the age of 10. Like many of my peers, it was by accident. But like a car crash, I struggled to look away. I wasn't sure what I was looking at, but I knew it made me feel good. – young person

For one of my young people, 16 years was age of first exposure (to my knowledge). For the other, they were in their 20s...To my knowledge, I am the only person they have spoken to about this. - Parent/family member

Initial exposure is usually unintentional, through an accidental encounter or when they are shown or sent pornography. Boys and are more likely than girls to see pornography both intentionally and accidentally.

My first experience...was around 9 years old. While waiting to play maths games on the family computer, I pressed a fake 'skip ad' button. A new tab opened [with] green figurines/characters....acting out different positions. Being oblivious, I looked at it, then closed it because that wasn't the game I pressed and it made me confused. It wasn't until I was in year 7 and overheard kids talking about their favourite type of porn that I remembered. – young person

Young people worldwide report that pornography has impacted on their and others' sexual attitudes and behaviours. At a younger age, some children may not understand, or be intrigued by, accidental exposure to pornography, whilst others may be curious or distressed.

When I was younger I didn't think much of it, it was funny between friends...I stayed away from opening and sharing links once I knew what they could be so I didn't see much of the explicit content but heard from friends who would talk about them - Young person

I remember seeing videos offered to me which were very uncomfortable and even now, I try to block those videos from my mind...now that I'm older, I can realise that most of them border abuse. - Young person

The younger a person is the less equipped they are emotionally, cognitively and developmentally to process these experiences in safe ways. - Parent/family member

Girls and younger children are more likely than boys and older children to report feeling upset by the pornography they have seen

There can be a lot of dangerous and unhealthy power dynamics shown online, and if you have ever been in a relationship or have past trauma, this could be quite traumatizing, triggering and harmful. - Young person

It makes young people think that's what they have to be or that they aren't favourable to give or receive pleasure if they don't look or act like that. - Young person

Excessive consumption can negatively affect mental health, leading to issues like addiction or desensitization to real-life experiences. - Young person

Children are more likely to actively seek out pornography as they grow into adolescence out of curiosity, learning about expectations, pressure from peers, for entertainment, to address boredom, and for sexual exploration.

I think it can give you ideas of different ways to engage in sex and intimacy in both a positive and negative way - this can place expectations on people of ways to be intimate or assumptions of how sex is supposed to be - Young person

Porn can be educational sometimes... For example, I felt less nervous about intimacy because I have a reference point....also knowing that the videos online are usually unrealistic. - Young person

I was a bit anxious about my first time, and porn gave me some guidance to feel more comfortable in the bedroom. It also gave me a better sense of my preferences. - Young person

When you're reading, you're given the opportunity to see through that person's eyes and hear what they're thinking and feeling... written scenes [can have] more achievable expectations like checking in with your partner throughout your sex to ensure they feel comfortable or performing aftercare. - Young person

To my understanding, this was for sexual exploration and to explore sexual experiences that they themselves had not had. - Parent/family member

Beginning questions with parents and family with “when” and not “if” a young person accesses porn will help to create more realistic and supportive dialogue. - Parent/family member

(b) Media by which pornography is accessed and circulated

headspace key messages:

- Children can easily access online pornographic content
- Sharing explicit content is normalised amongst many young people

Summary of research findings

Online pornographic content can be accessed easily, freely and anonymously through the kinds of internet-enabled devices commonly used by children, including phones, tablets, computers, and gaming devices (eSafety Commissioner 2023).

Mobile technology enables children to access pornography anywhere. The most common context for seeing pornography is alone and at home (eSafety Commissioner 2023, Crabbe, Flood et al. 2024).

Children may be exposed to pornographic content through a dedicated pornography site, through social media feeds or messaging functions, video chat website, gaming site, or text message, or being shown by someone else (de Souza 2023, eSafety Commissioner 2023).

Non-consensual sharing of sexual images is a widespread problem that disproportionately targets girls, with 65% of those affected saying incidents began by age 15, and 15% before age 12. (Walsh et al., 2025)

headspace insights relating to research findings

Pornographic content can be accessed freely by children using phones, tablets, computers, and gaming devices. Exposure may be through a dedicated pornography site, social media feeds or messaging functions, video chat website, gaming site, text message, or sharing between peers.

... that could be through sites like Pornhub etc, virus ads, links on YouTube comments or spam links from fake profiles and friends etc. I could say the same for my friends who would also receive and share spam links – Young person

In year 9 (15yrs) I discovered that porn doesn't have to be a video.... I had downloaded Wattpad, an app for fanfiction. I was scrolling through and found a fic that had 'Lemon' in the title. Turns out that meant pornographic scenes. Took me by surprise. – Young person

...when I was in high school. I searched it up out of curiosity. It then gradually became more of a habit...what surprised me the most was how accessible it was. It was free, not many verification checks and more categories than I could ever imagined. I also realised I could access it on my phone on incognito mode. – Young person

... pornography that is graphic, disturbing and harmful floods today's landscape and is more accessible than ever before. – Young person

Clinicians in headspace centres report more young people talking about sharing explicit material

We hear more about social media use of [young people] sexting in private chats than directly porn use. – headspace clinician

We had a lot of young people creating and distributing child pornography (their own photos). – headspace clinician

(c) Impacts on body image

headspace key messages:

- Pornography portrays unattainable bodily standards that make many young people feel inadequate
- Pornography often perpetuates and exaggerates body image stereotypes

Summary of research findings

Young people report learning about human bodies and anatomy through pornography (Robb and Mann 2023). They report contradictory feelings about the bodies pornography represents; often critiquing the unattainable standards of the bodies they see but also describing comparing them against their own bodies and feeling inadequate in contrast (de Souza 2023).

While most know that porn isn't accurate, cisgender hetero-sexual boys are far more likely than cisgender heterosexual girls to view it as accurate (Benakovic et al, 2024).

Some young people also describe feeling reassured by seeing more diverse bodies being sexual in pornography (Ashton, McDonald et al. 2019, Marques 2019).

Some young people report that pornography's racist stereotypes make them feel self-conscious, disgusted or victimised (Robb and Mann, 2023, p22).

Pornography depicting people living with disability may provide a welcome representation of sexuality that is often absent from other media (Ebrahim 2019).

Pornography use is also associated with higher levels of self-objectification, and with body dissatisfaction, insecurity and anxiety in both young men and young women (Maheux, Roberts et al. 2021, Farina 2022).

headspace insights relating to research findings

In my opinion, porn has an overall negative impact on both sex, self-perception and relationships....It can also perpetuate stigma and stereotypes. – Young person

It sets unrealistic standards like the way women need to look and particularly on how men are supposed to perform... being expected to be [like that] in real life is damaging to anyone. – Young person

Being black it always showed men with big dicks and so growing up people would always say things about black people having big dicks which isn't always the case. – Young person

(d) the relationship between pornography use and respect and consent education

(f) The impact of exposure to violent and/or misogynistic pornography on children, teenagers and young adults

headspace key messages:

- **Pornography propagates and eroticises drivers of gender-based violence**
- **The dominant narratives in porn are antithetical to the principle of consent**

Summary of research findings

There is a growing body of evidence that violent porn content (as well as porn content more generally) is leading to real-world violence for both the men who watch it, and their sexual partners (Benjkovic et al, 2024; Wright et al, 2021)

Young men's attitudes towards violence against women and gender equality issues have changed very little over time. Despite increasing community knowledge of issues of gendered violence, there is also significant resistance to progressive cultural change, including among young people (Maidment et al, 2024)

On average, Australian young men see pornography 3 years before their first partnered sexual experience, and young women see it 2 years before theirs. So, pornography's shaping of arousal patterns and of sexual understandings is often occurring without the counter-reference points they may develop from interpersonal sexual experiences (Crabbe, Flood et al. 2024)

With significantly more young men using porn for sexual education, this indicates that young men are having a vastly different sexual education than young women. (Benakovic et al, 2024).

Young men themselves observe the negative impacts porn has on their expectations around sex, intimacy, women, and consent (eSafety Commissioner, 2023)

High school boys who were exposed to violent porn were 2–3 times more likely to report sexual and physical dating violence perpetration *and* victimisation compared to their non-exposed male peers (Rostad et al., 2019)

Australian teachers and female students are experiencing sexism in schools, in part due to boys and young men's exposure to misogynist content (Maidment et al, 2024; Wescott et al, 2024)

There has been a significant increase in the rates of gendered violence and sexual assault against girls by other adolescents, associated with increasing consumption of violent pornography, normalisation of peer

sexual harassment, and sexualisation of adolescence in mainstream media (Maidment et al, 2024, Constantinou, 2024, Mathews et al, 2024).

Young people worldwide report that pornography has impacted on their and others' sexual attitudes and behaviours (Our Watch 2020, de Souza 2023, Robb & Mann 2023).

Pornography use is associated with a range of harms (summarised from Crabbe et al., 2024; see original for full sources):

- predictive of more sexualized, sexually objectifying and stereotypic gender views of women
- associated with risky sexual behaviours, including sexual strangulation
- associated with a range of violence-supportive attitudes and behaviours, including teen dating violence, sexual solicitation perpetration, and sexual violence
- associated with dating violence victimization
- a key contributor to girls' and young women's experiences of painful, unpleasant or coerced sex
- associated with sex without a condom
- a cause of higher levels of self-objectification, body dissatisfaction, insecurity and anxiety
- a driver of expectations that women's role is subservient to men and have an obligation to prioritise men's pleasure in sexual encounters; viewing women as sex objects, including among adolescents

headspace insights relating to research findings

Most young men and women see pornography 2-3 years before their first partnered sexual experience. So pornographic influences are often occurring without counter-reference points from interpersonal experiences.

For one of my young people...pornography was the first time they had encountered a heterosexual sexual experience. This may have influenced how they perceived non-pornographic sexual experiences between consenting adults, and perhaps their subsequent sexual experiences. The accessibility and disposability of pornography may have contributed to a belief or attitude that sex was accessible and disposable, potentially contributing to more risk-taking behaviour in this context. – Parent/family member

Unfortunately, we know pornography does not depict relationships, consent or boundaries accurately or safely often. As pornography became an educational outlet for many of my peers, it contributed to many in my generation gaining misguided and misinformed beliefs regarding consent, boundaries and healthy relationships. – Young person

This continues to perpetrate a culture and belief by young men that is not accurate in the real world. We know that pornography contributes to intimate partner violence. We know that it educates young people on incorrect notions of consent and healthy relationships. – Young person

Pornography use is shown to be associated with sexual objectification, risky sexual behaviours including sex without a condom and sexual strangulation, and dating and sexual violence and victimisation, including among adolescents.

It also drives expectations that women's role is subservient to men and that they should prioritise men's pleasure in sexual encounters.

It can distort perceptions of healthy sexual relationships by promoting unrealistic and often harmful depictions of intimacy. – Young person

... it focuses so much on the male's pleasure and the female is only a vessel for them to use. – Young person

Most of the video porn is bordering abuse. Whether it's 'joking' about having relationships with family members or underage school teens, it is romanticising toxic and abusive sexual relationships. – Young person

[Written porn]... focus[es] more on the relationship being formed and it being an intimate activity... [it] is often less abusive [than video porn] and focuses on the pleasure of all parties involved – Young person

The attitudes and behaviours towards others (particularly women) depicted in pornography can really shape a young person's perception of sex and relationships... It can normalise attitudes and behaviours that would not be considered healthy, consensual, or respectful. – Parent/family member

...expectations of sexual relationships and experiences derived from consuming pornography ...can influence the level of emotional and physical safety within relationships . – Parent/family member

(g) Impacts on minority groups

LGBTQ young people

Summary of research findings

Through pornography, young people can easily and anonymously access content that portrays their sexual and gender identity openly and in intricate detail (Arrington-Sanders et al, 2015).

On average, young people from sexual and gender minorities see pornography younger and consume it at higher rates (Bóthe et al. 2020, Miller, Raggatt et al. 2020, Robb and Mann 2023).

They use pornography as a means of self-discovery, exploration, and for determining their interests and attractions (Arrington-Sanders et al. 2015, McCormack and Wignall 2017, Bóthe et al. 2019, Harvey 2020, Widman et al. 2021).

They may use porn to learn about sexual roles, the mechanics of sex, sexual performance scripts such as what sounds they should make, sexual activities and techniques, and models for how sex should feel (Harvey, 2020; McCormack and Wignall, 2017; Arrington-Sanders et al, 2015).

They often express concerns about the unrealistic nature of the depictions, and the pressure this can create. They also report that it does not reflect their experiences and practices (Harvey 2020).

Porn use, especially for men who have sex with men, can play a significant role in their perception of themselves, their capabilities, and their bodies with subsequent links to mental ill-health and distress (Benakovic et al, 2024)

headspace insights relating to research findings

Porn use can be educational as well as unhelpful and misleading

It can also show relationships between same sex, transgender and intersex which was educational for me as I didn't see or learn about these things anywhere else. – Young person

Pornography enabled [my young person] to explore elements of their sexual and gender identity in safer ways than through direct experience alone...Consuming pornography may have contributed to an attitude of expecting more novel experiences when engaging in sexual activity with partners. - Parent/family member

Sexual education for homosexual young people is already hard enough, turning to pornography to understand. Here, homosexual pornography is often depicted as more brutal, painful, rough, often with large age differences, contain illegal and unsafe practices, and a whole other suite of practices. – Young person

For women, my experience is that there is a perception that this is to be watched by straight men, rather than other lesbians. Lesbians are fetishised, with young men talking about 'how hot it is' to watch. – Young person

First Nations and CALD young people

Summary of research findings

Pornography commonly depicts racist stereotypes. The ethnicity of performers is a factor in determining the porn that young people seek out (Rothman et al, 2015; Arrington-Sanders et al, 2015). Some young people report that pornography's racist stereotypes make them feel self-conscious, disgusted or victimised (Robb and Mann, 2023, p22).

headspace insights relating to research findings

Pornography can contribute to the objectification of individuals, perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes and promoting exploitative behaviour. For example, porn often exemplifies stereotypes that people can have about certain ethnicities. – Young person

Being black it always showed men with big dicks and so growing up people would always say things about black people having big dicks which isn't always the case. And at the same time always portraying white people and not really showing black women or any women in positive and settings for intimate moments. – Young person

Young people living with disability

Summary of research findings

Pornography depicting people living with disability may provide a welcome representation of sexuality that is often absent from other media and outside of the public imagination, but also contribute to the fetishization and degradation of people living with disability (Ebrahim 2019).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that neurodivergent young people and young people living with disability may be at particular risk of exposure to mainstream pornography acts as a gateway to exposure to child sexual exploitation material and other illegal sexual content (Dubin et al. 2014).

(h) The effectiveness of any current education programs about use and misuse of pornography, and how these may be improved; and

(j) Resources and support currently available to parents and carers to educate children about pornography, and how these might be improved

headspace key messages:

- **Young people need non-judgmental support and education**
- **We need young people to talk about their experiences with porn without feeling shame and stigma**
- **We need to help young people develop the skills to critique porn messages and understand harmful sexual behaviours**
- **Education should help develop attitudes and skills that underpin respectful relationships**
- **Parents, family members and professionals would welcome guidance and training on supporting young people in relation to porn use**

Young men are often viewed through a suspicious frame of threat or risk requiring “management”, rather than a population deserving of an empathic, curious, and collaborative approach to empower them to improve their health and wellbeing (Benakovic et al, 2024).

Feelings of guilt, embarrassment, and shame prevent young people from opening up about their use and seeking help in relation to the negative impacts of their porn use (eSafety Commissioner, 2023).

The solutions that people are directed to online primarily centre on addiction models or abstinence treatments, both of which potentially cause further distress by amplifying their shame, guilt, and low self-esteem (Benakovic et al, 2024).

Most young Australians support educational solutions (Lim et al., 2021).

Education that empowers young people to think critically about porn, and upskilling their sexual and relational literacy can help combat the potential harms of porn (Benakovic et al, 2024)

Young people’s priorities for education centre around reducing shame regarding porn use, improving critical thinking, and upskilling in issues around body image, sexual and gender-based violence, fetishisation of LGBTIQ+ communities and unrealistic standards around sex (Dawson et al., 2020).

Engaging young people as early as possible, being curious and listening genuinely, agreeing on a strategy for co-production and principles to guide implementation, and bringing them along for the journey are critical antecedents to well-designed, engaging programs (Seidler & Seidler, 2024b).

Porn use may keep young men in a “technological spiral” where the addictive nature of the technology results in men spending more time viewing porn, being worse off in actual real-life relationships, and subsequently finding themselves using porn more. (Haidt and Rausch, 2024).

headspace endorses the response and education resources referenced in submission no.20 from *It's time we talked* including the practice framework for school-based education to address pornography's influence.

It's time we talked has also developed a range of resources to support parents and carers – and also professionals – to prevent the harms associated with children and young people's exposure and access to online industrial pornography.

Notable porn literacy programs (Summary of Table 8.1 in Benakovic et al, 2024)

Bold text = “Exemplar interventions”

Intervention name (author); Country	Brief description
It’s time we talked (Crabbe); Australia	<i>It’s time we talked</i> takes a multifaceted approach to embed and integrate content on porn literacy in a whole-school, community, and societal context (young people, parents, teachers and other professionals), reinforcing key messaging across young people’s lives (Crabbe & Flood, 2021). Includes <i>In The Picture</i> , a repository of resources to support high schools in improving the porn literacy of their students (https://itstimewetalked.com/in-the-picture/), and <i>Porn is Not the Norm</i> , tailored to the specific needs of autistic young people and their communities.
The Truth About Pornography: A Pornography Literacy Curriculum for High School Students Designed to Reduce Sexual and Dating Violence (Rothman, Davey & Adler); United States	<i>The Truth About Pornography</i> curriculum aims to reduce rates of dating and sexual violence through discussion and analysis of the gendered and sexual norms present in porn. Positive evaluation findings.
The Gist (Davis et al., 2020); Australia	<i>The Gist</i> is an interactive mobile-first web-based app prototype co-designed with young people that aims to improve porn literacy. No published evaluation.
Pilot sex education program (Setty, Hunt; University of surrey, 2023); United Kingdom	Designed to challenge harmful sexualised behaviours and cultures in schools, in collaboration with teachers, school leaders, and parents. Aims to enable young people to see sexual development and safe, responsible and ethical sexual citizenship as a life-long journey, through discussions regarding relationships, sex education, and pornography. No published evaluation.
Hands-off (Bothe et al., 2021); Primarily United States sample	An automated, web-based intervention, containing 6 core modules (once a week, 45–60 minutes per module). Positive early evaluation findings including lower problematic use, frequency of use, self-perceived addiction, craving, and higher avoidance self-efficacy
The Pornhub Sexual Wellness Center (Bonito); International	An online resource connected with a major pornography aggregator site for people to get sexual health information and wellness. No academic evaluation published
Young Men and Media Intervention (Nelson et al., 2022); United States	An online program that uses nine interactive modules to increase sexual health knowledge, promote critical examination of pornography, and decrease sexual risk among adolescent men who have sex with men. Positive pilot evaluation findings including increased porn knowledge and reduced beliefs regarding porn as an accurate depiction of male-male sex
Healthy Sexuality (O’Shea); Ireland	Curriculum involving involved 4-hour long workshops to post-primary students which include the influence of porn. No evaluative or further information available online.

headspace insights relating to education needs

In 2024, 33% of headspace clinician survey respondents indicated that pornography is a current issue they are seeing in the centres for which they would like further training

I agree with your suspicions that it might not be heard much in centres due to stigma and shame. (From past experience) I recall only a couple of times that it had been brought up by young people – definitely in the context of shame and feeling ‘addicted’ to content and the consequent distress this caused. – headspace service provider

It is important to remove the issue of morality in discussing porn use, as this infers blame on young people for engaging in something that is very accessible, unregulated, and largely normalised in society. - Parent/family member

I believe harmful pornography can be addictive and in the same class as gambling and other addictive practices. Creating spaces for young people without stigma and shame are important to young people’s lives. – Young person

Negative behaviours and attitudes towards sex and relationships that may develop from using porn are likely unintentional and unconscious consequences for the young person – Parent/family member

I think there is a lot of shame young people experience when they use porn... Normalising the experience of accessing porn and wanting to access porn is important in reducing shame and increasing openness, trust and communication with young people. This can and should be done without normalising the content of porn, or necessarily what it is portraying. – Parent/family member

We noticed that [sexting] would be met with a lot of judgement and shame from parents, which is understandable. Often, parents will refer their young people to the centre so that our clinicians can have the conversation with them about it. – headspace clinician

There is a bigger issue in this around AI as well- seeing fake images and now fake scenarios and believing they're real. Porn already sets an unachievable narrative but adding AI into the mix just makes things worse. – Young person

Being older, you are taught the differences between fake and real and given media literacy, unfortunately, many young people don't have that same level of comprehension. Them being allowed to have access to these unrealistic scenarios and not knowing any difference is going to let them believe that fiction is real, setting into stone those expectations that cannot physically be met – Young person

[We should use] evidence-based strategies that minimise harm rather than continue to block and shut down legitimate conversations of young people wanting to know more about their bodies. – Young person

Rather than shutting young people down, I believe we should include them in the conversation. Conversations about consent, respectful relationships and sex are normal, and spaces should be created where young people can speak freely and without shame. – Young person

(i) The effectiveness of current restrictions on access to pornography and consideration of any need to improve these

headspace key messages:

- **Regulation should focus on production and dissemination of harmful porn, rather than restricting young people's access**

The wide-ranging influence of the porn industry must be understood as a large-scale commercial determinant of health similar to the alcohol and gambling sectors, warranting both effective regulation (particularly around unintentional exposure to content), and finding means to collaborate, educate, and shift the unhealthy representations in their content. (Seidler & Seidler, 2024b)

headspace insights from young people and families

Pornography is wildly unregulated. In the same way that businesses are fined for supplying alcohol to underage persons, I believe those distributing porn should be held liable for the minors they supply this to...[doing so] reflects an important message about not expecting young people to be completely responsible for decisions that they are not necessarily adequately informed or developmentally capable of making safely. – Parent/family member

We should abandon any communicated expectations to parents and family that they should be capable of preventing their young person from accessing porn. With the digital landscape as it is, and the widespread accessibility of porn, this is simply not realistic. Parents and family may perceive they have failed in preventing their young person from accessing porn, and experience shame about this themselves. – Parent/family member

Recently, Pornhub added a pop up before you enter the page asking if you are 18 or older. If you click yes, it automatically takes you to the website. There is nothing in place to confirm that you are in fact over 18. YouTube has successfully been doing it for years. I remember wanting to watch a prank video and when I clicked on it, a window came up asking if I was 16 or older, and I had to create a free YouTube account and use my ID to confirm my age...Child safety can and should be achieved. – Young person

It's also impossible to remove access to all porn or put safety measures on everything because there is stuff all over the internet and different apps and chats etc. – Young person

I think [revenue-raising advertising is] sometimes more damaging than the content itself. Graphic images and words about building a better body, sexploitation and depictions of violent scenes flood the screen. I would like to see more regulation on the advertising of these sites and containing safe help-seeking messaging. – Young person

While I do believe that if people want something bad enough, they will find a way, making more and more hurdles that they need to get through means that only those who desperately want it, will make it work. – Young person

I think more cyber safety around viruses and random links is important. – Young person

I don't feel the rhetoric of "just don't access it" is helpful or reaches young people, particularly when they are at an age of rapid social, developmental and sexual development. – Parent/family member

I don't believe bans are effective, I think they just reduce help-seeking and increase stigma for people who otherwise may already struggle to experience control over use – legalised or otherwise. – Parent/family member

Punitive responses to porn use only decrease help-seeking and sharing – as with any issue or topic. De-centering the young person in the issue of porn is really important. Addressing porn as a societal issue that people interact with and are affected by is essential in recognising the influence and far-reaching impact it has on young people. – Parent/family member

If there was a way to have parental notification in place or similar – say a contact attached to a young person's phone account – that was notified if their young person accessed pornographic material, this could be a helpful deterrent or monitoring tool. – Parent/family member

[Re social media ban] I would like to see a strategy from government about how they will address likely reduced help-seeking by young people and family experiencing negative impacts of engaging with banned material. – Parent/family member

(k) Other related matter: measures to reduce harm from exposure to pornography

headspace key messages:

- Talk to young people about what they want and need
- Restrict dissemination and unwanted exposure to harmful content, and don't assume that restricting access to social media is the solution
- Help people to understand the messages that porn sends about healthy sexual relationships
- Help people who have been impacted by porn use
- Make it easier for young people to ask for help

A two-pronged approach should acknowledge young people's agency in some contexts (noting that some porn engagement is unintentional), while commercial determinants of harm lens should be used to shift the burden of health and harm onto the industry that profits off it (Benakovic et al, 2024)

To create positive change, policymakers should implement: comprehensive porn literacy education for young people, their parents and mentors; multi-level, community social messaging that sets healthy gender norms (cf the Australian [Teach us Consent](#) program); and target effective regulatory measures at large multinational content providers, especially to reduce unintentional exposure to porn. (Benakovic et al, 2024)

Restrict dissemination and unwanted exposure to harmful content

I think there should be more legal burden on porn websites to ensure only people above the age of 18 can access it. There should also be more safeguards surrounding on what is shown to users. For example, if something shows content that may trigger trauma. There should also be more warnings that videos are unrealistic and have the consent of all people filming it. In addition, there should be more safeguards to ensure only people who consent to have their videos uploaded have their videos on the Internet. From my understanding, it seems easy for anyone to upload and there should be more regulation to ensure particularly, that videos do not display those who are underage and have not given consent. – Young person

...directing messaging at those distributing unethical porn is more representative of the broader issue. – Parent/family member

...harm [can] be minimised by reduced access and other controls – it just isn't realistic to expect parents and family to be able to prevent porn use altogether. – Parent/family member

I think it would be good to change the way porn is portrayed rather than making it inaccessible as I mentioned it was educational for me but it would be good to have a more child safe version of like porn education sites. – Young person

My experience with young people is if they put their mind to it, they will. Rather than putting up a barbed wire fence, I think that education, help seeking content and evidence-based approaches are important. – Young person

While I do believe that if people want something bad enough, they will find a way, but, making more and more hurdles that they need to get through means that only those who desperately want it, will make it work. – Young person

I think more cyber safety around viruses and random links is important. – Young person

It's also impossible to remove access to all porn or put safety measures on everything because there is stuff all over the internet and different apps and chats etc. – Young person

There could be a lot more support, advocacy and resources developed and directed at parents and family to assist them in discussing...the risks associated with pornography, the stereotyped behaviours and experiences it represents, and the ways it challenges notions of healthy and safe relationships. - Parent/family member

In the same way that we have media and advertising campaigns to provide education about smoking, gambling, vaping, domestic violence, excessive drinking etc, there is great opportunity for similar campaigns in relation to pornography. - Parent/family member

Help people to understand the messages that porn sends about healthy sexual relationships

Definitely more education around discernment in porn, or making it so there has to be a warning if something has been scripted and there are actors working in a porn video. – Young person

I think instead of normalising porn, we need to be normalising the conversations around the effects of porn. I remember being in health in yr 8 and my teacher briefly mentioned the negative effects of porn and the unrealistic expectations but that was it. Then he just moved on. I think this goes hand in hand, but I didn't learn about different types of abuse until yr 10. Either way, far too late. – Young person

To have an effective conversation around the negative effects of porn, particularly about how it depicts relationships, you need to also be informing them around what abusive relationships look like as that is what is shown in those porn videos. By discussing the negatives and what to avoid, it allows for a chance to discuss the positives and what a healthy sexual relationship should look like. Who promotes these conversions shouldn't just fall on one group, but everyone should play a part in talking about it. – Young person

I think there is a lot of opportunity to provide education about healthy sexual relationships and the way depictions of these may be undermined or challenged in porn – Parent/family member. – Young person

Help people who have been impacted by porn use

[Parental] shame can contribute to a lack of help or support seeking around their young person's porn use, perhaps fearing that their young person's porn use reflects on them and is a moral failure or failure of parenting/caring. – Parent/family member

Young people should have support from normal services to be able to discuss things like this in a safe space, some of the online videos and viruses can be triggering and not something you can talk to friends or family about. – Young person

Yes. I think there should be services available for people affected by porn use. I'm not sure what those services look like but I think it starts with talking more about the effects. I remember when I was younger, I was snooping around Pornhub and came across a video. The title didn't really tell much and neither did the thumbnail. I clicked it because I was

exploring and I still remembered what happened in that video. It made me so uncomfortable and I turned off my phone and tried not to think about it. I didn't tell anyone because I was worried I'd get in trouble for looking at porn. Had the conversations been more open about sex ed and the effects of porn and knowing who to reach out to, then I might've. But it's a case of 'what if.' – Young person

If there were to be a branch of headspace that opens for those affected by porn to reach out to, I think the biggest thing for its success would be to treat it like any other service. You don't want these young people feeling different for reaching out. This would mean; talking about like any other service and promoting it like the others. Since headspace does work with 12 year olds, there could be a concern about exposing them to something they're not ready for. I understand the concern but my first exposure was when I was 9 and because I didn't understand it, I just moved on. Or should a 12-year-old reach out to this hypothetical service, all it takes is an explanation. They are reaching out because they're curious, just answer their question and move on. – Young person

Targeting campaigns at supporting young people and family who have been negatively impacted by this very large social force would help in reducing stigma and shame, and increasing help-seeking. – Parent/family member

Make it easier for young people to ask for help

Less stigma around accessing and watching porn or self pleasure, all young people have done it and especially queer young people have found so much education through porn, so it's not all bad it just need to be reworked and made safe and not misleading and of course more sex education in schools is ABSOLUTELY necessary – Young person

Stigma and shame surrounding pornography can make it harder to ask for help. You can feel ashamed or embarrassed about the topic itself, in addition to asking for help on how to use it safely and healthily. Especially as this topic is not something I would be comfortable talking to my parents about, it is an additional barrier to seeking for help if you don't have an immediately support network or people you can think of to reach for help. – Young person

I also think not knowing that this is an important topic to discuss and check-in with a mental health professional. I think if we phrase how porn has influenced a young person as a topic, then more people would talk about it with professionals or peers. – Young person

Treating porn use as a moral issue and personal failing would likely make it harder for family to support young people around porn use and respectful relationships...Targeting campaigns at supporting young people and family who have been negatively impacted by this very large social force would help in reducing stigma and shame, and increasing help-seeking. – Parent/family member

We noticed that [sexting] would be met with a lot of judgement and shame from parents, which is understandable. Often, parents will refer their young people to the centre so that our clinicians can have the conversation with them about it. – headspace clinician

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