

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

*An ANROWS submission to the
Standing Committee on Social Issues (NSW)*

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ANROWS

AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL RESEARCH
ORGANISATION FOR WOMEN'S SAFETY
to Reduce Violence against Women & their Children

Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety Limited
PO Box Q389, Queen Victoria Building, NSW, 1230
ABN 67 162 349 171
Phone +61 2 8374 4000 | **anrows.org.au**

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Overall comments

ANROWS thanks the New South Wales Standing Committee on Social Issues (“the Committee”) for the opportunity to respond to the Inquiry into the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health (the Inquiry). This submission addresses the [Terms of Reference](#) “d” and “f” as outlined by the Committee.

The impacts of pornography are not well understood. Some research indicates associations between pornography use and use of violence, while other research suggests that these links are not conclusive or necessarily causal. This limited understanding extends to what we know about the influence of pornography on children and young people’s sexual attitudes and behaviours. Research also indicates that young people have mixed views about pornography, with many seeing pornography as filling an information vacuum when sex isn’t discussed in schools. In light of the limited evidence, ANROWS calls for investment in further research to understand the influence of pornography on children and young people’s safety and wellbeing. We also urge the Committee to define what is meant by “harmful pornography” to assist with the Inquiry’s clarity and purpose.

Our submission draws attention to the potential for respectful relationships education as a proactive and evidence-informed approach to supporting the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. We outline the importance of respectful relationships education delivery approaches to their effectiveness. ANROWS calls for investment in, and implementation and evaluation of respectful relationships education to equip children and young people to have healthy relationships, including responding to the influence of pornography on practices, attitudes and behaviours. We also wish to draw the Inquiry’s attention to *The Australian National Research Agenda to End Violence Against Women and Children 2023–2028*, which calls specifically for research on and approaches to gender-based violence to elevate the voices of children and young people themselves.

We would be pleased to assist the Committee further, as required.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Tessa Boyd-Caine
Chief Executive Officer

26 November 2024

Summary of recommendations

Recommendation 1: Invest in further research to understand the influence of pornography on children and young people’s safety and wellbeing, including into young adulthood, and the development of healthy sexual practices, behaviours and attitudes.

Recommendation 2: Define what is meant by “harmful pornography” in the context of this Inquiry, including how this definition was developed, to assist with clarity of focus and purpose.

Recommendation 3: Invest in, implement and evaluate respectful relationships education to equip children and young people with the tools to have healthy relationships, including the ability to recognise where pornography is harmful.

Recommendation 4: Ensure that the Inquiry listens to and privileges diverse voices to support decision-making informed by lived expertise, including the voices of children and young people and sex workers.

Assessing the current evidence base

The impacts of pornography are not well understood

Public and political concern about the potential harmful impacts of pornography has existed for a long time. However, evidence on the extent to which pornography causes harm is mixed (Ferguson & Hartley, 2022; Mestre-Bach et al., 2024; Woodley & Green, 2024). Some research, including systematic reviews, indicates that links between pornography and sexual violence are not conclusive or necessarily causal (Ferguson & Hartley, 2022; Mestre-Bach et al., 2024). Other research points towards links between pornography use and violence perpetration, such as sexual or intimate partner violence, in studies with population groups such as men who perpetrate intimate partner violence, soldiers, and partners of women living in rural areas (Brem et al., 2018; Beymer et al., 2021; DeKeseredy & Hall-Sanchez, 2017). While this submission is not a systematic review of the evidence, there is a need for more research to understand the relationship between pornography use and violence against women (Tarzia & Tyler, 2021).

The need for more research on the influence of pornography extends to its impact on children and young people. Children and young people are developing their identities and sexual practices, norms and expectations (Coumarelos, Weeks, et al., 2023; Martellozzo et al., 2016; Massey et al., 2021; Peterson et al., 2022), raising questions about the role of pornography in this formative stage. Data from an Our Watch survey indicates that the average age at which young participants had first viewed pornography was 13.6 years of age (2024).

Some research suggests that pornography influences children and young people’s attitudes and behaviours in relation to sex (Crabbe & Flood, 2021; Massey et al., 2020). However, again, these studies often show small effects, and longitudinal studies have mixed findings (Crabbe & Flood, 2021).

Very little research has asked young people themselves what their experiences and understandings of pornography are (See & Woodley, 2024). Research by See and Woodley (2024) argues that, when making claims about young people’s experiences of pornography, we should prioritise their firsthand perspectives wherever possible. Recently released survey data from Our Watch (2024) provides insight into how young people, aged 16 to 20, think about gender roles, sex, dating and relationships, including pornography. Young people report seeing pornography early, and many recognise when it pushes stereotypes or is degrading and violent towards women and certain races (Our Watch, 2024). We also need to stay aware of when young people’s stated perspectives are influenced by the perspectives of the adults and media around them (See & Woodley, 2024). This research emphasises that firsthand insights can lead to more effective policies and responses (See & Woodley, 2024).

It is important to acknowledge that research on the link between pornography and violence perpetration is still developing. The *Australian National Research Agenda to End Violence against Women and Children (ANRA) 2023–2028* (the Australian National Research Agenda; Lloyd et al., 2023) has identified that we need more research on how media (including mainstream pornography) portrayals of male sexual entitlement and sexual violence, and social attitudes and individual behaviours, enable domestic, family and sexual

violence. This link is not definitive. The Australian National Research Agenda also calls for government to engage commercial industries, like pornography distributors, in conversations about their role in enabling structural inequalities.

Young people's attitudes towards sexual violence are developing

Children and young people are developing their attitudes and understandings of sex and relationships. Findings from the 2021 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS) provide insights into how young people's attitudes towards and understandings of violence against women and gender equality develop and change. Promisingly, the 2021 NCAS shows that these changes can be positive improvements. The research showed that young people's attitudes towards sexual violence are improving over time (Coumarelos, Roberts, et al., 2023). In 2021, most young respondents (70%–90%) “strongly disagreed” with problematic attitudes that justify or excuse rape (Coumarelos, Roberts, et al., 2023).

However, young people's attitudes and understandings have not shifted as far as we need them to. Some young people still hold problematic beliefs about sexual violence that can be dangerous. Overall, the 2021 NCAS found that young people are less certain about consent and sexual violence compared to older Australians. For example, while 55 per cent of young respondents “strongly disagreed” that a man may not realise that the woman doesn't want to have sex if he is very sexually aroused, 29 per cent still “somewhat” or “strongly” agreed with this myth (Coumarelos, Roberts, et al., 2023). It is also concerning that 1 in 10 (10%) agreed with the myth that women often say “no” when they mean “yes” (Coumarelos, Roberts, et al., 2023).

Gendered differences are also evident in attitudes and understandings, with young women more likely to hold “advanced” attitudes towards sexual violence compared to young men (Coumarelos, Roberts, et al., 2023). These gendered differences were also evident in research by Cahill et al. (2023) which showed that boys were more likely to be supportive of violence and less likely to support gender equality when compared to girls and gender diverse young people.

Research has shown that people's attitudes, such as those supportive of gender inequality, have been associated with and identified as predictors of perpetrating violence (Coumarelos, Weeks, et al., 2023). It is therefore important to understand whether pornography use has any impacts on children and young people's attitudes and understandings of sex and relationships.

Responses can vary depending on context

Pornography is not *inherently* harmful either; nor is it all the same. Research suggests that questions of “harm” need to consider both what pornography depicts and the nature of an individual's interaction with it.

The content and production of pornography varies. Research by Vera-Gray and colleagues (2021) indicated that, in a dataset of 131,738 mainstream online pornography videos, one in eight had titles that described sexual activity that constitutes sexual violence. The authors extrapolate that some of this pornography depicts real sexual violence and unlawful activity (Vera-Gray et al., 2021). However, not all pornography depicts aggressive and violent behaviours or inflicts harm upon women during production. Some pornography is produced ethically (McKee et al., 2023) and depicts negotiation of consent, safe sex, pleasure, a variety of sexual practices and body types, genders and races, and may support healthy sexual development for young adults, defined as 18-25 (McKee et al., 2023).

Young people also have different responses depending on how they encounter pornography. Young people report finding pornography pleasurable and interesting if they look for it intentionally, while they generally don't like encountering online pornography unintentionally – finding these encounters to be uncomfortable and unwelcome (eSafety Commissioner, 2023).

Pornography may allow young people to seek out information on pleasure and sex when this information isn't readily available to them elsewhere (ANROWS, 2021; eSafety Commissioner, 2023). Some young people report using pornography to learn about sex, particularly when sex is not discussed in their schools (Woodley & Green, 2024). Some young people, particularly young boys, believe that pornography is realistic and some report that pornography has given them ideas for types of sexual activity they wanted to try out (Martellozzo et al., 2017). However, some research suggests that many young people are aware of the

ways in which pornography is “unrealistic” and presents harmful behaviours, such as lack of consent, and therefore do not see it as a useful way to learn about sex (Martellozzo et al., 2017; Our Watch, 2020). However, Our Watch (2024, p. 2) survey data also revealed that 31 per cent of young people surveyed reported using pornography as a form of sex education, even though many were aware it was not realistic. It is important to explore with young people why they use pornography, how they understand it and how they perceive its influence on their lives.

Importantly, restricting young people’s access to pornography does not guarantee that they do not engage in harmful behaviours. We know that abstinence-only sex education is not effective (Santelli et al., 2017). In fact, it can lead to worse sexual health and wellbeing outcomes for young people (Santelli et al., 2017). Instead, providing young people with the knowledge and skills to navigate sexual and romantic relationships can set them up for success. We encourage the Inquiry to explore the role of proactive education as a supportive and preventive response.

Recommendation 1: Invest in further research to understand the influence of pornography on children and young people’s safety and wellbeing, including into young adulthood, and the development of healthy sexual practices, behaviours and attitudes.

Recommendation 2: Define what is meant by “harmful pornography” in the context of this Inquiry, including how this definition was developed, to assist with clarity of focus and purpose.

Respectful relationships education as a proactive response

The need for and benefits of respectful relationships education

Research suggesting that young people may use pornography to fill an educational vacuum underscores the importance of respectful relationships education. Respectful relationships education aims to prevent gender-based violence by supporting young people to challenge attitudes and behaviours that create environments where violence can occur (Our Watch, 2021). Evidence shows it can be an effective preventive strategy when done right.

A breadth of evidence points to the benefits of respectful relationships education. Respectful relationships education can strengthen young people’s understanding of and skills around gender, sexuality, sexual activity, consent and relationships (Cahill et al., 2023; Struthers et al., 2019). It can support children and young people to identify jealousy, conflict and problematic behaviours in relationships and among their peers and equip them with the tools and strategies to respond to and navigate relationships (Cahill et al., 2023; Struthers et al., 2019). Specific positive outcomes include young people demonstrating increased recognition of others’ perspectives and rights, the ability to engage socially, and a reduction in bullying and sexual harassment (Cahill et al., 2023). Students themselves also expressed that learning about gender equality and gender-based violence was useful (Cahill et al., 2023).

Evaluations of school violence prevention approaches across Australia, Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States have shown increases in young people’s ability to identify rigid gender roles and violent behaviour, and decreases in their intention to use violence in relationships (Our Watch, 2021).

Increasing respectful relationships education effectiveness

The way that respectful relationships education is delivered is key to achieving benefits. In recent consultations with children and young people, ANROWS has heard that respectful relationships education can often be implemented from a “tick box” and incident-based approach, and therefore can be unsatisfactory for participants. To be effective, respectful relationships education needs to:

- be age and stage appropriate (ANROWS, 2021; Cahill et al., 2023; Our Watch, 2021; Struthers et al., 2019)

- start early, and the content and learning style should align and progress with the age and developmental stage of students (Our Watch, 2021)
- take a whole-of-school approach modelling respect and equality through school policies, procedures and culture, with families and communities involved in modelling respectful relationships at home (Our Watch, 2021; Schools Vic, 2024)
- be underpinned by appropriate teacher training (Cahill et al., 2023; Our Watch, 2021).

Respectful relationships education programs are more effective when delivered as intended, for example, by using collaborative learning strategies that draw on and develop the skills and insights of students instead of skipping these and defaulting to a teacher-led approach (Cahill et al., 2023). However, teachers must be equipped to support these learning strategies. Teachers feel more confident and prepared when they are supported by guidance such as lesson plans including learning intentions and data, information and scenarios (Cahill et al., 2023). It is also easier to implement respectful relationships education when it aligns with the school mission and vision, when there is support from school leaders, and when teachers have access to professional learning (Cahill et al., 2023).

Alongside intentional and faithful delivery, it is also important to trial different models that centre the expertise of young people. For example, respectful relationships education delivered by peer educators, generally aged under 25, in a peer-to-peer model can lead to young people better understanding what behaviours are acceptable and improving their respectful behaviour (Struthers et al., 2019). In a study by ANROWS on peer-led respectful relationships education, 92 per cent of youth participants agreed that it is helpful to have peer-led learning on respectful relationships (Struthers et al., 2019). Peer educators may have greater knowledge of young peoples' experiences and relationships and can be viewed as more trustworthy and relatable by other young people (Struthers et al., 2019).

The evidence on respectful relationships education is still developing. There are promising findings about its effectiveness. We need more research to understand the extent of this effectiveness, and how it can be better supported through different delivery styles. Respectful relationships education should always be underpinned by evaluation to ensure we engage in continuous learning and improvement.

Recommendation 3: Invest in, implement and evaluate respectful relationships education to equip children and young people with the tools to have healthy relationships, including the ability to recognise where pornography is harmful.

Inclusion of diverse voices

The Australian National Research Agenda emphasises the importance of including the voices and opinions of children and young people in research demonstrating respect and validation of their experiences. Including their voices also supports the development of more relevant system responses. In this spirit, we strongly encourage the Inquiry to centre the voices of children and young people in their work.

Additionally, conversations around pornography should involve sex workers as a key consultation group to ensure that their perspectives are reflected and that responses, especially those proposing restrictions on pornography access through digital platforms, do not subject sex workers to harm or further marginalisation.

Recommendation 4: Ensure that the Inquiry listens to and privileges diverse voices to support decision-making informed by lived expertise, including the voices of children and young people and sex workers.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the evidence on the impacts of pornography on young people is still developing. There is a clear need for further research to ensure that government and sector responses to pornography that intend to support young people's safety and wellbeing are evidence-informed and effective. The existing research that indicates that young people use pornography for education suggests that implementing respectful relationships education could further support children and young people's safety. Any research and

responses should include prioritising working with children and young people themselves, who are experts by experience and can bring unique perspectives and insights (Lloyd et al., 2023; See & Woodley, 2024).

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ANROWS is an independent, not-for-profit company established as an initiative under Australia's *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022* (the National Plan). Our primary function is to build the evidence base that supports ending violence against women and children in Australia.

ANROWS is embedded in the National Plan architecture and will continue to deliver and develop this function across the next decade under the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032*. Every aspect of our work is motivated by the right of women and children to live free from violence and in safe communities. We recognise, respect and respond to diversity among women and children, and we are committed to reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Primary (core) funding for ANROWS is jointly provided by the Commonwealth and all state and territory governments of Australia. ANROWS is also, from time to time, directly commissioned to undertake work for an individual jurisdiction, and successfully tenders for research and evaluation work. ANROWS is registered as a harm prevention charity and deductible gift recipient, governed by the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC).

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Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety Limited
PO Box Q389, Queen Victoria Building, NSW, 1230
ABN 67 162 349 171
Phone +61 2 8374 4000 | **anrows.org.au**