

February 16, 2016

## **Senate Environment and Communications References Committee**

### ***Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the internet***

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the *Senate Inquiry into the harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the internet*. As the peak body for child and family services in Victoria, the Centre develops and advocates for public policies that advance the rights and wellbeing of children, young people and families.

We represent over 100 community service organisations throughout Victoria working across the continuum of child and family services, from prevention and early intervention to the provision of out-of-home care. Through advocacy, research, training and dissemination of good practice, the Centre supports agencies' ability to meet their goals.

#### **The expansion of the internet and accessibility of sexually explicit material to children**

The emergence of ever more sophisticated technologies has radically changed the ways in which we communicate, learn, play, and conduct business. As active consumers and producers of media, children are increasingly likely to come across sexually explicit material, whether deliberately or by accident, and to be confronted by this material at an increasingly younger age. The Australian Federal Police have identified children's exposure to inappropriate content and sexually explicit material, including pornography, as a critical challenge of the digital age.<sup>1</sup> Studies suggest the impact of pornography on children and young people can be profound.

#### **Defining pornography**

There is no nationally consistent definition of pornography. How pornography has been defined and understood has differed across time and cultures. Most definitions of pornography focus on the representation of material that is designed to stimulate sexual interest or arousal. However, what may be described as pornographic in one context may not be perceived as such in another context. A useful first step in developing a nationally consistent approach to minimising harm from children's exposure to pornography would be to have a commonly agreed definition.

#### **Characteristics of the pornography industry**

Pornography, defined as representations designed to stimulate sexual arousal, is now cheaper and more readily accessible than ever before. Globally, the pornography industry has an annual profit of US\$24.9 billion, indicating its vast consumption and success.<sup>2</sup> As the industry has grown and producers seek to push the market boundaries, the nature of pornography has become more hardcore, violent and aggressive. What was ostensibly 'soft' pornography has become integrated into mainstream popular culture, and hardcore pornography has become increasingly normalised across the internet.<sup>3</sup> Research conducted in 2007 showed that almost 90 percent of scenes in pornographic videos portrayed physical aggression, while nearly half contained verbal aggression, and that 94 percent showed the aggression perpetrated against women.<sup>4</sup> In particular, the portrayal of violence and degrading behaviour during sex has the potential to negatively influence children's attitudes to relationships and sexual expectations and norms.

#### **Children's brain development and the harmful effects of pornography on children**

Children's brain development requires nurturing and safe environments and positive adult role models to develop secure attachments and foster respectful relationships and attitudes to others and the self. This includes developing wellbeing in relation to sexual health. The World Health Organization defines sexual health as *a state of physical, mental and social wellbeing in relation to sexuality*. It requires a *positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence*.<sup>5</sup> Children's development and wellbeing is shaped by a range of social factors.

A growing body of research demonstrates the harmful impact of pornography on children and young people's attitudes and beliefs, sexual behaviour, sexual aggression, self-concept and body image, social development, and brain development.<sup>6</sup> Although sexual curiosity and viewing sexually explicit material are perceived as a part of the natural trajectory of adolescent development, violent and aggressive pornography has been found to be harmful for children and young people who use pornography as a regular source of information and knowledge.

The significant harms and effects of pornography on children and young people are summarised below:

- **Earlier access**

Children are increasingly likely to encounter *unwanted* exposure to pornography or online harassment, often despite filters and blocking software on the computer, due to its prevalence and pervasiveness.<sup>7</sup> They are also likely to be exposed to pornographic material earlier than they are exposed to physical sexual experiences. The median age of first sexual intercourse in Australia is 16, but US research shows that the age of first exposure to pornography is 11 years old. This indicates that children are being exposed to sexually explicit material before they are developmentally prepared to understand and critically engage with the material.<sup>8</sup>

- **Unrealistic and skewed attitudes to relationships**

Children and young people are prone to developing unrealistic expectations of sex and skewed attitudes towards intimate relationships. The Australian Psychological Society (APS) argues that *viewing highly sexualised content or violent pornographic material has many risks for children's psychological development and mental health, by potentially skewing their views of normality and acceptable behaviour at a crucial time of development.*<sup>9</sup> The Victorian Government's educational resource Building Respectful Relationships highlights that internet pornography is influencing children and young people's sexual expectations and practices, including areas such as body image, sense of self and safe-sex practices. It also negatively impacts the way children and young people view intimate relationships, sexual understanding and experiences.<sup>10</sup>

- **Problem behaviour**

There is consensus that young people learn sexual behaviours from watching sexually explicit material, linking exposure to pornography to children and young people's engagement in 'risky behaviour'.<sup>11</sup> The Australian Childhood Foundation has identified a correlative relationship between exposure to and consumption of pornography and increased numbers of children and young people engaging in problem sexual behaviour.<sup>12</sup> While viewing pornography does not lead directly to engaging in problem sexual behaviours, children and young people who have sexually abused others report greater exposure to pornography than those engaged in non-sexual criminal activity.<sup>13</sup>

- **Perpetuation and reinforcement of gender inequity and rigid gender roles**

Exposure to and consumption of pornography is highly gendered. Males are more likely than females to consume pornography, to consume it regularly, to initiate its use, to view more types of images, and to have supportive attitudes to it.<sup>14</sup> Male dominance and female submission are often reinforced in sexually explicit material.<sup>15</sup> Pornography normalises sex acts that many women may experience as degrading, painful or violating. This raises serious implications for young people's capacity to develop a positive sexuality that incorporates mutual pleasure, respect and the negotiation of free and full consent.<sup>16</sup> The APS argues that pornography is grounded in gender inequity, perpetuates rigid gender roles and stereotypes, and reinforces attitudes that condone violence against women.<sup>17</sup>

### **The harmful impact of pornography on children who are more vulnerable**

Children who grow up in households that cannot provide a safe or nurturing environment, that experience financial hardship, violence, drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness or disability, can miss out on opportunities to develop positive and respectful behaviours, attitudes and connections to their peers and community. Children in out of home care have often lacked nurturing environments and positive role models in their lives. The lack of consistency and stability in out of home care placements, including residential, foster and kinship care, makes children in care particularly vulnerable to developing harmful behaviours, attitudes and connections with others. In the absence of

alternative sources, children in care who grow up without consistent positive role models or stable nurturing and safe homes are more likely to use the internet and pornography as a useful source of information about sex and relationships. Given the trauma experienced by this group of children and young people—and consequent behavioural, emotional and social difficulties—they are more susceptible to the harmful messages in pornography and the negative impacts on their sexual health and development. The Inquiry conducted into the sexual exploitation of children in residential care by the Commission for Children and Young People in Victoria, ‘...as a good parent would...’, cited the harmful effects of pornography on children in residential care settings:

*The Inquiry saw evidence that pornography, social media and the internet play a significant role in the lives of vulnerable children and young people in residential care. The challenge for the Victorian Government and the entire service system is how to prevent and manage the inevitable and ongoing risk that social media poses to our children in care who, prior to entering into care, have experienced significant trauma, psychological damage and abuse.*

### **Harm minimisation**

Debates about pornography are complex, frequently emotive and controversial. Research on the effects of exposure to pornography on children and young people is difficult to conduct and statistics are difficult to obtain. However, studies show a range of harm minimisation methods that have been effective in countering the harmful effects of pornography on children and young people. Our Watch, the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) and Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety (ANROWS) recently released a whole-of-community framework to prevent violence against women and children. *Change the story* highlights the need to challenge attitudes condoning violence against women. It also argues for strategies that promote women’s independence and decision-making, challenge gender stereotypes and roles, and strengthen positive, equal and respectful relationships. These are the underlying issues that must be addressed to strengthen the positive psycho-social development of our children and community and give children the skills and knowledge to make informed judgements about internet use.

The APS has identified informed parenting, school-based practices and educational approaches as the most productive measures to reduce the harms of internet pornography on children and young people, particularly when used in conjunction with industry regulation, enforcement and internet filtering.<sup>18</sup>

The literature supports the following harm minimisation recommendations:

#### *Cyber safety*

- Foster safe engagement with technology and capacity to manage online risks. It is important that the government supports the development of children as active and competent ‘cyber citizens’.
- Promote Industry regulation. The Industry should develop and update appropriate internet safety software that effectively filters inappropriate material from access by children. This should still afford young people the opportunity to access information that forms part of broader creativity and learning.

#### *Education*

##### **In schools**

- Resource schools adequately to promote and encourage safe internet use and critical understanding of pornography. This includes:
  - Improving media literacy and the ability to critique information presented on the internet, including pornographic imagery.
  - Consider the impact of pornography on sexual behaviours and decisions within sex education, including improving understanding of the nature, purpose and development of pornographic imagery that is constructed for a commercial purpose.
  - Mandate the inclusion of respectful relationships education in Australian curriculum, including awareness of rights and responsibilities in sexual relationships.

### **In residential care**

- Specific sex education and respectful relationships education need to be developed for children and young people in residential care settings, who often have limited access to positive role models and information about sex and respectful relationships.

### **For parents**

- Support and encourage parents to take responsibility for their children's internet usage, particularly through:
  - Internet filtering measures
  - Internet usage supervision
  - Facilitating and promoting awareness and knowledge of respectful relationships development.

### *Community focused strategies*

- It is critical that community-focused strategies be implemented to address how pornography perpetuates rigid gender roles and reinforces attitudes that condone violence against women. Acknowledgement of the harm caused by pornography on children's ability to develop respectful relationships should be implemented in action to reduce violence against women and children.
- Recognise the harmful effects of pornography on young men within documents that are focused on addressing gender inequity, particularly the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022 and family violence responses.

Overall, while further research is needed to show the full impact of exposure to pornography on children and young people over time, there is sufficient evidence to indicate that children's exposure to pornography can adversely affect their developmental capacity to form trusted, reciprocal relationships with others.

It is critical that proven harm minimisation strategies are implemented to keep children safe while using technologies, and to focus on how children can build respectful attitudes, behaviours and relationships, particularly towards women. It is also important that targeted sex education and respectful relationships education is implemented within residential care settings.

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## Endnotes:

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- <sup>2</sup> Crabbe, M. & Corlett, D. (2010) *Eroticising Inequality*. DVRCV Spring Quarterly Newsletter, Edition 3.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Wosnitzer, R. J. & Bridges, A. (2007) *Aggression and Sexual Behaviour in Best-Selling Pornography: A Content Analysis Update*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, San Francisco.
- <sup>5</sup> World Health Organisation 2016 *Sexual and reproductive health. Defining Sexual Health*. Accessed at: [http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/sexual\\_health/sh\\_definitions/en/](http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/sexual_health/sh_definitions/en/)
- <sup>6</sup> Owens, E. Behun, R. Manning, J. Reid, R. (2012) *The Impact of Internet Pornography on Adolescents: A Review of the Research*. Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity 19:19-122.
- <sup>7</sup> Bravehearts (2012) Child Sexual Assault: Facts and Statistic. Accessed at: [http://www.bravehearts.org.au/files/Facts%20and%20Stats\\_updated141212.pdf](http://www.bravehearts.org.au/files/Facts%20and%20Stats_updated141212.pdf)
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- <sup>9</sup> Australian Psychological Society. (2015, April 14). *APS highlights concerns about the harmful impacts of pornography*. InPsych, April 2015. Retrieved from <https://www.psychology.org.au/inpsych/2015/april/sampson/>
- <sup>10</sup> Victoria Department of Education and Training (2015) *Building Respectful Relationships: Stepping Out Against Gender-Based Violence*. Melbourne: DET.
- <sup>11</sup> Bryant, C. (2009) op. cit.
- <sup>12</sup> Fernandes, C. Pratt, R. (2015) Porn and the changing face of clinical risk assessment. The Australian Childhood Foundation Blog Prosody. Accessed on 7/1/16 at <http://www.childhood.org.au/blog/home/2015/march/porn-1>
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- <sup>15</sup> Brown, J. D. & L'Engle, K. L. (2009) X-rated: Sexual attitudes and behaviours associated with US early adolescents' exposure to sexually explicit media. *Communication Research*, 36, 129-151.
- <sup>16</sup> Crabbe, M. & Corlett, D. op. cit.
- <sup>17</sup> Australian Psychological Society. (2015, April 14). op. cit.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.