

INQUIRY INTO IMPACTS OF HARMFUL PORNOGRAPHY ON MENTAL, EMOTIONAL, AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

Organisation: Council of Catholic School Parents NSW ACT

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Council of Catholic School Parents NSW/ACT

NSW Legislative Council's Standing Committee on Social Issues

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

1 November 2024

COUNCIL OF CATHOLIC SCHOOL PARENTS NSW/ACT

 www.ccsp.catholic.edu.au



Preamble

This submission has been prepared by the Council of Catholic School Parents NSW/ACT (CCSP) representing the parents of more than 275,000 students in approximately 630 Catholic schools in NSW/ACT.

CCSP thanks the NSW Legislative Council's Standing Committee on Social Issues for the invitation to provide a submission to this inquiry. This submission is made on behalf of approximately 150,000 families who choose to enrol one or more of their children in NSW/ACT Catholic schools.

CCSP is the officially recognised body representing the interests of parents of children and young people in NSW and ACT Catholic schools. The work of the Council is guided by the principles of parental choice, equity, and social justice. CCSP provides leadership, advocacy and support to the parents of children and young people in all Diocesan and Congregational Catholic schools in NSW and the ACT.

'Parents', as the term is used in this submission, is intended to cover both biological and adoptive parents and other carers who are the primary carers of children and young people, including grandparents and recognised kinship carers.

Parents are the first educators of their children.¹ This is not only true for parents in Catholic families or the parents of children in Catholic schools but all parents.

CCSP helps parents to establish safe online environments for their children by providing hints and tips for safer internet usage through a variety of methods.

- o [CCSP website](#), [Parent Talk eNewsletter](#) and [Facebook](#).
- o Promoting online safety resources developed by the eSafety Commissioner.
- o Collaborating with the eSafety Commissioner to deliver online safety webinars for parents across NSW/ACT.
- o Delivering a range of parent education webinars supporting parents in their role as primary carers and offering avenues of support if issues are identified.

This submission is in response to the Committee's published Terms of Reference adopted by the Committee on 6 August 2024.

The Council of Catholic School Parents NSW/ACT Council members have provided feedback to some parts of the Terms of Reference - Parts (a) through (k).

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., 2023.

Terms of Reference

The Standing Committee on Social Issues Terms of Reference target feedback with reference to the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health, with particular reference to:

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

In the recently released Sexual Harassment of Teachers Survey (SHoT survey), over 1000 teachers responded providing evidence of concerns shared by parents. 'Teachers expressed despair with the rapid rise of sexualized behaviours which they attributed to early exposure to pornography.' This contributes to their distorted view of sexuality and the significant negative impacts on children and young people both mentally and emotionally.

Exposure to pornography can also distort an individual's view of and capacity to develop healthy relationships.

Parents cited concerns about their children engaging in sexual activities at a younger age causing problematic social issues around respectful relationships as well as increasing sense of poor body image.

Parents also expressed concern about the traumatic impact, confusion and unnecessary inquisitiveness that could be experienced by children and young people. One parent advised they were aware of children as young as Year 3 and 4 asking other students at school about pornography and if they had seen it.

Concern was also expressed about the ease with which pornography can be accessed, the lack of parental engagement in managing access to social media as well as the inability of many parents to use technology to block unwanted content being accessed.

Concern was also expressed about children and young people not reaching out to trusted adults for fear of judgement, punishment or their device being removed from them.

(b) media by which pornography is accessed and circulated

Parents provided feedback requiring the use of mechanisms to make it impossible for children and young people to access sites where sexually explicit and violent material is hosted.

Parents are increasingly seeking government intervention to ensure social media companies be held to account applying age restrictions by engaging age assurance technology implemented to prevent children and young people accessing this material.

(c) impacts on body image

The Australian Institute of Family Studies in a research snapshot taken from Quadara, A., El-Murr, A., & Latham, J. (2017) titled [The effects of pornography on children and young people: An evidence scan](#) identified that male and female consumers of pornography had increased levels of self-objectification and body surveillance. Parents have long held concerns about adolescent body image and the impacts of social media, including pornography, on adolescent and childhood perceptions of body image.

It is widely acknowledged that the sexualisation of children by exposure to increasingly suggestive and revealing images and more recently the use of AI to generate unrealistic body images on social media have contributed to an avalanche of material placing children and young people at risk of increased anxiety regarding body image.

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

Pornography places unrealistic expectations on those that watch it. It portrays as normal, activity which can be degrading, non-consensual and harmful – both physically and emotionally. Pornography gives rise to dependency, sex addiction and unrealistic expectations of sexual activity.

It is focused on the performative nature of sex acts. It reduces a relationship to a physical act and creates unrealistic expectations of what a partner must do in order to please the other and is often about one partner (usually a woman) submitting herself or allowing physically harmful and uncomfortable acts to be done to her.

It is leading to a rise in social issues, including domestic violence and sexual violence as very rarely are respectful relationships portrayed in pornography.

Children can believe that what they see from pornography is normal and acceptable behaviour.

As stated, the content is unrealistic and not normal everyday interaction and relationship behaviour – young people who are exposed to pornography haven't had the experience of deep and meaningful relationships and as such, their perceptions of this are unrealistic and false.

Pornography portrays a false understanding of a sexual relationship, there is no emphasis on building a trusting, gentle and caring relationship, the focus is all on the physical.

(e) the production and dissemination of pornography, including deepfake or AI-generated pornography

Recent Australian media reports highlight the use of AI or deepfake generated or explicit images by students in schools being used to exploit and harass female students. The impact of this on the wellbeing of girls and women is indisputable and of significant concern to parents.

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

There is a relationship between pornography and violence against women. Vast amounts of research confirm a link between the use of pornography, particularly by males, and sexual violence and aggression towards women. At a time when our children and young people are bombarded with extreme images of violence, sexually explicit material, aggressive and suggestive content on open social media and internet platforms, when females are depicted as objects for sexual gratification the impacts on the developing brains of your children and young people is catastrophic.

This issue of consent is not articulated in pornography and viewers, particularly children or young people, can reasonably assume consent has been provided. Pornography can be violent and can prevent participants from physically being able to withdraw consent.

In many pornographic scenes, explicit verbal consent is rarely depicted or emphasized. Instead, sexual acts often proceed without clear communication between the participants. This can create the false impression that mutual consent is not necessary or that it happens implicitly rather than through clear agreement.

Pornography portrays women as willing submitters to harmful and uncomfortable acts, as vessels to be passed around, and whose welfare and comfort is secondary to a man's sexual satisfaction.

Some forms of harmful pornography, particularly violent or aggressive genres, regularly depict acts of physical aggression, coercion, or domination of women. This can normalise violence and lead to the perception that such behaviours are acceptable in sexual relationships, contributing to a broader culture of violence against women.

A brief search of online media depicts stories of women being raped and murdered with further investigation revealing the impact hard core pornography had on the offender.

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

Education for the community needs to focus on all harmful aspects of pornography including mental, physical, emotional and social.

Parents have expressed their view that they need to talk candidly and frankly, in an age-appropriate way, about pornography with their children – what it is, how they might first come across it, how to respond, natural curiosity and what is wrong with what they might see but might not understand. Parents advise that they need resources to support whole-of-family learning as part of curriculum with a preference for children and parents being educated together with increased access to mental health practitioners and counsellors. There is also broad support for a ban on social media until young people are at least 16.

A hotline or free online chat service that they can go to, to ask trusted providers to answer their questions in a way that promotes honesty and safety as well as talks by law enforcement and victims of sexual abuse

As stated by CCSP in a previous submission:

CCSP acknowledges the expertise of the eSafety Commissioner in the area of social media and online safety and welcomes and applauds the passing of the Online Safety Act 2021 (Cth), which strengthens the eSafety Commissioner's powers to help protect all Australians from the most serious forms of online harm.

Not all parents are digitally literate or have a full understanding of the potential short- and long-term risks that children may face from using social media platforms. This extends to their digital identity/footprint, personal reputation, viewing of age-inappropriate content and unknowingly breaking the law by possessing and forwarding certain images.

CCSP admits it can be challenging for users of technology, including parents, to understand and effectively navigate security settings on devices and online platforms. It is an area in which many parents are inexperienced and unskilled.

Anecdotal evidence exists to suggest that some parents either intentionally set up social media accounts for their children even though they are under the minimum user age, or, turn a blind eye to their children's use of age-inappropriate social media platforms. In either case, children's online safety and wellbeing is at risk. There does not seem to be any meaningful enforcement of identity verification and age assurance policies and practices. These seem to be all too easily circumvented or ignored.

Education is essential. The Australian community needs education campaigns that provide users of technology or anyone supervising children who use technology with an understanding of how to mitigate the risks that social media and online platforms might present.

These education campaigns should be multimedia campaigns that are not limited to being delivered online. They should consider how to reach parents with little or no digital literacy, low proficiency of written English or limited access to the internet. They should be tailored and targeted to meet the needs of each intended audience.

Conclusion

CCSP commends the NSW Legislative Council's Standing Committee on Social Issues for conducting this Inquiry into the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health.

We acknowledge the challenge faced by the Australian government both federal and state in achieving this outcome. It is only through legislators working closely with parents that we can ensure best outcomes for our children and young people.

CCSP thanks the NSW Legislative Council's Standing Committee on Social Issues Inquiry into the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health for the opportunity to provide this submission and will happily contribute further information if requested.