



# PORNOGRAPHY

## AND ITS IMPACT ON ADOLESCENCE



The pervasive use of online pornography is having a profound impact on our society, reaching almost every aspect of daily life and creating an unrecognized web of harm. As the private use of hardcore pornography is increasingly normalized, it is not only adults that will be affected, but children and teenagers as well. For adolescents in particular, pornography may lead to wide-ranging negative effects.

Adolescents today use pornography at unprecedented levels. For instance, a 2017 study in Australia of 941 15–29 year olds, reported the median age for first viewing pornography was 13 years for males and 16 years for females. This same study reported that 100% of males and 82% of females had ever viewed pornography. Among those who had viewed pornography within the last 12 months, 84% of males and 19% of females used pornography on a weekly or daily basis.<sup>1</sup> When contrasted with Australian data from the early to mid-2000s, which showed lifetime exposure to pornography rates between 73-93% for adolescent boys and 11-62% for adolescent girls, the staggering increase of pornography use among today's youth becomes startlingly clear.<sup>2</sup>

The large-scale private use of hardcore pornography by millions of people, including adolescents, has significant ramifications. Studies have consistently shown that the use of pornography can impact the brain, relationships, behaviors, as well as both physical and mental health. Efforts to prevent pornography exposure and correlated harms, educate the public, and develop recovery treatment modalities necessitate the adoption of public health approaches to effectively combat these problems.

### Impact on Adolescents:

- **Harm to Young Brains:** A survey of 813 U.S. teens and young adults (13–25), found that 26% of adolescents aged 13–17 actively seek out pornography weekly or more often.<sup>3</sup> Research has demonstrated that children are more susceptible than adults to addictions and to developmental effects on the brain.<sup>4</sup>
- **Emotional Bond with Caregivers:** A nationally representative survey of youth ages 9–17 reported that online pornography users were significantly more likely to report a poor emotional bond with their caregiver than adolescents who viewed pornography offline or not at all.<sup>5</sup> A poor emotional bond

between caregiver and child is also associated with sexually aggressive behavior.<sup>6</sup>

- **Risky Sexual Behaviors:** Internet pornography use is linked to increases in problematic sexual activity at younger ages, and a greater likelihood of engaging in risky sexual behavior such as hookups, multiple sex partners, anal sex, group sex, and using substances during sex as young adolescents.<sup>7</sup> A recent UK survey found that 44% of males aged 11–16 who viewed pornography reported that online pornography gave them ideas about the type of sex they wanted to try.<sup>8</sup>
- **Child on Child Harmful Sexual Behavior:** A study of 950 child patients presenting to a Child Advocacy Center in the Midwestern U.S. for suspected child abuse (primarily sexual abuse, but also some cases of severe physical abuse), examined intake and assessment data (self-reported, as well as parent and guardian provided) collected in 2015. The children ranged in age from 3 to 18; 74% were female. Analysis found that children who disclosed exposure to pornography were at 3.3 times greater likelihood of engaging in problematic sexual behavior compared to those who did not disclose pornography exposure.

The researchers explained: “Having exposure to pornography at a young age may not only introduce children to behaviors they may eventually acquire, but the children may have those behaviors reinforced by seeing the models (e.g. the individuals shown in the pornography medium, the person who exposed the child to pornography, etc.) being rewarded by the behavior. If the benefits of such sexual behavior are reinforced for the child, they may have a higher likelihood of adopting the behavior themselves.”<sup>9</sup>

- **Increased Likelihood of Selling and Buying Sex:** A Swedish study of 18-year-old males found that frequent users of pornography were significantly more likely to have sold and bought sex than other males of the same age.<sup>10</sup>
- **Sending Sexually Explicit Images:** A survey of 4,564 adolescents aged 14–17 in five European countries found that viewing Internet pornography is significantly associated



## Pornography is not only dangerous to adolescents.

Although pornography can affect people in different ways, studies have shown links between pornography use and sexual violence, including the adoption and belief in rape myths, as well as other sexually aggressive behaviors among adults. Frequent pornography use can also lead to decreased body image and self-worth for both males and females. Research also demonstrates a negative connection between pornography and marital and adult sexual satisfaction.

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with an increased probability of having sent sexual images and messages (i.e. sexting) among boys.<sup>11</sup>

- **Women as Sex Objects:** Internet pornography is shown to normalize the notion that women are sex objects among both adolescent boys and girls.<sup>12</sup>
- **Physical and Sexual Victimization:** A nationally representative survey of pornography use among youth aged 9–17, found that those with increased exposure to Internet pornography were significantly more likely to report physical and sexual victimization.<sup>13</sup>
- **Impact of Young Exposure:** Research has found that among males the younger their age of first exposure to pornography, the higher their current consumption of pornography, as well as their greater integration of pornography into sexual activity, and less enjoyment of partnered sex.<sup>14</sup>

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