

Continuum of Online Pornography

Youth & Digital Technology: Growing Up Online Toolkit

Risk Factors for Problematic Use of Online Pornography

Incidental exposure may occur when children find themselves on pornographic sites they did not intend to visit due to incorrect web addresses or seemingly innocent word combinations [1, 2, 3]. Children who have viewed these sites may feel shocked, surprised, guilty, ashamed and scared, in part because they may have experienced sexual arousal, a natural physical response, while viewing pornographic content they do not have the maturity to comprehend [2]. With the pervasive use of smart phones children have access to pornography almost anywhere [2, 4].

Many parents believe that their children have not seen inappropriate content online, but the reality is that children as young as eight and nine years of age can easily come across sexual content on the internet— most notably, graphic adult pornography [1]. About half of adolescents in a recent large-scale study in the UK had seen pornographic material without actively seeking it [3]. Filtering, blocking or monitoring software on home computers along with parental monitoring and supervision, has been shown to decrease unwanted exposure to online pornography [5].

Social factors, personality traits, and pre-existing comorbidities may increase the risk of pornography use. Desire for popularity and peer pressure is also associated with higher pornography use [6]. Adolescents who exhibit risky behaviour or delinquency in other life areas are more likely to view pornography and develop problematic use [6]. Substance use, depression, and anxiety are also risk factors for developing an online pornography addiction [6,7].

When Online Pornography Use Becomes Problematic

- increased private time spent at the computer, along with clearing browsing history
- less interest in real face-to-face interactions
- interference with day-to-day activities
- use of language that mirrors pornographic material and reflects knowledge of sexual material that exceeds current age
- sexual interests and activity above age-appropriate levels
- overly intense reaction (anxiety, frustration or anger) when denied access to the internet [8].

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Negative Impacts on Youth

The interference of pornography on normal sexual development can result in:

- An increased risk of developing a pornography addiction [2].
- The development of unrealistic, potentially harmful sexual values, beliefs and attitudes; the imitation of inappropriate sexual behaviours, including greater sexual preoccupation and higher numbers of sexual partners [2, 8].
- An increase in aggressive sexual behavior in relation to watching pornography showing violence [8].
- A decreased self-concept, girls report feeling physically inferior and boys sexually inadequate. But as self-confidence and social development improves, the use of internet pornography decreases [3].
- Negative emotional side-effects, such as decreased social integration and emotional bonding with caregivers, increased conduct problems, delinquent behavior, depressive symptoms, feelings of shame, guilt, anxiety and confusion, and risk of poor social bonds as adults [8].
- The depersonalization of women (and potentially men and children depending on exposure) [7].
- Association between pornography use and engaging in risky sexual behaviour such as sex under the influence of alcohol or another substance [6].
- Pornography consumption and sexting are strongly related. The more pornography girls and boys consume, the more sexting they engage in [9].

Other issues related to sexual internet-based preoccupations exist, such as sexting, sextortion, cyberbullying, online dating violence, exposure to online sexual predators, and revenge pornography [6].

Sexting, sextortion and online predators are explained in more detail in the following section, as these issues are highly relevant for this toolkit's targeted age group.

Sexting

Given that the internet remains primarily unregulated, youth are at risk to be unwillingly exposed to sexual images or solicitation in various formats, such as sexting [10].

Sexting is the sending or receiving of sexually suggestive or explicit images, messages or videos via electronic transmission [3,10]. The prevalence of sexting by young people varies according to the definition and data collection methods. While most adolescents do not create or share naked photos of themselves, in a large-scale U.K. study, 8% had seen an image a close friend and 15% had seen an acquaintance. Adolescents seem to have awareness of many of the negative consequences of sexting [3].

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While sexting is the term used by the media and in public discourse, young people use very different language. They interpret sexting as writing and sharing explicit messages with others and expressions such as 'naked selfies', 'nudies', 'banana pics' for visual messages [3, 11].

According to the Kids Help Phone, youth who share sexually explicit images through sexting may be engaging in the following criminal issues:

- Inadvertently creating child pornography with pictures and video.
- Be tempted to engage in the non-consensual distribution of intimate pictures.
- Be engaging in behaviours that involve intimidation or coercion of the affected youth in combination with the creation and sharing of child pornography [12].

Studies reveal that sexting is most prevalent among adolescents and young adults [13]. Sexting, or “digital intimacy”, has become a part of sexual exploration and sexual expression for many young people. Although the definition of sexting is broad and includes mutually consensual image sharing, as well as coercive and exploitative behaviours, most young people who sext do so voluntarily [11].

In general, older teens are more likely to sext [14]. However, most adolescents, at increasingly younger ages, will experience some kind of sexting. A University of Calgary study analyzed the findings of 39 international studies, including a total of 110,380 adolescents; it found that 14.2% adolescents had sent a sext, 25% had received one, 12% had shared them without consent, and 8.4% had a sext shared without their consent [10].

Sexting & Gender

Boys participate in more sexting behaviours than girls [9]. Girls report feeling more pressure than boys to sext which can result in emotional distress and more negative consequences than boys if the sexts become public [15]. Boys perceive sexting to improve and display their social status. Youth, especially boys, are more likely to share sexts with others without consent if they hold stereotypical attitudes about sex and gender roles, such as the idea that men cannot control themselves sexually or that women should be less career-oriented than men [16].

Impacts of Sexting on Youth

Sexting, in itself, is not harmful. Some research proposes it can be a healthy component of adolescent development. However, other research shows a link between sexting and some behavioural, psychological, and social factors [17]. For example, sexting is associated with early onset of sexual behaviour and nonconsensual forwarding of sexts [15, 17].

25% of youth who have sexted have felt psychological distress related to it [14]. Sexting is most likely to have a negative impact when the person who sends the sext felt pressured to do it. Youth who feel pressured to sext generally report increased anxiety and dating violence. Sexting also correlates with low mood, including feelings of hopelessness and sadness, suicide ideation or attempted suicide and conduct problems [11,15].

Why do young people send sexually explicit images?

- Romantic relationships
- Sexual experimentation
- Coercive circumstances [3]

Sexually explicit images in sexts may be distributed to platforms where other peers, family members, teachers, employers, and friends can view them. Youth whose images are shared may experience cyberbullying, alienation, and harassment from their peers.

Youth can be left feeling vulnerable, humiliated, ashamed, angry, embarrassed, and fearful that their images will resurface in the future. This belief, whether real or perceived, that their sexual images are still circulating on the internet or between peers can be embarrassing at the least; it can also be very challenging to manage emotionally, as youth are developmentally not equipped to deal with the betrayal of trust associated with nonconsensual sharing of sexts [18]. At its worst, nonconsensual forwarding of sexts has been implicated as a contributing factor to youth suicide [10,18].

Are all Sexts Coercive?

Some studies have found very little evidence of peer pressure to engage in sexting. Other studies report that sexting is perceived as flirting and occurs in committed relationships. Sexting may be seen as a consensual and pleasurable part of youths' intimate relationships [18].

Legal Impacts

Many youth and young adults do not understand the legal risks of sending or receiving sexually explicit images of others under the age of 18 years. Sending, owning or taking naked or sexually explicit pictures of someone under the age of 18 years is illegal in Canada, even if the sharing of the image was consensual [19].

Sextortion

Sextortion is the threatened dissemination of explicit, intimate, or embarrassing images of a sexual nature without consent, usually for the purpose of procuring additional images, sexual acts, money, or something else” (p. 2) [20].

In the United States, 5% of youth have been the victim of sextortion and 3% admit to being the instigators [20].

As a service provider, if you determine that a child or youth is being subjected to sextortion, you will generally need to alert law enforcement.

The Canadian Centre for Child Protection (2025) provides the following information about sextortion with children and youth:

- Youth will often comply with online threats to try to manage the situation alone.
- Situations can escalate quickly, and youth may find themselves in over their heads.
- Youth often find it hard to ask adults for help as they are embarrassed and terrified that the sexual images or videos will be distributed to people they know.
- Youth require supportive responses from adults to help them manage serious situations they encounter online.
- Youth need practical steps to get out of harmful situations and to understand that they can come to adults for help.
- Adults have an obligation to be responsive and supportive when youth make mistakes [1].

Online Predators

Online predators establish relationships with children and youth and try to pressure them to take explicit pictures or videos and send them to them. In the most extreme cases they will pressure them to meet in an off-line location for sexual purposes. In 2004, legislation on child luring in Canada and the National Strategy to Protect Children from Sexual Exploitation on the Internet were created. Cybertip, Canada's tipline for reporting online sexual abuse and exploitation, reported that it had seen the volume of luring reports grow by 815% between 2018 and 2023. Most online predators are adults, but not always [21]. Service providers may consider encouraging families to discuss online predators and safety with children and youth.

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