

Online Pornography: Prevalence & Trends

Youth & Digital Technology: Growing Up Online Toolkit

The prevalence of adolescent pornography use remains uncertain due to several influencing factors, including intentional versus unintentional exposure, methodological differences in research, rapid technological advancements, and varying cultural contexts [1, 2]. Accurately estimating usage rates among individuals under 19 is particularly challenging due to the lack of mandatory age verification measures on pornographic websites [3, 4, 5].

In this document, service providers will find some statistics and trends regarding problematic online pornography among adolescents.

Trends in Adolescent Engagement with Online Pornography

Adolescent engagement with online pornography has become increasingly common [1, 6]. With the widespread availability of smartphones, it can be accessed almost anywhere such as streaming services, the internet, and on social media. Pornography is reaching increasing numbers of youth at younger ages. The average age boys are exposed is about 10 years of age and for girls 12-13 years of age [5, 6]. A Canadian study called “The prevalence of unwanted online sexual exposure and solicitation among youth: a meta-analysis” found that one in five youth experience unwanted online exposure to sexually explicit material, while one in nine youth has experienced online sexual solicitation [7].

Online pornography consumption is increasing [1, 6] and is readily becoming a source of sexual information for youth [2]. 2SLGBTQI+ youth appear to view pornography at a younger age and show higher use of sexually explicit material use potentially related to sexual development and information gathering that may not readily be available from sexual education classes in school and other more mainstream sources [8]. 2SLGBTQI+ youth may not be at an inherently higher risk of problematic pornography use, as their primary motivations often involve information-seeking rather than compulsive consumption [8].

Concerns About Early Exposure

Being exposed to pornography at a young age is problematic, given that today’s pornography often includes verbal or physical aggression and objectification of women [9]. Young children lack the cognitive and emotional context to interpret such material appropriately, especially since exposure often occurs before they engage in sexual activity themselves. Research indicates that the impact of early pornography exposure varies by age. Those exposed at nine years old or younger have been found, as adults, to report higher involvement in risky sexual behaviors, increased sexual arousal in response to violent content, more diverse sexual experiences, and more frequent pornography use than their peers [10]. Additionally, exposure to sexual content may influence sexual behaviours as youth may be more likely to perceive pornography as a realistic depiction of sexual activity [10, 11].

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Not only has pornography infiltrated mainstream society, but its content has also evolved to include escalating sexual violence in response to acquired taste. What was once considered “hardcore” pornography is now accepted in mainstream media as “softcore” [12]. Historically, hardcore pornography meant pictures in magazines of men’s and women’s exposed genitals, as well as people having sexual intercourse. Now, hardcore pornography involves violent anal penetration and rough, deep oral sex, often to the point of vomiting. This type of pornography can cause viewers to feel shame, humiliation, and hate [12,13]. Hardcore pornography also incorporates morally repugnant themes, incest and gang rape, for example, which would have been considered too obscene, violent, and socially deviant in the past.

Use and access to pornography is not a new global occurrence [10]. Pornography has evolved over time, but it was not until the technological development and inclusion of photography in the mid-19th century, movies in the early 20th century, and the advancement of the internet in the late 20th century that pornography was able to infiltrate almost every aspect of modern society. Access, affordability and anonymity have been identified as contributing to the widespread distribution of, attraction to, and engagement in online pornography [11]. Along with increased social acceptance, this has made internet pornography addiction a new clinical phenomenon [10].

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