

# UNPROTECTED FROM PORN

*The Rise of Underage Pornography Use and the Ways it is Harming Our Children*

Jason S. Carroll  
Brian J. Willoughby  
Brad Wilcox  
Michael Toscano



 **Wheatley  
Institute**

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Institute  
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**family  
studies**

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### **Notes and Acknowledgements:**

Wheatley Institute engages students, scholars, thought leaders, and the public in research supported work that fortifies the core institutions of the family, religion, and constitutional government.

The mission of the Institute for Family Studies (IFS) is to strengthen marriage and family life and advance the welfare of children through research and public education.

**Jason Carroll** is the Director of the Marriage and Family Initiative at the Wheatley Institute at Brigham Young University. He is also a Senior Fellow at the Institute for Family Studies. Dr. Carroll is a past recipient of the Berscheid-Hatfield Award for Distinguished Scientific Achievement given by the International Association for Relationship Research.

**Brian Willoughby** is a Professor in the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University and a Fellow of the Wheatley Institute. Dr. Willoughby is considered an international expert in the fields of couple and marital relationships, sexuality, and emerging adult development. Dr. Willoughby currently serves as an associate editor for the Journal of Sex Research and serves as an assistant editor for the journal Emerging Adulthood.

**Brad Wilcox** is a Senior Fellow and the Director of the Get Married Initiative at the Institute for Family Studies. He is also a Visiting Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and the Director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia.

**Michael Toscano** is a Senior Fellow and the Director of the Family First Technology Initiative at the Institute for Family Studies. He previously was the executive director of the Institute for Family Studies and is a leader in efforts nationwide to adopt laws to make technology safer for kids. He has written on family policy, tech policy, the uses of technology to reshape work, and the effect of technological change on America's republican form of government.

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### Executive Summary

#### **Technology changes and shifts in online behavior during the last 20 years have significantly increased access to pornography among children and teens**

With the advent of the Internet and social media, the introduction of smartphones, and the continued proliferation of other online technologies, pornography consumption has changed dramatically in our modern society. These advancements have changed both the amount and the types of sexual content available online. As a result, experts have documented that the number of people using pornography and the level of engagement of these users have increased exponentially in the last two decades.

While these trends cut across all age groups, the emergence of a new form of childhood, where children and teens have unrestricted access to online sexual materials, has today made pornography use widespread among young people. It is not an overstatement that children and adolescents now have more access to pornography than any generation in history. Despite pornography being designated as “adult content,” in this new form of childhood our judicial system has gone out of its way to protect the rights of porn providers to distribute this material to kids (and adults) without constraint. That the pornography industry is afforded this deference—despite the overwhelming social science research that shows that underage pornography use is now the norm, rather than the exception, and that its availability has radical implications for healthy adolescent development in our society—is one of the crises of our time.

#### **Children and Teens Are Frequently Accessing Explicit Pornography with Developmentally Harmful Content**

The rise in underage pornography use has been paralleled by a shift to more extreme and harmful types of pornography being available online. A growing body of research has consistently shown that a large portion of the sexual media available online is not only sexually explicit, but also regularly depicts rape, violence against women, deviant sexual behaviors such as incest and sex with minors, and various other forms of developmentally harmful content. In an alarming trend, a growing number of studies are also finding that a significant portion of minors are directly seeking out and viewing these types of harmful online sexual materials.

It is time for our culture to come to terms with the inconsistency of placing value in the dignity and importance of developing a strong rising generation of children, girls, and women, but then turning a blind eye to the types of messages conveyed in pornography to our young people. Such violent, demeaning, and deviant content is not merely passive media that has little to no effect on young minds. On the contrary, decades of media studies have shown that consuming any type of media likely influences both the attitudes and behaviors of young children and teenagers.

### **Pornography consumption by children and adolescents has been shown to be frequently harmful to their healthy development in a number of significant ways**

The preponderance of evidence from social science research is that pornography consumption by underage children and adolescents is harmful to their healthy development in significant ways. This research shows that pornography consumption increases young people's risk for both short-term and long-term harms, including, increased mental health problems, unhealthy sexual scripts and behaviors, increased sexual aggression, potential compulsive struggles, decreased future relationship stability, and other developmental challenges.

Studies to date also confirm that while pornography poses a significant risk to all users, the likelihood of harm is increased among underage children and teens due to their sensitive developmental stage of life. And the risk of lasting harm is even greater for teens with a set of existing risk factors that make them particularly vulnerable to the threats of pornography.

Studies also show that many of these risks continue into adulthood and have deleterious effects on later relationship quality and adult wellbeing. Such effects have been documented across dozens of studies, including large national surveys, recent meta-analyses (studies designed to systematically assess the results of previous research), and critical reviews of scientific literature, the highest standards for social science research.

### **Parents, industry leaders, and officers of government need to promote measures that protect children from the documented harms of underage pornography use**

Trends around the globe show that an increasing number of children and adolescents in our modern world are struggling with mental health problems, family disruption, and other notable challenges. Much of this increase appears to be the result of a collective social failure to properly protect children from the rise of digital childhood, daily social media consumption, harmful content on the internet, and other online threats. Protecting the best interests of children in these modern times will require us to more fully acknowledge the "rise in vulnerability" we are witnessing among children and teens across the globe.

When it comes to collective action to safeguard children the fundamental question we must address is not, "Does all pornography harm all children all of the time?" Rather, if we are to properly safeguard young people, the question we must ask that sets the baseline standard of protection is, "Does at least some pornography harm some children some of the time?"

Existing research clearly shows that this standard is being met, even under the strictest of scientific standards. In fact, existing research confirms an even higher standard of harm and shows that most pornography harms most children most of the time. When all of the various ways that pornography can harm child development are considered, there is really no defensible argument for children and adolescents having unrestricted access to sexual media and pornographic materials of any form.

We deeply support efforts to hold both the producers of pornography and social media platforms accountable for making sure they are not contributing to and profiting from underage pornography use. For example, some states have recently passed laws requiring pornography websites to verify a user's age, and in the case of social media, obtain parental consent, in order to gain access. Furthermore, a new effort to implement device-based age verification, and require parental supervision for minor social media accounts, parental consent for app downloads, and accurate app ratings from the industry, would contribute to a critical effort to create a safer digital app environment for children in which parents are effectively involved. Our children need and deserve nothing less.

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# Introduction: The Rise of Underage Pornography Use

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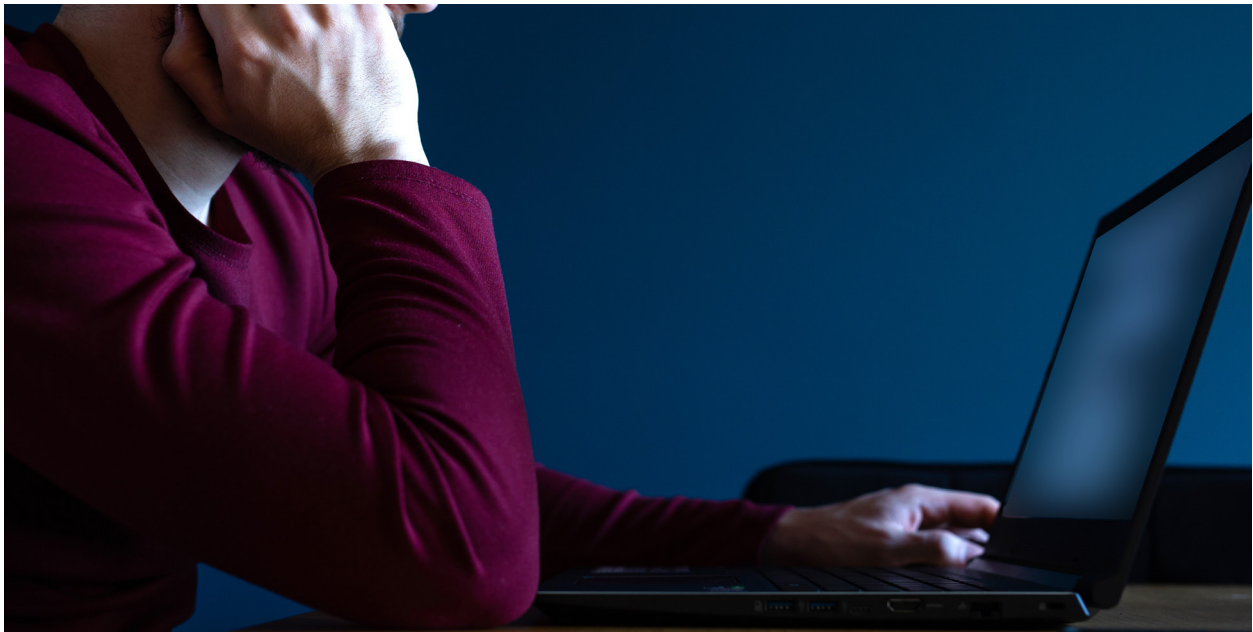
**While exposure to pornography has long been a developmental risk for underage children in our society, there have been several major developments in the last 20 years that have shifted the landscape for protecting children and adolescents from the harms of online sexual content.**

One thing that nearly all people agree on is the importance of protecting children. We all recognize that children rely completely on their parents and other adults to nurture their development and keep them safe from danger and harm.

The question, “What is in the best interests of the child?” is a foundational standard in child protection efforts to ensure government policies and practices safeguard the needs and wellbeing of children. Simply put, this standard asserts that, above all else, parents and other adults should be focused on ensuring that their actions have a positive impact on children. It also calls upon parents, citizens, and officers of government to promote measures that foster children’s well-being, including protecting their safety, promoting optimal development, and strengthening family unity across the course of life.

## **The Current Landscape of Protecting Children from Sexual Media**

In today’s digital world, a growing concern for many parents is how to protect their children from sexual media and online pornography. While exposure to sexual media and pornography has long been a developmental risk for underage children in our society, there have been several major developments in the last 20 years that have ratcheted up the challenges of protecting children and adolescents from the harms of online sexual content.



As we demonstrate in this research review, multiple studies show that underage pornography use is now the norm, not the exception, of teenage development in our society today. Traditional efforts to prevent or limit underage access to pornographic material have been largely ineffective and unsuccessful. Worse, the actions of the pornography industry have been actively protected by American jurisprudence.

**“The emergence of a digital childhood culture where underage minors have regular and often unfiltered online access has made pornography use widespread among children and adolescents.”**

With the introduction of the Internet and social media, the social approval of smartphones for children, and the continued proliferation of other smart technologies (which also have access to the Internet), pornography consumption has changed dramatically, both in the amount and types of sexual content available in our society. As a result, experts have documented that the number of pornography users and the level of engagement of these users have increased massively in the last two decades.

While these trends cut across all age groups, the emergence of a culture of digital childhood where underage minors have regular and unrestricted online access has made pornography use widespread among children and adolescents. In fact, despite pornography being designated as “adult material,” social science research shows that a large portion of children and teens access online pornographic content on a regular basis.





# Research Review of the Harms of Pornography

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**The preponderance of evidence from social science research is that pornography consumption by underage children and adolescents is frequently harmful to their healthy development in a number of significant ways.**

The research literature on the effects of underage pornography use is much more developed than it was 20 years ago, when the United States Supreme Court struck down a federal bill requiring that pornography sites age verify their users to keep kids from inappropriately (and illegally) accessing their platforms. In fact, research on pornography in general is more developed and established than it was just a few decades ago. As we document in this research review, this research shows that pornography consumption increases young people’s risk for both short-term and long-term harms, including, increased mental health problems, unhealthy sexual scripts and behaviors, increased sexual aggression, potential compulsive struggles, decreased future relationship stability, and other developmental challenges.

Studies to date also confirm that while pornography poses a significant risk to all users, the likelihood of harm is increased among underage children and teens due to their sensitive developmental stage of life. And the risk of lasting harm is even greater for teens with a set of existing risk factors that make them particularly vulnerable to the threat of pornography.

**“Studies to date also confirm that while pornography poses a significant risk to all users, the likelihood of harm is increased among underage children and teens due to their sensitive developmental stage of life.”**

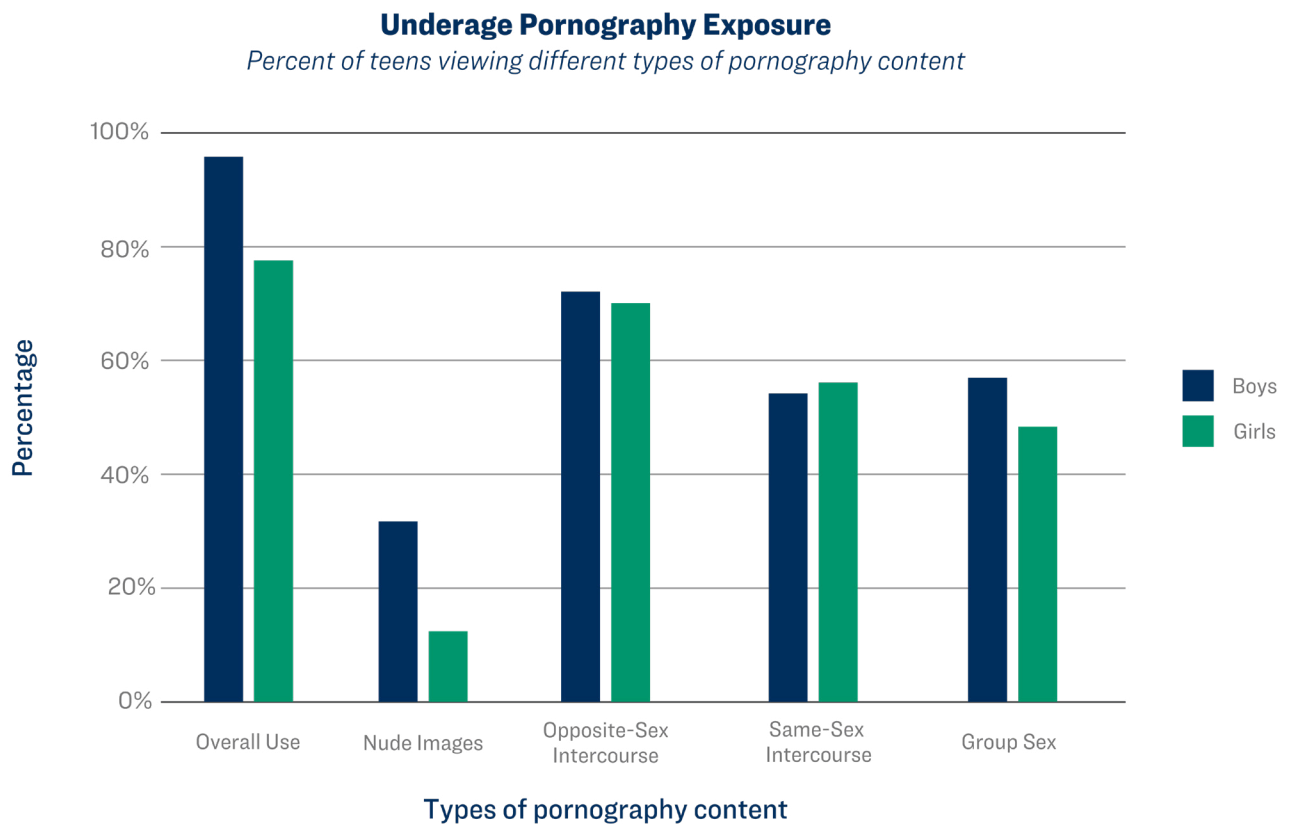
These effects have been documented across dozens of studies, including large national surveys, recent meta-analyses (studies designed to systematically assess the results of previous research), and critical reviews of scientific literature, the highest standards for social science research.

## **Large Portions of Minors Regularly Access Pornographic Content**

Despite pornography’s designation as being for “mature audiences,” social science research consistently finds that large portions of minor-age children and teens access online pornographic content on a regular basis. In fact, in many recent studies on adolescent pornography use the authors assert the relevance of their research by using opening statements such as “Due to the easy accessibility of pornography on the Internet for adolescents...” or “Because of the widespread use of pornography among teens...”

The preponderance of studies show that underage pornography use is now the norm, rather than the exception, of adolescent sexual development in our society. Many young teenagers now have their first experience with sex and sexual behavior through viewing online pornography. Recent research shows that the majority of children and teens in modern society have been exposed to pornography before they have reached the age of 18. For example, a large international survey found that over 97% of boys and 78% of girls between the ages of 12 and 18 have viewed pornography.<sup>1</sup>

**“The preponderance of studies show that underage pornography use is now the norm, rather than the exception, of adolescent sexual development in our society.”**



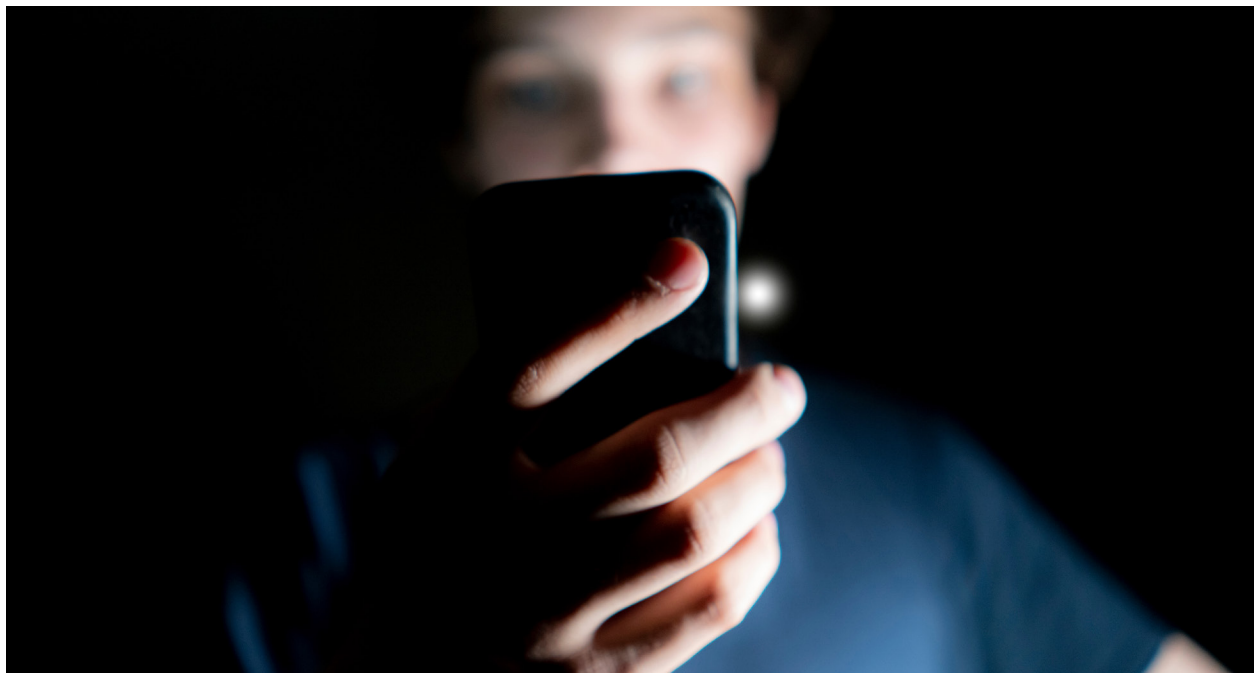
Source: Ballester-Arnal, R., Garcia-Barba, M., Castro-Calvo, J., Gimenez-Garcia, C., & Gil-Llario, M. D. (2023). Pornography consumption in people of different age groups: An analysis based on gender, contents, and consequences. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 20(2), 766-779.

These prevalence rates are consistent across most parts of the world. For example, three nationally representative studies of adolescents in Sweden found that pornography use was prolific among teens, with over 50% of teenage girls and 90% of teenage boys reporting they had viewed pornography in their life.<sup>2</sup> This same study found that over 80% of males and 20% of females reported viewing pornography once a month or more and that almost one in four teenage boys reported that they view pornography every day - a rate of habitual use that is more than twice as high as 10 years earlier.

**“Over half of all first encounters with pornography for underage children were unintentional due to a lack of proper safeguards to prevent engagement with sexually explicit material online.”**

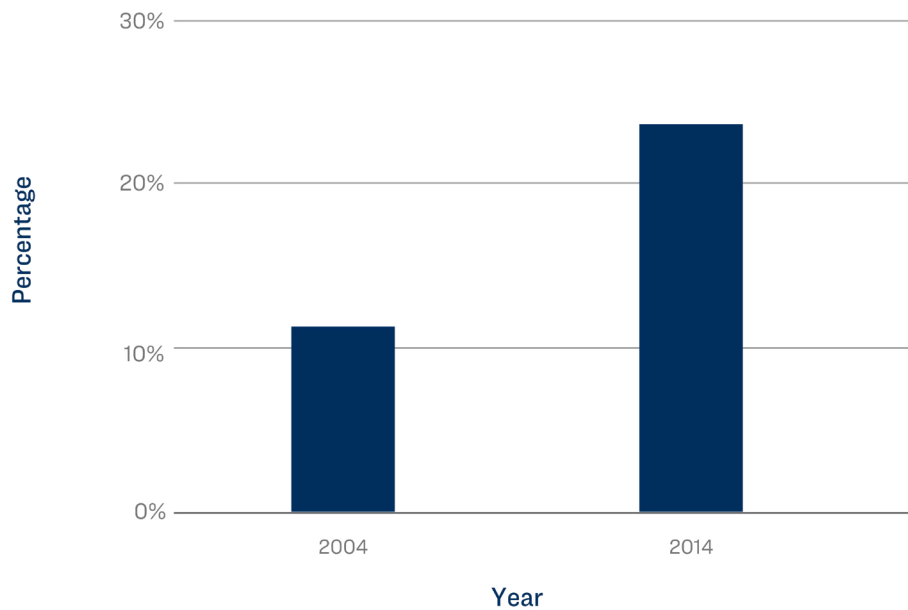
The high prevalence of underage pornography use is driven by the fact that the average age of first exposure to pornography is happening in late grade school or early middle school for our children. One national U.S. study found that most children begin to view sexually explicit material around the ages of 10 to 14 years of age.<sup>3</sup> Another study found that half of boys have intentionally accessed pornography by the time they are 13 years old, and half of girls have intentionally accessed pornography by the time they are 16 years old.<sup>4</sup>

Again, these trends are consistent across most parts of the world. A key study of youth between the ages of 16-18 undertaken by the Australian government found that the average age of first exposure to pornography was 13 years old and that 75% of all youth surveyed had viewed online pornography. Instructively, this same study noted that over half (58%) of all first encounters with pornography for underage children were unintentional due to a lack of proper safeguards to prevent engagement with sexually explicit online material. This same study also noted that over 60% of youth reported encountering pornography at least once a month.<sup>5</sup>



### Increase in Habitual Pornography Use

*Percent of teen boys who report viewing pornography daily*



Source: Donevan, M., et al., (2022). Adolescents' Use of Pornography: Trends over a Ten-year Period in Sweden. Archives of Sexual Behavior, (51), 1125-1140.

### Children and Teens Are Frequently Exposed to Pornography With Developmentally Harmful Content

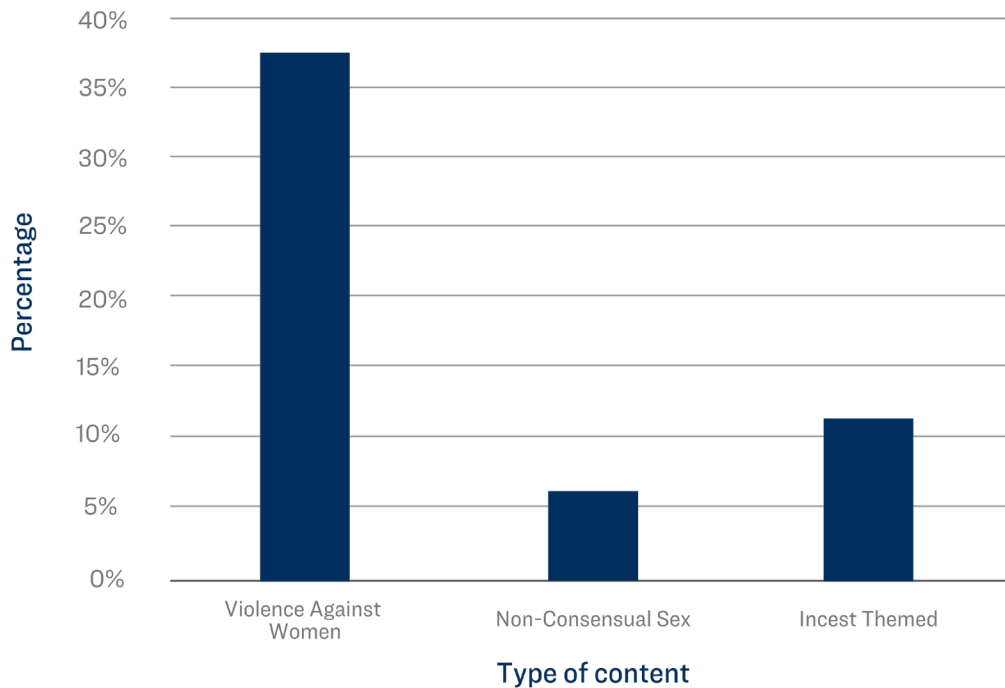
The need to protect minors from pornographic materials is heightened by considering the types of sexual content many minors are being exposed to online. A growing body of research has consistently shown that a large portion of the sexual media being regularly consumed by children and teenagers is not only sexually explicit, but also regularly depicts sexual interactions that prominently display a lack of sexual consent, sexual violence against women, deviant sexual behaviors, and various other forms of developmentally harmful content.

Research on pornography content includes studies that directly document the content of videos available on mainstream pornography websites, as well as survey studies that assess the specific types of content children and adolescents are viewing when they access online pornography.

Direct studies of mainstream pornography content reveal some concerning trends in the types of sexual content that is available to underage children and adolescents. For example, a 2015 study undertook a content analysis of the top 100 most viewed pornographic videos from the four most popular pornography sites. They found that over one-third of the videos depicted some sort of violence against women and that this number rose to 40% when only considering professionally produced videos. They also noted that over 6% of all videos depicted clear non-consensual acts of sexual violence.<sup>6</sup>

## Harmful Content in Online Pornography

Percent of videos on popular pornography sites with violent and deviant content



Sources: Klassen, M. & Peter, J. (2015). Gender Inequality in Internet Pornography: A Content Analysis of Popular Pornographic Internet Videos. *Journal of Sex Research*, 52, 721-735 and Vera-Gray et al. (2021). Sexual Violence as a Sexual Script in Mainstream Online Pornography, *The British Journal of Criminology*, 61, 1243-1260.

These trends were confirmed in another study that was one of the largest analyses of pornography content that has ever been undertaken, examining over 7,000 videos from two of the largest online pornographic tube sites. In total, almost half (45%) of all the videos reviewed showed some type of physical aggression.

Perhaps just as problematic, these same authors coded the reaction of women to these acts of violence and aggression and found that women in pornographic videos almost always were shown as enjoying or deriving pleasure from acts of violence.<sup>7</sup> Another study examining the content of 50 of the most popular online pornographic videos at the time of the study likewise showed a consistent pattern of non-consensual sexual acts, with only 12% of the scenes analyzed showing clear verbal consent.<sup>8</sup>

**“The most common keyword across all videos coded was “teen,” suggesting that attempting to portray sexual acts with underaged or barely legal participants is the most common way producers of mainstream pornography market their sexually explicit videos.”**

The consistency of encountering sexual violence in mainstream pornography is also not a hidden element of most pornography sites. In perhaps the largest study to date exploring the titles and descriptions of sexually explicit content online, a group of scholars from the United Kingdom examined over 150,000 video segments from the three largest pornography tube sites to explore common themes and types of titles of such videos. In total they found that 12% of all video segments coded included some form of reference to sexual violence in the title. Of note, these researchers also noted that the most common keyword across all videos coded was “teen,” suggesting that attempting to portray sexual acts with underaged or barely legal participants is the most common way producers of mainstream pornography market their sexually explicit videos.<sup>9</sup>

The scholars of this study also noted that an exceptionally large proportion of videos on these sites include reference to incest in the title, with over 1 in 10 videos either describing family relationships as a key component of the video or such incestual relationships being a part of the video title. Further, the study also noted that most of these videos suggested that such familial relationships were not step-relations, but blood relatives. The scholars of this study found that this type of content was easily searchable and accessible on each site, concluding strongly in their discussion of their findings that:

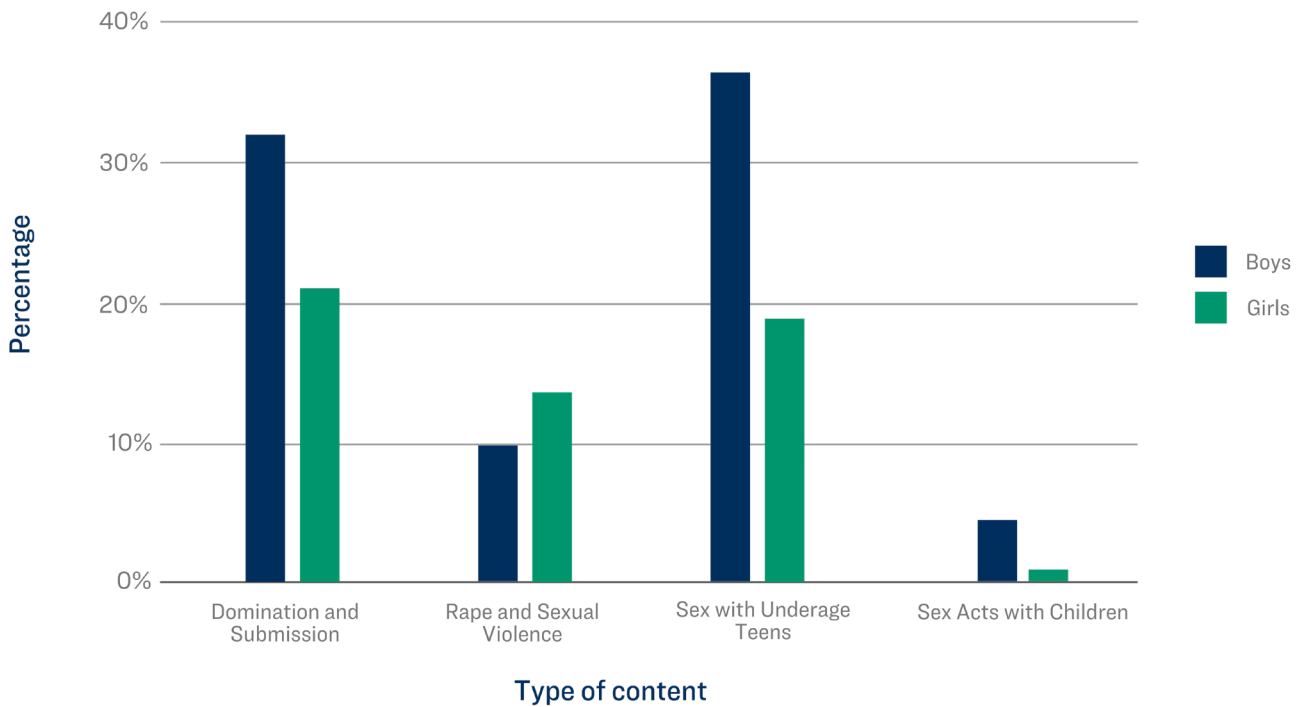
*“We have found that mainstream pornography websites are likely hosting material that is unlawful to distribute or download. It is not the case that criminal material is relegated to niche sites, hidden from all but a determined viewer, or only available on the dark web. It thus cannot be assumed either by regulators, individual users or policy-makers, that the mainstream websites are ‘safe’ sites, free from unlawful material.”<sup>10</sup>*

In an alarming trend, a growing number of studies that assess the specific types of content children and adolescents view when they access online pornography find that a significant portion of minors are directly seeking out and viewing these types of harmful sexual materials online.

A large international survey found that more than 1 in 5 of underage boys who view pornography reported repeatedly looking for and viewing sexual material that depicted domination and submission and 1 in 10 reported regularly viewing pornography that depicted rape or other forms of sexual violence. A staggering 35% reported viewing pornography that portrayed at least one of the partners as an underage teenager and nearly 4% reported viewing sexual acts with children (pedophilia).<sup>11</sup>

## Harmful Content in Teen Pornography Use

Percent of teens viewing harmful pornography content



Source: Ballester-Arnal, R., Garcia-Barba, M., Castro-Calvo, J., Gimenez-Garcia, C., & Gil-Llario, M. D. (2023). Pornography consumption in people of different age groups: An analysis based on gender, contents, and consequences. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 20(2), 766-779.

These numbers were similar for underage girls, where 1 in 5 also reported viewing pornography with women being dominated by men and over 13% reported viewing pornography that portrayed rape or sexual violence. One in five underage girls reported viewing pornography where at least one partner was portrayed as being a minor and 1% viewed pornographic content depicting sex acts with children.

Unfortunately, research has found that underage children and teens are frequently finding and viewing pornography with violent content. In fact, a 2018 study found that “a significantly higher proportion of respondents reported frequently seeing violence than those who reported frequently seeing romance/affection when they watched pornography during the previous 12 months.” This study found that 74% reported seeing violence or aggression towards a woman that appears consensual, with 35% having seen this type of interaction frequently. Another 43% reported seeing violence or aggression toward a woman that appears to be nonconsensual, with 11% seeing this on a frequent basis. Although this study included young adults as well as teens, analyses showed that young users ages 15 to 19 are equally likely to see this content as are older users ages 20 to 29.<sup>12</sup>

**“A significantly higher proportion of teens reported frequently seeing violence than those who reported frequently seeing romance or affection when they watched pornography.”**

It is time for our culture to come to terms with the inconsistency of espousing the dignity and value of children, girls, and women, but then turning a blind eye to the types of messages conveyed in pornography to our young people. Simply put, our children are watching. Such violent and demeaning content is not merely passive media that has little to no effect on young people.

On the contrary, decades of media research has suggested that consuming any type of media likely influences both the attitudes and behaviors of young children and teenagers. Research focused exclusively on the media effects of pornography on young people have consistently and virtually unanimously suggested that viewing pornography with the referenced types of content can dramatically increase the likelihood of unhealthy sexual decision-making and risk-taking among youth.<sup>13</sup>

### **Pornography Has Been Linked to Unhealthy Sexual Behaviors Among Adolescents**

Given the pervasive content featuring violence, unhealthy gender roles, and unrealistic depictions of sexual intimacy that are rampant in mainstream pornography, it is perhaps unsurprising that scholars have consistently linked pornography to unhealthy sexual attitudes and behaviors among adolescents.

While dozens of smaller scale studies have shown links between pornography and risky sexual behavior,<sup>14</sup> we focus here on the most compelling evidence drawn from large U.S. national samples and systematic reviews of the scientific literature on the topic. Such research has suggested that watching pornography among underage children and teenagers likely creates more permissiveness related to sexual behavior and, in turn, makes them more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors that increase the potential for poor health outcomes, teen pregnancy, and economic disparities.

Research connecting pornography use and permissive sexual attitudes among adolescents has been virtually uncontested over the last several decades. In their 20 year review of research on pornography and adolescents, Peter and Valkenburg (2016) noted that “consistent evidence has emerged that adolescents’ use of pornography is related to stronger permissive sexual attitudes.” (pg. 519).<sup>15</sup> Analyzing multiple samples from the General Social Survey, a large U.S. national sample, Wright (2022) concluded that strong evidence suggests that pornography viewers held more permissive attitudes toward a variety of sexual behaviors.<sup>16</sup>

Engaging with sexually explicit content that creates and perpetuates these permissive attitudes about sex appears to accelerate sexual debut and make youth more likely to engage in sexual behaviors earlier and more often. For example, a two-year longitudinal study of over 600 adolescents between the ages of 13 and 15 found that engaging regularly with pornography was associated with an increased chance of reporting an earlier age of masturbation, petting, oral sex, and vaginal sex, especially for males.<sup>17</sup>



A review of the scientific literature exploring links between pornography use and an earlier age of first sex across 19 studies found that over 60% of all studies that examined this link found that pornography use was associated with an earlier age of first sex, including evidence in longitudinal data.<sup>18</sup>

In another meta-analysis of 21 separate studies, Mori and colleagues (2023) found that pornography exposure increased the likelihood of problematic and unhealthy sexual behaviors among children and teens by 150% and exposure to violent or aggressive pornography increased the likelihood of problematic and unhealthy sexual behaviors by 250%. Critically, these scholars noted that the effects on unhealthy sexual behavior when viewing pornography appeared stronger for teenage girls.<sup>19</sup>

This link between pornography use among underaged minors and a host of risky sexual behaviors has been found in numerous regions around the world, suggesting it is robust. For example, a large national sample of 1,500 adolescents from Spain found that pornography use tended to trend with other risky behaviors, such as drug use and abuse, and that viewing pornography was one of the key predictors in a host of unhealthy sexual behaviors, including engaging in unprotected sex, having sex after using substances, and engaging in infidelity.<sup>20</sup>

**“Pornography exposure increased the likelihood of problematic and unhealthy sexual behaviors among children and teens by 150% and exposure to violent or aggressive pornography increased the likelihood of problematic and unhealthy sexual behaviors by 250%.”**

The consistency of these findings is yet again critical to note. While individual studies will always have limitations based on sampling and measurement and findings in any area of social science will be inconsistent from study to study, the regularity in which pornography use among underaged youth has been linked with risky and early sexual behaviors is staggering, with several scholars who have undertaken systematic reviews on the topic concluding that such a link is virtually uncontestable and likely varies only in degree based on the underlying vulnerability of the user, even if one would like to argue about the magnitude of such links.

## **Pornography Has Been Linked to Acts of Sexual Aggression in Adolescents**

Another key concern is the influence that pornography has on aggressive and violent behavior, especially sexually aggressive behaviors among children and teens. Given the consistency in which violent and aggressive sexual acts are shown in pornography and the established influence media consumption has on children and adolescents,<sup>21</sup> it is unsurprising that the frequency of pornography use would be related to aggressive sexual behavior among underaged minors.

Indeed, a variety of individual studies have linked pornography viewing, especially viewing violent pornography, to sexual harassment, sexual aggression/dominance, and sexual assault among adolescents.<sup>22</sup> These findings have been replicated in numerous cross-sectional studies, but are also shown in longitudinal studies as well, suggesting evidence of causal links between pornography viewing and violent and aggressive behaviors.<sup>23</sup>

Fortunately, a review of this research once again is not restricted to the analysis or interpretation of single studies where potential researcher bias and reader preference may seek to bend social science findings in a desired direction. Research on the association between pornography use and violence and aggression has matured to the point where large-scale meta analyses and systematic reviews of the literature have been undertaken.

**“A meta-analysis of 22 studies and over 20,000 research participants found that higher use of pornography was associated across studies with more verbal and physical sexual aggression.”**

In one of the largest examinations of this connection to date, a meta-analysis of 22 studies and over 20,000 research participants found that higher use of pornography was associated across studies with more verbal and physical sexual aggression.<sup>24</sup> One key to this meta-analysis was that the authors were able to explore both violent and non-violent pornography use and found that both were significantly associated with increased sexual aggression, suggesting that any form of pornography viewing may be associated with an elevated risk for sexually aggressive behavior. The conclusion of these scholars after their exhaustive review was telling, they stated,

*“...the accumulated data leave little doubt that, on the average, individuals who consume pornography more frequently are more likely to hold attitudes conducive to sexual aggression and engage in actual acts of sexual aggression than individuals who do not consume pornography or who consume pornography less frequently.” (p. 201).<sup>25</sup>*

This association has also been examined across studies among adolescents specifically. A 2019 review of the research literature examining the link between pornography and aggressive behavior in adolescents drew five conclusions after reviewing 43 studies.<sup>26</sup> The first two focused on the overall links between pornography and violent attitudes and behaviors in this age demographic. The scholars concluded that,

*“Exposure to sexually explicit media and sexually violent media is positively related to dating violence and sexual violence myths and more accepting attitudes toward dating violence and sexual violence” and that “exposure to sexual media and sexually violent media is related to actual and anticipated dating violence and sexual violence victimization, perpetration, and bystander nonintervention.” (p. 443).<sup>27</sup>*

What's most important across these findings is that the association between pornography and aggressive and violent behavior is not based on the interpretation of singular studies, but on the conclusion from meta-analyses and comprehensive reviews of the literature. This is the highest standard of research and the consistency in which scholars have noted associations between pornography and violence for adolescents leaves almost no question of these links.

There is even evidence that this connection between pornography and aggression transcends acts of aggression specific to sexual behaviors. Just recently a large-scale meta-analysis of the link between pornography use and generalized violence was undertaken. The findings of this study were consistent with the vast majority of individual studies. Across the 59 studies examined, a significant link between more pornography use and higher non-sexual violence was found,<sup>28</sup> further establishing associations between regularly viewing pornography and an increased risk of violence.

Like associations with risky and early sexual behavior, the consistency of the cited findings leaves little doubt that underaged minors are particularly prone to being influenced by pornography when it comes to sexual and generalized aggression. Almost every measure of sexual aggression and violence, from acceptance to perpetuation to victimization, has been documented to be associated with pornography use among children and adolescents.

### **Pornography Has Been Linked to Mental Health Struggles Among Adolescents**

Beyond problematic links to risky and unhealthy behaviors, another risk of pornography for underage minors is for their short and long-term mental health. The growing consensus among clinical experts is that pornography use can develop into a compulsive and addictive behavior that undermines individual and relationship health. Recently, the World Health Organization updated the criteria for Compulsive Sexual Disorder in the International Classification of Diseases manual (ICD-11) to recognize pornography use as a behavior that could lead to dysfunctional sexual behaviors. This is just one step the global community has taken to recognize the potential long-term mental health harms of unregulated and habitual pornography viewing.

**“Simply put, viewing pornography with any degree of frequency puts one at risk for future compulsive and problematic use.”**

Clinicians now typically distinguish between compulsive pornography use, which involves functional impairment to daily behavior, and problematic pornography use (PPU), which is often described as being less severe, but still creating emotional distress and some disruption to a person's life. Numerous clinical researchers have now acknowledged the reality of both compulsive pornography use and PPU, the numerous negative implications these behaviors can have on mental, physical, and relational health, and the need to treat this behavior with clinical interventions.<sup>29</sup>

Simply put, viewing pornography with any degree of frequency puts one at risk for future compulsive and problematic use. In a large meta-analysis that considered 61 studies, a robust and consistent effect was found between the quantity of pornography viewed and reports of problematic or compulsive pornography use.<sup>30</sup>

Due to a lack of both neurological and emotional maturity, research also suggests that underage youth who view pornography are particularly at risk for the development of unhealthy pornography patterns later in life. A large international survey found that viewing pornography that depicts group sex, sex among adolescents, or domination and submission—which are all forms of pornography regularly accessible to underage minors—is significantly associated with both excessive and problematic pornography use among teenagers.<sup>31</sup>

Another study of almost 1,000 young adults in the United States found that early engagement with pornography (typically before the age of 12) was significantly associated with dysfunctional use of pornography during adulthood;<sup>32</sup> while a study of over 800 Canadian teenagers found a strong and significant relationship between the frequency of pornography use and problematic pornography use one year later.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps the best predictor of problematic, dysfunctional, and compulsive pornography use in later adulthood—which may have monumentally negative effects on one’s well-being and relationships as an adult—is viewing pornography on a regular basis during childhood and adolescence. That this link has been consistent across virtually every sample of adolescents gathered over the last two decades suggests that any regular use of pornography among the youth constitutes an elevated link to compulsive and problematic pornography use later in life.

Other negative associations between pornography use and adolescent mental health have been found. Numerous studies have suggested that viewing sexually explicit material may damage the self-appraisal of children and teenagers, potentially undermining a positive self-concept, self-esteem, and body image.

**“Perhaps the best predictor of problematic, dysfunctional, and compulsive pornography use in later adulthood is viewing pornography on a regular basis during childhood and adolescence.”**

A recent study of high school students from the Southeastern United States found that viewing pornography was associated with an elevated tendency to compare one’s body to others.<sup>34</sup>

Other studies have also linked higher pornography use to more negative appraisals of one’s body.<sup>35</sup> While less studied and more inconsistent, such evidence suggests additional risks to the mental well-being of underage minors when they frequently engage with sexually explicit content online.

## **Pornography Has Been Linked to Relationships Instability and Puts Adolescents at Risk of Disrupted Family Formation in Later Adulthood**

One of the most consistent findings over the last twenty years has been the link between higher engagement with pornography and poorer romantic relationship outcomes and well-being. While most of this research has focused on young adults and adults, the consistency of these findings suggests that underage engagement with pornography will likely create behavioral patterns that will make long-term relationship success and successful family formation, two pillars of stability and economic well-being in our society, less likely in the future.

Much of the early research exploring pornography and relationship health focused on self-reported levels of sexual and relationship satisfaction. While most research on this topic has reported small effects, results have been consistent. In a pivotal meta-analysis done by Paul Wright and colleagues in 2017 that examined 50 studies and over 50,000 research participants, higher use of pornography was found to be associated with lower satisfaction in relationships, especially for men.<sup>36</sup>

Since that time, other studies have continued to replicate the association between pornography use and lower relationship and sexual satisfaction. In a large sample of over 3,700 people from across the United States, higher pornography use was found to be associated with less sexual satisfaction.<sup>37</sup> These findings have also been replicated among adolescent samples.<sup>38</sup> Perry (2020) sought to undertake a unique approach to this question by examining the association between pornography use and relationship quality across 30 different measures of relationship quality in 30 different national surveys in the United States.<sup>39</sup>

While consistent, many scholars and other experts have rightly pointed out that the links between pornography use and self-reported satisfaction levels are often small and sometimes inconsistent. However, important for the present argument, while social science associations are historically inconsistent in almost any area of study (given variations in samples and measurement), almost no study over the last twenty years has suggested that pornography use has positive benefits to relationships.

Indeed, after undertaking his exploration across 30 different samples of how pornography use is associated with relationship quality, Perry concluded that, "...more frequent pornography use was almost never associated with better relationship quality." (p. 1211). When combined with previously noted results linking pornography viewing with aggressive and violent relationship behaviors, experts on pornography have rightly concluded that pornography use during childhood and adolescence undermines the formation of healthy relationships and the development of healthy relationship skills.<sup>40</sup> Other studies have found associations between pornography use and a host of other negative relationship outcomes, including higher sexual insecurity,<sup>41</sup> lower feelings of intimacy and connection,<sup>42</sup> and decreasing marital quality for husbands<sup>43</sup>

**“One of the most consistent findings over the last twenty years has been the link between higher engagement with pornography and poorer romantic relationship outcomes and well-being.”**

More recent research, however, has begun to focus on a much more consistent risk of on-going pornography use, namely, the risk to relationship instability or break-up. Unlike findings on self-reported satisfaction, associations between pornography use and instability in relationships have been consistent and effects have often been found to be moderate to large in size. For example, the same large national study of over 3,700 Americans that found some links between pornography and less sexual satisfaction also found large and consistent associations between pornography use and lower relationship stability<sup>44</sup> This association was found regardless of gender and, importantly, was found even if pornography use was reported as a shared couple behavior.

These results extend beyond just reported stability in a current relationship. Adults who view pornography are significantly more likely to report a break-up, even after controlling for numerous other factors,<sup>45</sup> and are about twice as likely to divorce<sup>46</sup> and separate.<sup>47</sup>

Key to the present argument, Perry and Schliefer found that the association between pornography and divorce was especially strong among younger couples.<sup>48</sup> While the cited research deals with adult relationships, it is clear that a pattern of using pornography during childhood or adolescence will greatly increase the risk of poor relationship formation and stability later in life. Like other research cited, the consistency in which pornography use has been associated with risky relationship formation and the large links between pornography and relationship instability suggest that underage minors who use pornography may struggle developing and maintaining long-term romantic relationships, marriages, and families.



## Findings from Meta-Analyses and Research Reviews

Developmental Risk Area	Number of Studies Reviewed or Analyzed	Overall Finding
Pornography and Earlier Age of Sex Pathmendra et al, 2023	19 studies	Pornography use is associated with an earlier age of first sex.
Pornography and Unhealthy Sexual Behaviors Mori et al, 2023	21 studies	Pornography exposure increased the likelihood of problematic and unhealthy sexual behaviors among children and teens.
Pornography and Sexual Aggression Rodenhizer & Edwards, 2019	43 studies	Exposure to pornography is positively related to dating violence, sexual violence myths, and more accepting attitudes toward dating/sexual violence.
Pornography and Violence Mestre-Bach et al, 2024	59 studies	There is a significant link between more pornography and higher non-sexual violence.
Pornography and Compulsive Use Chen et al, 2022	61 studies	The quantity of pornography viewed is significantly related to reports of problematic or compulsive pornography use.
Pornography and Relationship Satisfaction Wright et al, 2017	50 studies	Higher use of pornography was found to be associated with lower satisfaction.
Pornography and Relationship Quality Perry, 2020	30 studies	There is consistent evidence that higher viewing of pornography was associated with lower relationship quality.

## The Harms of Pornography Are Often Much Greater Than is Acknowledged in Most Research Studies – Particularly for At-Risk Children

One of the potential criticisms of the existing research literature linking pornography to a range of negative outcomes for underage minors is the suggestion that these negative associations either disappear or weaken once other factors are accounted for. For example, some scholars have suggested that many of the negative associations with adolescent pornography use are largely based on internal guilt and stress created among those with religious convictions or moral opposition to pornography.<sup>49</sup> Attempting to dismiss, however, the previously outlined negative effects of pornography by suggesting they are only the result of confounding variables fails on two fronts.

First, in almost all cases the associations between pornography viewing and negative health and well-being are reduced, but do not disappear when accounting for these types of controls. This is a normal statistical phenomenon where almost all practical and statistical associations will decrease the more variables are introduced into the model. In fact, a recent analysis of a large U.S. national sample of over 3,700 individuals in committed relationships found that pornography use was consistently linked to lower relationship satisfaction and stability, regardless of the controls used, including religiosity.<sup>50</sup>

**“In almost all cases the associations between pornography viewing and negative health and well-being are reduced, but do not disappear when accounting for these types of controls.”**

This has also been documented in other areas and across multiple meta-analyses. As previously stated, the negative effects of pornography have been consistent across domains of development, often varying only in magnitude, and no positive effects have ever been documented for underage viewing of pornography across dozens of studies.

Second, and most critically, the majority of pornography studies focusing on controls have been less about showing if it harms, but more about showing who it harms the most. The most striking examples can be found in the research examining aggression and violence and their link to pornography use. In their various studies (both survey and experimental) on links between pornography and violent behaviors and attitudes toward women, Hald and colleagues have found that men with underlying personality traits, and other risk factors, for violence are the most prone to being influenced toward violence by pornography.<sup>51</sup> A recent review of literature has documented this for adolescents as well.<sup>52</sup>

**“The majority of pornography studies focusing on controls have been less about showing IF pornography harms, but more about showing WHO pornography harms the most.”**

Such research does not dismiss the potential risk and negative effect viewing pornography has on underage minors, but instead suggests that many such minors with preexisting risk factors may be at elevated jeopardy for being influenced by such sexual content. These studies suggest that young boys and girls who are at the highest risk for eventual aggression and violent acts are some of the most susceptible to the negative effects of pornography, elevating the potential future sexual violence and aggression among the nation’s most at-risk youth.



That pornography may be particularly problematic for at-risk and disadvantaged youth populations has been documented in other areas as well. In a study that specifically explored the influence of pornography use among disadvantaged youth, Rothman and Adhia found that economically disadvantaged Black and Hispanic youth who watched pornography were more likely to report dating abuse victimization in the last year.<sup>53</sup>

In recent years, scholars have argued that some researchers in the field have overused statistical controls in their pornography research in a way that may mask or under-report the practical negative effects of pornography. Wright and colleagues have in particular called out other pornography scholars as being overly reliant on control variables to make associations with pornography diminish or disappear.<sup>54</sup> These scholars have noted that few researchers provide strong theoretical justifications for the controls they use in their studies and that many of the controls used may be better viewed as predictors of pornography use.

**“Some researchers in the field have overused statistical controls in their pornography research in a way that may mask or under-report the true practical negative effects of pornography.”**

The net result of this overuse of control variables is to underreport the actual magnitude and effect of pornography viewing, particularly among underage children and adolescents. For example, a 2020 study examined links between pornography and relational happiness in two large U.S. samples.<sup>55</sup> While the frequency of pornography was found to have a negative association with relationship happiness in both studies, once a dozen controls were factored in (including religiosity, depression, and masturbation), these associations disappeared. The author then attempted to argue that masturbation in particular could be viewed as a “confounding” factor and the true culprit of the link between pornography and lower happiness. While essentially no studies have bothered to examine this fact, we feel comfortable stating that virtually all men who regularly view pornography, and likely the vast majority of women, masturbate while viewing pornography, so the two behaviors are essentially one behavior. This argument is the equivalent of arguing that the bun, not the sausage, is the real problem with a hot dog!



# Conclusion: Taking Steps to Protect Our Children

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**The preponderance of evidence from social science research is that pornography consumption by underage children and adolescents is frequently harmful to their healthy development in a number of significant ways.**

As we have noted, the foundation question, “What is the best interest of the child?” should guide efforts to ensure that government policies and industry practices safeguard the needs and wellbeing of children. Parents and other adults should be focused on ensuring that all of their actions have a positive effect on children. This standard calls upon teachers, citizens, leaders of industry, and officers of government (as well as parents) everywhere to promote measures that foster children’s welfare, including protecting their safety, promoting optimal development, and strengthening family unity across the life course.

While we have a collective obligation to protect all children, we should be particularly vigilant about safeguarding at-risk children who are already struggling with personal challenges and difficult circumstances. Trends around the globe unfortunately show that a huge population of children and adolescents are currently suffering from mental health problems, family disruption, and other significant challenges. Much of this appears to be the result of a social failure to protect children from the rise of digital childhood, social media, online threats, and pornography. Acting on behalf of the best interests of children will require us to update our understanding of the current situation and acknowledge the “rise in vulnerability” among children and teens across the globe.

When it comes to collective action to safeguard children the fundamental question we must address is not, “Does all pornography harm all children all of the time?” Rather, if we are to properly safeguard young people, the question we must ask that sets the baseline standard of protection is, “Does at least some pornography harm some children some of the time?” Existing research clearly shows that this standard is being met, even under the strictest of scientific standards. In fact, existing research confirms an even higher standard of harm and shows that most pornography harms most children most of the time. When all of the various ways that pornography can harm child development are considered, there is really no defensible argument for children and adolescents having unrestricted access to sexual media and pornographic materials of any form.

## Parent Strategies for Protecting Children

Parents have the primary responsibility to safeguard their children from the harm of online pornography and sexual media. Research shows that the quality of the parent-child relationship is one of the best predictors of child wellbeing. What’s more, parental warmth and engagement is a more important protective factor against the risks of harmful online content than is any specific rule or practice.

It is also important for parents to clearly teach their children the risks of viewing pornography and set boundaries that will help their children have age-appropriate experiences with technology. This should involve delaying cellphone and social media use to later ages and becoming knowledgeable about filtering and accountability tools that can help parents monitoring their children's online activity. For better or worse, digital safety is now an unavoidable part of modern parenting.

### **Collective Strategies for Protecting Children**

But—given the evident insufficiency of parental controls and filters and given the all-encompassing nature of digital childhood—parents should not be left to safeguard their children from an unregulated industry of sexual media, pornography websites, and social media platforms, which have been given de facto impunity to capture a spellbound audience of underage children.

Without reservation, we support efforts to hold both the producers of pornography and social media platforms accountable for failing to ensure they are not contributing to and profiting from underage engagement with pornography. Some states have recently passed laws requiring pornography websites to age-verify their users (to block children from accessing these platforms) and social media platforms to acquire parental consent before children can gain access.

As a complement to the above efforts, we also support the new movement to implement device-based age-verification and require parental supervision for minor social media accounts, parental consent for app downloads, and accurate app ratings from the industry. These would all create a safer digital app environment for kids in which parents are effectively involved. Our children need and deserve nothing less!

Given the major developments discussed in this brief, namely increased access to pornography by underage users, strong and consistent research findings showing multiple ways that pornography harms child development, and the increased number of vulnerable young people in our society, the state has a compelling interest—indeed, a responsibility to—support parents as they strive to safeguard their underage children from the harmful effects of pornography. It is reasonable that this protection should involve requiring any website that publishes sexual material that is harmful to minors to verify that every user attempting to access the content is at least 18 years old.

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