

SUBMISSION

TO:
Australian
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications

INQUIRY INTO HARM BEING DONE TO AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN THROUGH ACCESS TO PORNOGRAPHY ON THE INTERNET

Prepared by: Linda McNeil
Executive Director
Council of Catholic School Parents NSW/ACT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary and Recommendations.....	3
Preamble	4
Response to Terms of Reference	5
a. trends of online consumption of pornography by children and their impact on the development of healthy and respectful relationships;	
b. current methods taken towards harm minimisation in other jurisdictions, and the effectiveness of those methods;	
c. the identification of any measures with the potential for implementation in Australia; and	
d. any other related matters.	
Conclusion	9

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY and RECOMMENDATIONS

It is significant that this inquiry coincides with the NSW Inquiry into the sexualisation of children and young people and that recently a symposium was held in Sydney on 'Porn Harms Kids', which suggests that this is an area of escalating concern that is just beginning to draw attention. It is certainly an area of major concern for parents – although it can be said that many parents are unaware of the ubiquity of pornographic material and its abusive nature.

However, it is fair to say that families have grave concerns for the health of their children's relationships, sexuality, and mental and physical health as a result of the skewed view they are getting about sex and relationships from the pornographic material they are viewing deliberately or incidentally online on their mobile devices or those of their peers.

This submission discusses the

- Ubiquity of pornographic material
- General acceptance in all media TV and advertising
- Disturbing trend toward ever increasing violent, degrading, abusive nature of content
- Impact on future mental and sexual health of young women and men

Recommendations

This submission from parents demands greater support from government for education programs to assist parents/carers in exercising our role as primary educators of our children by improving regulations to address the ubiquitous nature of hard-core online materials, thus giving parents greater control and choice over the content our children are exposed to. Attention needs to be given to the following areas:

- Recognition in schools of abuse between students
- Programs to address peer abuse with suitable processes for notifying families
- Greater awareness of consequences of purveying pornographic material, i.e. criminal offences
- More Research
- Role for government and statutory bodies
- Public awareness campaign in schools, public toilets, magazines, twitter, facebook
- Programs on respectful relationships and gender equality

PREAMBLE

The Council of Catholic School Parents NSW/ACT (CCSP)

This submission has been prepared by the Council of Catholic School Parents NSW/ACT (CCSP) on behalf of the parents of more than 255 000 students in Catholic schools in NSW.

The CCSP is an independent association and the officially recognised body representing the interests of parents and carers with children in Catholic schools in NSW/ACT. The CCSP has a network of representatives from each of the eleven dioceses in NSW/ACT that is drawn upon for input into submissions such as this. The work of the Council is guided by the principals of choice, equity and social justice.

The sexualisation of children and young people is an issue of serious concern for our parents and we recently participated in the National Symposium on Pornography. The presentations and statistics offered at this symposium paint a dire picture resulting from the exposure of children and young people to increasingly aberrant sexual material and the inability of parents to shelter their children from viewing such material.

Catholic Schooling in NSW

- Catholic schools in NSW:
- have been providing a quality education for Australian children for over 180 years
- educate more than one in five students
- have significant geographical and socio-economic coverage
- reflect the cultural diversity of contemporary Australia
- are a national asset

The mission of Catholic schools is to be more than providers of high quality education - they also seek to support the spiritual life of students and families and exist to advance the common good of Australian society.

There are more than 580 Catholic schools in NSW serving educationally, geographically, culturally and socio-economically diverse communities. They enrol over 255 000 students.

The range of school types is also diverse covering primary, secondary, senior secondary and central (K-10) models of schooling, special schools (for students with special needs and those with behavioural or other needs), vocational colleges and systemic and Independent schools.

RESPONSE TO TERMS OF REFERENCE

a) trends of online consumption of pornography by children and their impact on the development of healthy and respectful relationships

The reality is, it is no longer a question of how parents can protect their children from viewing pornography but more about what they need to do to minimise the adverse effects of their children being exposed to online pornographic content. Delegates at the recent forum at UNSW, Sydney 'Porn Harms Kids' were told that more than 90% of boys and 60% of girls have seen online porn and that 30% of internet traffic is porn related.

"Around 80 percent of Australian boys aged between 11 to 14 have viewed porn and 100 percent 15-year-olds have all seen it so they're certainly exposed to graphic content."

Susan McLean

This prevalence of online pornographic material raises certain issues with as yet unknown impact.

Issues

- Readily available on any mobile device which kids are connected to 24/7
- Default sex education
- Now classed as an addiction with harmful effects
- Aggressive marketing in response to expanded marketplace
- Increasingly violent, degrading, aberrant, toward women

Potential Impacts

- Understanding of free and full consent in sexual relations
- Mutually respectful relationships
- Mental and sexual health (brain development and anatomical injury or strain)
- Gender inequality
- Domestic violence
- Production and promulgation of their own sexual imagery (often under age)
- Online bullying and sexual harassment commonplace

Where the child or adolescent is accessing pornography, the effects can be very serious and can lead to sexual promiscuity, and regressive gender role attitudes for both males and females.¹

Special attention also needs to be made available to Aboriginal communities, which suffer their own set of circumstances and disadvantage.²

In fact, it can be said that we don't know the full impact on children and young people and the effects on their own mental, physical and sexual health as well as the quality of their relationships into the future. There needs to be more research commissioned to determine the long-term effects on children and society.

¹ 2009, Brown and L'Engle conducted a longitudinal study confirming this

² <http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/health/aboriginal-sexual-abuse#axzz434uDHKRW>

Another impact with serious long-term effects is on gender equality. Melinda Tankard Reist who interacts with girls of all ages has found that they feel pressured by boys to engage in the risky sexual behaviour in the pornography the boys have watched.³ This can lead to shame, humiliation and loss of self-esteem for the girls and in extreme cases physical injury and permanent harm.

The nature of the porn industry is such that each new site or trend has to outdo previous ones to continue to titillate and attract viewers. So new sites crop up, often produced by single, young, entrepreneurial men who are free to exploit whatever they can in the name of profit. An extreme example is the existence of websites like 'Facial Abuse' (which may have become 'Face Fu__ing') and is apparently one of the most popular porn sites on the internet, not only exposes viewers (young and old) to sickeningly abusive material but also tortures and exploits the workers all in full view of authorities. Sites like this, which are now available to all and sundry via the internet should be banned altogether. Once this kind of material has been viewed – it cannot be unviewed and can lead to devastating life circumstances as in the case of Liz Walker who viewed sexual material at a very young age.⁴

More benign mainstream entertainment like the “warm and fuzzy” Christmas movie produced by Seth Rogan et al., *The Night Before* presents as humorous and commonplace, sexting pictures of male anatomy to a female work colleague. The rating on this movie is MA+15 but the producers made clear their intention for it to be aired every year on TV as a “warm and fuzzy holiday comedy” Christmas movie. So instead of visions of sugar plums dancing in their heads, children can now go to sleep on Christmas eve with other visions, this is abhorrent!

"One of our actual goals was to make a movie that would get played on television every year so you can't do that if you're mocking the holiday that you want to be played on."⁵

Whilst it is becoming increasingly difficult for authorities and governments to control the spread of inappropriate material due to the vastness of the media and the internet, what must be done is to tighten the regulatory mechanisms instead of relaxing them as we have seen with the recent change in the TV code of practice classification zones. This is not helpful for families who are trying to limit their child's exposure to inappropriate material.

b) current methods taken towards harm minimisation in other jurisdictions, and the effectiveness of those methods;

The UK, which sees itself as a world leader in child online safety⁶ and has implemented new regulations and conducting consultation and being pro-active. The following are examples:

- The [Audiovisual Media Services Regulations 2014](#)
- Child Safety Online: Age Verification for Pornography Consultation
- Working with ISPs to block inappropriate material⁷

³ <http://melindatankardreist.com/2016/03/growing-up-in-pornland-girls-have-had-it-with-porn-conditioned-boys/>

⁴ <http://www.smh.com.au/national/the-damage-pornography-did-to-a-sixyearold-child-20160205-gmmuv2.html>

⁵ <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/movies/seth-rogen-on-why-he-could-make-fun-of-christians-in-his-christmas-movie-the-night-before-20151202-gld6qh.html>

⁶ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/500729/AV_ConsultationDCMS_20160216.pdf

⁷ <http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/uk-prime-minister-details-plans-automatically-block-porn/story?id=19738924>

c) the identification of any measures with the potential for implementation in Australia;

A coordinated approach across all sectors, public and private would have the most effect and could involve a combination of the following:

- tighter government regulation
- public health awareness campaign because people must first understand the prevalence and severity of what kids are being exposed to
- school programs on respectful relationships, gender equity, human dignity and value
- advertising in toilets for girls and boys
- age-appropriate education programs in schools with boys and girls together
- included in cybersafety training
- a big role for the Children's Advocate and eCommissioner who need to tackle it as a public health crisis
- support of grass roots movements like Collective Shout, Risk and Reality Project, Our Watch⁸

The recent symposium at UNSW 'Porn Harms Kids' which gathered experts who presented to educators, social workers, youth workers got good coverage through TV and social media and was very effective in raising awareness about this issue and that online pornographic content has drastically changed over the past few years. This is of utmost importance because parents may think they know what their children are accessing and that it is not that harmful but unless they are currently active in online pornography they would be very surprised to know the type of content that dominates today.

Education campaigns can be run through instagram, twitter, sporting clubs and dance schools which are some of the biggest offenders when it comes to shaping unhealthy attitudes to sexuality.⁹ Often parents are unaware of what they are signing their daughters or sons up for when they join dance or sport, which can sometimes promote sexualisation of young children and sexism.

There are a number of useful website which attempt to counteract such trends:

<http://internet-safety.yoursphere.com/2012/02/instagram-is-it-okay-for-kids-what-parents-need-to-know/>

<http://www.dontcrosstheline.com.au/>

<http://www.theline.org.au/ambassadors-and-partners>

There have been some positive moves to tighten up regulations and one example is the Online Content Scheme established in 2000 which imposes strong sanctions and criminal penalties for serious offences and dovetails with the move to enhance Online Safety for Children (see CCSP submission 2014 here <http://www.ccsp.catholic.edu.au/ccsp-submissions>). The appointment of the eSafety Commissioner and eSafety Hotline have been very positive developments in this area after consultation with the community.

⁸ <http://www.ourwatch.org.au/News-media/Latest-news/%E2%80%8BAustralian-girls-aged-15-19-report-endemic-online>

⁹ <http://melindatankardreist.com/>

The Office of the eCommissioner would have a role to play in these measures. They have already been proactive in conducting research¹⁰ and there is a continued need for research in the area of online safety and advertising effects on children and young people particularly in the areas of physical and mental health.

Government needs to work with schools to maintain a highly visible campaign of information through schools, presenters, resources, and statutory authorities as well as the role of the ombudsman. ACMA presenters and presentations have been very good in the past but need to be more accessible and include information about pornography in their presentations.

Government also needs to model and insist on corporate social responsibility and not bow to the dictates of industry whether it is the advertising or pornography industry. CCSP also made submission into the recent inquiry into Sexualisation of Children and Young People in the hopes that there will be stronger regulation as opposed to the current ineffectual practice of self-regulation by free to air TV for example.

¹⁰ <https://esafety.gov.au/about-the-office/research-library/aussie-teens-and-kids-online>

CONCLUSION

The excuse of ignorance about what is being circulated in the online porn world is no longer adequate for parents, schools, and government authorities. The facts show that almost all boys and the majority of girls have been exposed to porn either intentionally or accidentally before they leave adolescence and are looking to these sites for their sex education. And the stark reality is that the vast majority of these sites promote violence, degradation and abuse of women.

It is not an overreaction to say that this is a public health crisis resulting in problems of addiction, personal injury both to boys and girls, mental health problems like depression, anxiety, social isolation, body image obsession, gender inequality and domestic violence.

There have been a number of government inquiries into the 'sexualisation of children and young people' in Australia and still the situation worsens and media regulations continue to ease. The excuse held up by early reports on inquiries that due to children's tender age, they do not absorb images and concepts with an adult understanding no longer stand and it is well past time to start protecting our children from serious mental and emotional abuse. As highlighted by Susan Mclean, we can no longer stop our children from being exposed to porn, so we must now minimise its harmful effects.

Parents need support and assistance from governments both state and federal to rear their children in an environment that respects their human dignity as an individual and not merely someone or something to be used as a means for commercial profit. Government needs to step in to demand higher standards, compliance and accountability from the advertising and online industries.

A highly integrated and sophisticated public health campaign is needed to raise awareness of the issue and the detrimental effects on our children and their future relationships.

Programs need to be developed for schools and delivered to girls and boys together to expose the sub-culture of misogyny and abuse, which is creeping into adolescent culture.

Schools also need policies and protocols for dealing with inappropriate sexual behaviour of children toward other children. These matters are very sensitive and need to be managed well. Also, schools need to be structurally designed or modified to minimise the opportunity for such transgressions to occur as in the case of having individual toilets rather than large toilet blocks which often host bullying and predatory behaviour.

We implore governments to support families in their endeavours to raise well-balanced, respectful individuals by setting higher standards in terms of media regulation, ensuring that those standards are adhered to with serious repercussions when they are not.