



Australian Government
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Reducing potential harms related to pornography for young people

What the evidence says

Australian Institute of Family Studies

Policy and practice paper | September 2026





The Australian Institute of Family Studies acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognises their continuing connection to lands and waters. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and to Elders past and present.

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Content warning

The contents of this report may be confronting or distressing to read.

- It might be confronting because it focuses on pornography and sex.
- It might be distressing because it discusses sexual violence and gendered violence.

Reader discretion is advised. Please seek help and support if needed – for example, through:

Sexual Health Quarters Offers sexual health counselling, information and resources on its website Offers sexual health support through its clinic ((08) 9227 6177) and referrals through its helpline ((08) 9227 6178)	Headspace – 1800 650 890 Offers information and clinical assistance for young people struggling with their mental health, studying or career progression	Kids Helpline – 1800 55 1800 Offers information and counselling for young people struggling with their mental health or social lives
ReachOut Offers information and peer counselling for young people struggling with their mental health Offers assistance to parents or educators seeking to support young people	Beyond Blue – 1300 224 636 Offers information and counselling for anyone who may be experiencing anxiety, depression or suicidal ideation	Raising Children Network Offers scientifically validated information to support parents and carers to keep children healthy and developing well
1800RESPECT – 1800 737 732 Offers counselling, information and referrals for anyone who has experienced, or is at risk of, domestic, family and/or sexual violence	MensLine Australia – 1300 789 978 Offers counselling for men with family relationship concerns, including family violence, either online (web chat or video call) or by phone (call)	13YARN – 13 92 76 Offers yarning opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are feeling overwhelmed or having difficulty coping – by phone (call)
QLife – 1800 184 527 Offers LGBTIQ+ peer support and referrals for people wanting to talk about a range of issues including sexuality, identity, gender, bodies, feelings or relationships	Disability Gateway Offers links to information, services and support in a range of areas people with disability, their families and carers may need	Directories for local support ▪ ANROWS directory ▪ NASASV directory ▪ AskIzzy directory

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CFCA policy and practice papers provide evidence-informed overviews of complex issues affecting children, families and communities. They examine what we know about a topic of interest, what works and for whom, and translate evidence into implications for policy, practice and service delivery.

Overview

This resource aims to summarise the research evidence on pornography use and young people in relation to:

- the effects pornography use can have on young people
- programs/interventions aimed at addressing young people's pornography use
- young people's, parents' and professionals' (e.g. educators) views on how to reduce potential harms from pornography use.

This resource is aimed at practitioners and other professionals (e.g. educators) who work with young people. It may also be of interest to young people and parents and carers.

This is a guide to up-to-date research and describes what we know about this topic. It also provides high-level practice considerations for professionals who work with young people.

This resource does not discuss pornography from a clinical or legal perspective and does not touch on therapeutic strategies or legislative responses to pornography use. Although some of its insights pertain to problematic pornography use¹ or pornography addiction, it does not specifically focus on programs or interventions designed to address this intensive use.

Key messages

- Most young Australians have been exposed to pornography by the time they reach early-mid adolescence (around 13–14 years). Some young Australians view pornography regularly (e.g. daily, weekly, monthly).
- Young people often encounter pornography unintentionally at first but many increasingly seek it out through their adolescence for a range of reasons, including curiosity and a desire to learn about sex (particularly in the absence of other/suitable sex education).
- While research indicates that pornography use may not be inherently harmful, it has the potential to be harmful. There is a widely expressed view that the potential harms it can cause young people need to be addressed.
- Research indicates that pornography use among young people is associated with negative attitudes and behaviours. These include engaging in condomless sex, engaging in unwanted sexual behaviours or sexual aggression, holding stereotypically gendered or sexist attitudes and experiencing mental health problems.
- Research that examines the impacts of programs/interventions aimed at addressing young people's pornography use is emerging and very limited.
- Young people and parents are supportive of greater education about pornography (e.g. improving pornography literacy) and having more open conversations about pornography and sex.
- More research and resources are needed to guide the development and implementation of evidence-based programs/interventions and strategies to reduce potential harms from pornography use among young people.
- The emerging evidence and recommendations from the eSafety Commissioner suggest that it may be useful for professionals working with young people to build their awareness and knowledge around pornography use and associated outcomes. This can help them to support young people and parents and carers to better understand and discuss pornography use in age-appropriate and non-judgemental ways and to facilitate access to trusted referral pathways and resources for young people who need extra help.

¹ Defining 'problematic pornography use' (PPU) is contentious and there is no consensus or established framework to guide clinicians in approaching this issue (Binnie & Reavey, 2020b; Bronstein, 2025). Nevertheless, PPU is generally discussed in terms of being a behavioural addiction or impulse control disorder/sexual impulsivity/sexual compulsivity, leading to significant negative interpersonal, intrapersonal or extrapersonal consequences for the user (Binnie & Reavey, 2020b).

Introduction

Pornography² refers to sexually explicit material that is intended to arouse³ (McKee et al., 2020).

Online pornography can be text, an image or video that is sexually explicit and hosted online. It is easily, anonymously and freely accessible to individuals, including children and young people (Binnie & Reavey, 2020a; Standing Committee on Social Issues, NSW Parliament, 2025).

Australian nationally representative surveys have shown that most young Australians have been exposed to pornography by the time they reach early-mid adolescence (around 13–14 years) (Crabbe, Flood & Adams, 2024; Power et al., 2022). Evidence suggests this is similar to overseas – with findings of the prevalence and young age of exposure emerging from nationally representative studies in England, New Zealand and the United States (Children’s Commissioner, 2023a; Office of Film and Literature Classification, 2018; Rothman et al., 2021).

The evidence base does not conclusively suggest that pornography use is inherently harmful. However, it does suggest that pornography has the potential to cause harm, depending on what the pornography depicts and/or how an individual interacts with it (Standing Committee on Social Issues, NSW Parliament, 2025).

For young people, there is some research that suggests pornography use is linked with potentially beneficial outcomes, such as learning about sex and explorations of sexuality (Andrie et al., 2021; Doornwaard et al., 2017; eSafety Commissioner, 2023). There is also research that suggests links to potentially negative outcomes. For example, Australian research has found that, for young people, pornography use is linked with engaging in unwanted sexual behaviours or endorsing rigid ‘masculine norms’ that normalise – among other things – male aggression or control towards women (The Men’s Project, 2025; Warren & Swami, 2018).

The evidence base about how pornography use affects young people is still emerging. Nevertheless, the potentially harmful outcomes associated with pornography use – not just for young people but the broader population – have become a public health concern, and there is a widespread view that pornography use among young people, in particular, needs to be addressed (Children’s Commissioner, 2023b; Davis et al., 2018; Lim et al., 2017; Quadara et al., 2017; Rothman, 2021).

This concern has emerged in an environment of pornography hosted and accessed on the internet (Lewczuk et al., 2022; Paasonen, 2024). Young people spend a significant portion of their lives on the internet (with often increasing use as they move through adolescence), and one of the most common places they encounter pornography is on social media sites (eSafety Commissioner, 2023, 2026).

In Australia, the Age-Restricted Material (ARM) Codes came into effect on 9 March 2026 via the *Online Safety Act 2021* (Cth). They were designed, in part, to reduce young people’s exposure to pornography (Explanatory Memorandum, Online Safety Bill 2021 (Cth); eSafety Commissioner, 2025a). A focus of these codes is reducing exposure to age-inappropriate content, including pornography and violence (Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, 2024; eSafety Commissioner, 2025b).

A small Australian study (involving 517 participants) found that young Australians (aged 15–29) were more likely to report having seen violence than romance/affection in pornography (Davis et al., 2018). A range of studies have found that aggression, domination and coercion – especially by men towards women – are common themes in pornography (Fritz & Paul, 2017; Fritz et al., 2020; Shor, 2019; Vera-Gray et al., 2021).

This resource summarises the evidence about the outcomes associated with pornography use among young people, the evaluated programs/interventions that may reduce the potentially harmful outcomes, and young people’s, parents’ and professionals’ perspectives on these issues.

2 This resource focuses on ‘mainstream pornography’, made professionally and distributed widely (Fritz & Paul, 2017). It does not intend to address (although overlaps may arise with): illegal materials (e.g. materials that have been Refused Classification, child sexual abuse material, deepfake pornography or other image-based abuse-related materials); user-made pornography (e.g. nude images or footage, or content hosted on OnlyFans); sexualised content in mainstream media (e.g. advertising, television, film and music videos).

3 ‘Arousal’ refers to an experience of psychological activation (e.g. mood change) and physiological activation (e.g. raised heart rate) (Thayer & Friedman, 2025). Pornography generally intends to prompt arousal that is sexual in nature – involving subjective feelings of sexual arousal, and genital responsiveness or sensation (Janssen, 2012).

Nature of the evidence

This paper uses evidence (published 2016–25) gathered from a scoping review of the literature that has evaluated pornography-related programs aimed at young people.

Our review found that research examining the impacts of programs/interventions that include content on pornography aimed at young people is emerging and very limited.

Given the limited number of empirical evaluations of relevant programs/interventions, we also analysed references that discussed theoretical models/frameworks or qualitative insights from stakeholders' perspectives (e.g. young people, parents and helping professionals) about how to address the harms pornography can cause.

It is important to be cautious when interpreting the limited evidence base around pornography and associated outcomes among individuals, as there are a range of conceptual, definitional and methodological challenges that limit the generalisability of findings (Fisher & Kohut, 2020; Kohut et al., 2020; Peter & Valkenburg, 2016). For example, studies use different definitions of 'pornography', ask sensitive questions, rely on self-reported responses and use self-selected participants and non-representative samples. Further, studies may find *some* form of association between pornography use and various attitudes and behaviours (beneficial and harmful) but the association has not been proven to be causal.

Ultimately, we consider that more research is needed to understand how pornography affects young people and to identify what programs/interventions are the most appropriate or effective at addressing young people's pornography use (Standing Committee on Social Issues, NSW Parliament, 2025; Quadara et al., 2017).

What do we mean by 'reducing potential harms from pornography use'?

This paper does not discuss whether pornography or its use is 'good' or 'bad'.

As indicated above, there is a lack of research on the cause–effect relationship between pornography use and harms. Although studies have found *associations* between pornography use and harms, researchers remain undecided about the causal nature of this association. That is, whether pornography use *causes* harmful attitudes or behaviours (either on its own or in combination with other factors) or whether people who already have/use harmful attitudes or behaviours are inclined to use pornography, which, in turn, reinforces those attitudes or behaviours.

Acknowledging these limitations, this paper examines a range of negative attitudes or behaviours found to be *associated* with pornography, which are referred to as '*potential* harms'. It outlines the research about young people's pornography use, the potential harms associated with it and programs/interventions that include components designed to address it.

It is important to note that there are different views about how to manage young people's pornography use and how to reduce its potential harms. These views can:

- be influenced by people's professional, cultural and personal backgrounds, as well as their experiences and personal values
- influence the ways in which people attempt to address pornography use.

For example, one of the programs/interventions outlined in this paper focuses on managing pornography use by reducing it, while the other programs/interventions focus on building 'pornography literacy'. Efforts aimed at reducing pornography use – including the imposition of regulations such as the ARM Codes – aim to prevent or, at least, reduce exposure to pornography to avoid its potential harms (Flood & Hamilton, 2003; Rutledge, 2026). Efforts to promote pornography literacy aim to provide young people with the knowledge and skills to recognise and resist unrealistic or negative themes in pornography, which may serve to 'inoculate' against its potential harms, rather than avoiding it altogether (Healy-Cullen et al., 2024b).

These approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive; some stakeholders suggest that a combination of pornography reduction/regulation and pornography literacy may work best (Flood & Hamilton, 2003; Turvey et al., 2024).

Given the lack of research evidence evaluating different programs/interventions designed to address pornography use (whether through reduced use or improved literacy), and given that it was beyond the scope of this paper to consider programs/interventions specifically designed to address pornography use that is problematic or involves forms of pornography thought to be more harmful to users (e.g. violent pornography: Standing Committee on Social Issues, NSW Parliament, 2025; Quadara et al., 2017), we do not assess or rank the appropriateness of different programs/interventions. However, we do note some of the different views about them from stakeholder insights.

Young people's encounters with pornography

The National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health⁴ (SSASH, conducted in 2021) showed that the average age at which survey respondents reported first viewing pornography was 13.6 years (Power et al., 2022). Similarly, a nationally representative survey has shown that most young Australians have encountered pornography at some stage in their lifetime – on average, by early-mid adolescence (i.e. 13-14 years) (Crabbe et al., 2024).

Eighty-six per cent ($n = 5,725$) of young people aged 14-18 years who participated in the SSASH survey had viewed online pornography at least once in their lifetime; 26.6% viewed it less than monthly, 14.7% viewed it monthly, 19.5% viewed it weekly and 14.1% viewed it daily or almost daily (Power et al., 2022).

It is common for young Australians to encounter pornography several years before their first partnered sexual experience (Crabbe et al., 2024). It is also common for their first encounters with pornography to be unintentional (eSafety Commissioner, 2023; Giunta et al., 2025). However, many young people increasingly seek out pornography as they progress through adolescence (eSafety Commissioner, 2023; Martellozzo et al., 2020).

Pornography and social media sites are the most common places young Australians encounter pornography – whether intentionally or not (eSafety Commissioner, 2023).

Studies suggest young Australians may begin, or continue, to seek pornography for a range of reasons – including curiosity or a desire to learn about sex (Power et al., 2022; Woodley et al., 2025b). Sometimes, young people seek pornography because it is the only source of sex education available to them or because it best represents their diverse sexual identities (Flory & Shor, 2025; Healy-Cullen et al., 2022; Nelson et al., 2019; Stout et al., 2025; Woodley et al., 2025b).

What makes pornography potentially harmful?

Researchers have theorised that media can provide viewers with 'models' or 'scripts' that can inform their understanding of or approach towards social situations (Bandura, 2001; Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Young people who have participated in qualitative studies have suggested that pornography (as a form of media) can act as one such model or script for sexual behaviours (Scarcelli, 2025; Vertongen et al., 2025).

For example, in a UK mixed-methods study on young people's experiences with online pornography (involving young people aged 11-16 years), one 13-year-old male participant told the researchers that '[o]ne of [his] friends has started treating women like he sees on the videos – not major – just a slap here or there' (Martellozzo et al., 2020, p. 6).

This quote reflects the idea that some young people who encounter pornography may perceive its content as normalised and become desensitised to it over time. Studies suggest this is more likely for young males (Lebedíková et al., 2023; Scarcelli, 2025; Setty, 2022). Young males are also more likely than young females to perceive pornography as representing realistic sexual behaviour (Tomić et al., 2018; Wright & Štulhofer, 2019).

The belief that pornography is realistic and normal or desensitisation around its contents may be concerning given the potentially harmful models or scripts of behaviour it commonly portrays. A high proportion of pornography hosted on widely accessed websites omits conversations about consent, models power imbalances between people and/or displays people using abusive, disrespectful, objectifying or violent behaviours (disproportionately towards women) (Fritz et al., 2020; Shor, 2019; Shor & Seida, 2019; Vera-Gray et al., 2021; Willis et al., 2019).

4 The SSASH survey involved 6,841 young people aged 14-18 years.

However, other studies suggest some young people are aware of, and resistant to, problematic scripts in pornography and the potential harms they may cause (Ballester-Arnal et al., 2022; Davis et al., 2020; Doornwaard et al., 2017; Healy-Cullen et al., 2024a; Lim et al., 2021). Some researchers have speculated that having strong media or pornography literacy skills or open conversations about pornography may help predict whether young people are aware of harms and resistant to them (Davis et al., 2020; Doornwaard et al., 2017; Goldstein, 2020). However, more research is needed to identify and evaluate whether these factors (or any others) are protective.

What are the outcomes associated with pornography use among young people?

Some research in relation to pornography has specifically examined the potential benefits and harms of pornography use among young people. Much of this research has been on the harms. The findings from this research are summarised below.

Potential benefits

Qualitative studies have shown some young people consider pornography use to be beneficial because it allows for exploration, inspiration, entertainment, gratification, pleasure, a sense of control and breaking taboos or shame around sex (Doornwaard et al., 2017; eSafety Commissioner, 2023).

A survey of 10,930 adolescents across 6 European countries found associations between pornography and beneficial behaviours, with young people who had been exposed to pornography reporting higher levels of engagement in offline social activity and sports than young people who had not been exposed (Andrie et al., 2021).

Potential harms

Qualitative studies indicate pornography use can be harmful as it can lead to lower self-esteem and increased insecurity and/or unrealistic expectations or anxieties around duration, performance and overall physical experience during sex (Doornwaard et al., 2017; Martellozo et al., 2020; Scarcelli, 2025).

The evidence emerging from quantitative studies is mixed. However, these studies have generally pointed to associations between pornography use and a range of potentially harmful attitudes and behaviours. For example, studies showed that young people who reported having viewed pornography were more likely to report one or more of the following:

- engaging in condomless sex (Nelson et al., 2019;⁵ Wright et al., 2020⁶)
- engaging in unwanted sexual behaviours (Warren & Swami, 2018), sexual aggression (Waterman et al., 2022; Wright, Paul et al., 2021)⁷ or other harmful sexual behaviours⁸ (Children's Commissioner, 2023b; Hollis & Belton, 2017)
- using dominant sexual behaviours⁹ such as choking, spanking and name calling (which are negatively associated with sexual satisfaction with partners) (Wright, Herbenick et al., 2021)
- holding mistaken beliefs about sex – ranging from physiological (e.g. around the nature of female orgasms, including the statement 'most women easily have orgasms during intercourse') to social (e.g. around the

5 This study only found this association for young sexual minority male participants who reported that over 50% of the pornography they viewed involved condomless anal sex.

6 This study labelled this association positive but not significant.

7 However, other studies found no such link (Štulhofer, 2021; Tomić et al., 2018) or that the link only exists in conjunction with the use of pornography magazines (Kohut et al., 2021).

8 Defined by the Children's Commissioner (UK) as '[a] spectrum of sexual behaviours exhibited by children that are sexually harmful to others, ranging from inappropriate, to problematic, abusive and violent as established by the Hackett continuum of harmful sexual behaviour' (i.e. a compass that encompasses developmentally expected, socially acceptable and mutual sexual behaviour ('normal'), to physically violent, intrusive, instrumental and/or sadistic sexual abuse ('violent'): Hackett, 2014) (Children's Commissioner, 2023b).

9 These and other rough sexual practices are not necessarily or inherently harmful if 2 parties coming from reasonably equal positions of power mutually consent to them, communicate about them, and practice them with clear boundaries and understandings around potential emotional and physical impacts (see e.g. Woodley & Jaunzems, 2024). For example, choking can involve risks of loss of consciousness, brain injury or death (Sharman et al., 2024; Wright et al., 2022), and people may cause significant harm if they do not understand and take steps to address these risks (Woodley & Jaunzems, 2024).

prevalence of certain sexual preferences, including the statement ‘most people prefer rough sex to gentle sex’) (Wright et al., 2022)

- perpetration or victimisation of dating violence – specifically found among young people who had watched pornography with a romantic partner (Huntington et al., 2024) and young people who had watched violent pornography (Rostad et al., 2019)
- willingness to forward sexts from a stranger to others (van Oosten & Vandenbosch, 2020)
- lower romantic relationship skills, lower refusal skills¹⁰ and greater sexual permissiveness (Huntington et al., 2024)
- higher externalising behaviour problems such as rule breaking and aggression (Andrie et al., 2021)
- higher levels of internet addiction (particularly around the age of 16) (Alexandraki et al., 2018)
- mental health problems (Lim et al., 2017) and higher perceived intensity of negative emotions (Cerbara et al., 2023)
- negative self-esteem and body satisfaction (Cerbara et al., 2023)
- holding stereotypically gendered or ‘sexist’ attitudes (e.g. about male dominance and female submission), including ‘masculine norms’¹¹ or negative attitudes towards women (Cerbara et al., 2023;¹² Laporte et al., 2024; Stanley et al., 2018; The Men’s Project, 2025)
- increased tolerance towards violent behaviours and discrimination (Cerbara et al., 2023).

A mixed-methods study has also shown that young people who regularly viewed online pornography were more likely to report engaging in sexual coercion and abuse (Stanley et al., 2018).

Further, research suggests there may be factors that heighten the association between pornography use and harms. These include regular/frequent pornography viewing, greater pornography exposure and the use of pornography with violent imagery or themes (Huntington et al., 2024; Rostad et al., 2019; The Men’s Project, 2025; Wright et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2022; Wright, Herbenick et al., 2021).

What does the evidence say about addressing pornography use by young people?

Studies generally suggest that educational programs/interventions or open conversations may support young people to make informed and protective choices about pornography use (Burke et al., 2023; Davis et al., 2020; Turvey et al., 2024; Vandenbosch & van Oosten, 2017; Wright et al., 2020).

These strategies may support young people to use skills or draw boundaries that may mitigate potential harms from pornography use (e.g. applying a critical lens, using search filters or setting time limits). Young people have suggested that a *combination* of education, conversation and regulation of pornography is likely to be most supportive/protective (Flood & Hamilton, 2003; Turvey et al., 2024).

The next sections outline the evidence on programs/interventions that are designed to address pornography use among young people. However, our review of the evidence found few evaluated programs/interventions and, as a result, there is insufficient evidence to establish what works to mitigate the potential harms associated with pornography use.

Given this, we also reviewed the literature on the views of a range of stakeholders (i.e. young people, parents and carers, educators, researchers and other professionals) on what might help to reduce the potential harms from pornography use. These have been included in this resource because these add support to the growing evidence base around the importance of pornography literacy.

¹⁰ Refusal skills refer to the capability to say no to risky, unhealthy or unwanted behaviours including substance use, unwanted or unprotected sex, or violent relationships.

¹¹ Stereotypical masculine norms refer to a collection of beliefs that place pressure on boys and men to behave in certain ways (The Men’s Project, 2025). This was measured in the study using a validated survey scale – Meanings of Adolescent Masculinity (Oransky & Fisher, 2009 cited in The Men’s Project, 2025).

¹² This study (involving 4,228 upper secondary school age young people in Italy) found this *only* in relation to boys, noting the opposite emerged for girls.

Educational programs/interventions

Our review identified very few studies evaluating programs/interventions aimed at young people that directly focus on pornography use. Three of the programs/interventions outlined below focused on broader topics (e.g. sex education) and included some content on pornography in the context of that broader focus, while only 2 programs specifically focused on pornography (Dawson et al., 2025; Rothman et al., 2018) (Table 1).

Some of the programs/interventions that addressed pornography use, in some way, were delivered face-to-face by facilitators and some were online programs (Table 1). All except one study (Rothman et al., 2018) involved high school students aged 12–18 years.

The programs/interventions and their evaluations (listed in Table 1) are diverse in terms of program aim, content, delivery, research design and study measures. They also involve relatively small groups of participants, ranging from 12 to 429 young people, and all but one are based in the United States. This demonstrates the methodological inconsistencies and limitations, flagged earlier, which make it difficult to draw clear conclusions about the best way to address the potential harms of pornography use.

Table 1: Evaluations or studies of programs that address pornography use

First author	Country	Program name	Details
Ashley	USA	Relationships Under Construction (RUC)	• Face-to-face sexual risk avoidance education • 8 school-based lessons delivered by facilitators • Topics: dating violence, communication skills, positive youth development, healthy relationships, pornography – Pornography addiction is listed in Lesson 8 but specific details on the content are not published in the paper.
Dawson	Ireland	Sex on Our Screens	• Online pornography intervention program (self-directed) • 4 modules • Topics: pornography industry, pornography regulation (laws around use, production and sharing), representations of bodies and genitals, consent, sexual violence and coercion, sexual scripts, observational learning and vicarious reinforcement
Nelson	USA	Healthy Relationships Program	• Online sex education program (self-directed) • 6 online activities/games related to the topics covered • Topics: HIV and STIs, pornography, pregnancy prevention, health relationships – Pornography content consists of what pornography is, why it is problematic to learn about sex through pornography, and how common or uncommon sexual acts that are portrayed in pornography are when people have sex in real life.
Nelson	USA	Young Men and Media	• Online HIV prevention program (self-directed) • 4 modules • Topics: male anatomy, HIV/STI prevention, pornography literacy, general sexual health – Pornography content: pornography literacy skills, including differences between pornography and reality, what's behind the scenes on a pornography set, and normalisation of pornography use among male youth.
Rothman	USA	Pornography literacy	• Face-to-face media literacy program focused on pornography • 5 sessions with instructors • Topics: pornography definition, history of sexually explicit images in society, pornography and norms related to sex and gender, potential harms of pornography exposure and adolescent development, unreal representations of sex in pornography, occupational safety and health in the pornography industry, healthy intimacy, non-consensual dissemination of pornography.

Although the evidence base around pornography mitigation programs/interventions is still emerging, the studies listed above indicated the following pornography-related outcomes post-intervention:

- reduction in pornography viewing (defined as nude or suggestive pictures) at 3-month follow-up (Ashley et al., 2024).
- improvements in pornography literacy/knowledge (Dawson et al., 2025; Nelson et al., 2022, 2025; Rothman et al., 2018).
- improvements in capability to address consent (e.g. information, skills and confidence) and make positive sexual decisions (e.g. resisting pressure) (Dawson et al., 2025)
- improvements in genital self-image (Dawson et al., 2025)
- reduction in beliefs that pornography includes realistic or accurate depictions of sex (Dawson et al., 2025; Nelson et al., 2022).
- changes in some pornography-related attitudes and behavioural intentions – including being less likely to agree that pornography is a good source of education, harmless entertainment or model for behaviour, and being more likely to ask for advice about pornography use (Rothman et al., 2018).

However, other pornography-related behaviours (e.g. using pornography as a primary source of sex education and feeling 'fine, happy or great' about pornography use) did not change from pre- to post-test (Rothman et al., 2018).

Given the limitations of the existing research literature, it is not possible to determine what programs/interventions or what elements of programs have the greatest impact on pornography-related outcomes among young people.

Stakeholder perspectives on reducing the potential harms associated with pornography use

The following sections describe the documented views of some young people, parents and carers, educators, researchers and other professionals on mitigating the potential harms associated with pornography use, to supplement the limited insights available from the programs/interventions outlined above.

Perspectives of young people

Studies suggest many young Australian people are aware there are a range of negative features of pornography and its use and may attempt to adopt a critical orientation towards pornography (Davis et al., 2020; Giunta et al., 2025; Woodley et al., 2025a; Woodley et al., 2025b).

When young people are asked how they insulate themselves against potential harms from pornography, they suggest a range of ways – including not taking it 'seriously' or monitoring and regulating their own viewing (e.g. noticing and exiting when they encounter something distasteful or uncomfortable for them) (Attwood et al., 2018; Healy-Cullen et al., 2024a; Healy-Cullen et al., 2024b; Woodley et al., 2025a; Woodley et al., 2025b).

However, young people have said they may not always be able to use such self-regulation tactics when curiosity 'takes over', and they have expressed concern for younger peers who may not be able to use self-protective mechanisms; for example, due to naivete or immaturity (Vertongen et al., 2025).

Despite some young people feeling confident in their pornography literacy, young people are generally supportive of schools providing more education about pornography (Baker, 2016; Giunta et al., 2025; Lim et al., 2021; Healy-Cullen et al., 2022; Woodley et al., 2025b). Further, some young people state they would value the opportunity to have direct conversations with adults about sex and related topics such as pornography (Davis et al., 2020).

Perspectives of parents

Parents have also recognised that conversations with young people about sex and pornography can be valuable for educational purposes (Dawson et al., 2024), and some say they feel responsible for having them (Burke et al., 2023; eSafety Commissioner et al., 2018). However, many parents do not have these conversations (Lim et al., 2024; Rothman et al., 2017; Vall-Castelló et al., 2025), and some parents in Australian qualitative studies have said

that they are not confident about when or how to have such conversations¹³ (Burke et al., 2023; Davis et al., 2021; Lim et al., 2024).

One reason parents may lack confidence in this regard is because they may not have encountered explanations or models for how to have these conversations (Dawson et al., 2024). Other barriers include:

- parents' embarrassment or taboos about discussing pornography and related topics such as sexual interest, pleasure or behaviour (Dawson et al., 2024)
 - parents' cultural or religious beliefs can also make them feel that discussing pornography or topics related to sexuality or sexual behaviour is culturally and/or socially inappropriate (Gesser-Edelsburg & Abed Elhadi Arabia, 2018; Zen et al., 2025)
- parents' desire to maintain the perceived innocence of their children and an associated fear that proactively discussing pornography will prompt their children to seek it out or watch it (Davis et al., 2021; Jeffery et al., 2025; Zen et al., 2025; see also Dawson et al., 2024)

Some studies suggest parents may feel more confident to navigate conversations with young people about pornography if schools lead the way (Balliet & Ford, 2025; Burke et al., 2023; Crabbe & Flood, 2021; Davis et al., 2021). Many parents and caregivers are supportive of schools doing more to educate young people about pornography (Burke et al., 2023; Davis et al., 2021; eSafety Commissioner et al., 2018; Healy-Cullen et al., 2022).

There are limited studies demonstrating the impacts of parental conversations on pornography use or reduced harms. However, one promising example emerged from Wright and colleagues' (2020) US study involving a sub-sample of 416 participants aged 14–18 years. Findings from that study indicate that parents may be able to counteract the link between pornography exposure and teenage boys' propensity for condomless sex by communicating with them about sexual health and discussing preventative measures (Wright et al., 2020).

Studies suggest that having conversations is not the only tactic parents can employ to support their children when it comes to navigating (and ideally mitigating) the potential harms associated with pornography use. One study found that parental monitoring (i.e. efforts to monitor children's location, activities and contacts) was consistently linked with fewer negative behaviours associated with pornography use, such as sexual aggressiveness (Tomić et al., 2018).

Other stakeholders' views on educational programs

The views of other adults working with young people – especially educators – have also been explored in the research. Professionals with experience in pornography and sex education topics have recommended that educational programs address emotional and relational learning, recognise that pornography may be viewed during key processes of development and maturation, and include honest and explicit discussions of pornography and its contents while allowing for reflective, open discussion rather than a sole focus on negatives (Ballester et al., 2022).

Other experts who have developed pornography literacy education programs recommend that programs be based on sound concepts and evidence, include a human rights focus, leverage young people's existing skills and competencies, incorporate the whole school (with appropriate training) and be non-judgemental, conversational and participatory (Balliet & Ford, 2025; Crabbe & Flood, 2021; Davis et al., 2021).

Australian young people have also indicated these principles are important to them – supporting positive, inclusive and strengths-based framing, as well as critical and socially conscious thinking (Giunta et al., 2025; Lim et al., 2021; Vrankovich et al., 2025).

However, some studies suggest educators may not feel comfortable or trained to run pornography literacy programs (Vall-Castelló et al., 2025) or may resist doing so because they consider young people are 'too young' and not 'ready for it' (Meehan, 2025). This reflects taboos and sensitivities surrounding these topics as well as the need for professional development/training of educators and other professionals working in this area (Balliet & Ford, 2025; Baker, 2016; Burke et al., 2023; Crabbe & Flood, 2021; Meehan, 2025; Ollis, 2016; Vall-Castelló et al., 2025).

¹³ On the other hand, one study indicated *most* parents **are** confident – finding 69% of parents of children aged 6–17 surveyed from Australia ($n = 2,799$) were confident talking with their children about pornography (eSafety Commissioner et al., 2018).

Discussion and practice implications

This paper has provided a snapshot of the outcomes associated with pornography use among young people, the evaluated programs/interventions that may reduce potentially harmful outcomes, and young people's, parents' and professionals' views on what could work to mitigate those potential harms.

The current evidence base in this area is severely limited, so it is not possible to draw any definitive conclusions regarding what works for mitigating the potentially harmful outcomes associated with pornography use among young people. More research and resources are needed to guide the development and implementation of appropriate mitigation strategies.

Despite limited evidence, efforts are being made to proactively manage the potential harms associated with pornography use. For example, as flagged earlier, Australia introduced its ARM Codes on 9 March 2026, in part to curb pornography being accessed by young people. This has been a key initiative to address some of the challenges identified in this paper. However, it is not yet known whether the ARM Codes will work as intended and some studies suggest efforts to limit pornography exposure or use may not always be successful (Turvey et al., 2024; Woodley et al., 2025a; Yar, 2020).

Reviews of stakeholder perspectives suggest that some young people, their parents and carers and researchers support initiatives that go beyond, or supplement, limits placed on pornography exposure or use. For example, some stakeholders are supportive of initiatives that focus on helping young people to develop healthy understandings and reactions to pornography when they are exposed – including through education and open conversations promoting pornography literacy (Ballester et al., 2022; Maas et al., 2024; Ollis, 2016; Turvey et al., 2024; Woodley et al., 2025b).

Although the topic of pornography is not explicitly included in the Respectful Relationships Education (RRE) curriculum in Australian schools,¹⁴ some of the resources listed in the recent (March 2026) National Respectful Relationships Education Framework do provide information and guidance about how to appropriately talk to and/or teach young people about pornography in the context of RRE (Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, n.d.; Our Watch, 2025; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] et al., 2018).

There can be pushback against initiatives that encourage discussions about pornography due to the limited knowledge, discomfort or lack of confidence parents and carers, young people and the broader population feel when asked to confront the topic of pornography, noting it is often framed as private and/or problematic (Burke et al., 2023; Jhe et al., 2023; Ollis, 2016; Power et al., 2026). Pushback might also reflect the fact that the current empirical evidence base does not yet support an agreed, evidence-based approach to discussing this topic.

Nevertheless, given that young people's pornography use is considered relevant from a public health perspective, it might be useful for practitioners and other professionals to develop their understanding of this topic so they feel comfortable and confident to manage it in the context of their work; for example, if young people ask them for information or support because they do not want to ask their parents and carers (Jhe et al., 2023).

Further, given that young people may still be exposed to pornography even when safeguards exist (e.g. the ARM Codes or filters applied by individual users) and/or they may not have learnt pornography literacy through programs such as RRE, practitioners and other professionals may be in a position to help parents and carers and young people with prevention and post-exposure support.

¹⁴ Although the RRE curriculum itself does not explicitly refer to 'pornography' (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, n.d.), the National Respectful Relationships Education Framework does include the following, overlapping principle: 'systems and schools equip students with critical media, digital literacy and social and emotional learning skills to help them understand the media they may consume' (Department of Education, 2026).

Practice considerations

The following practice considerations are drawn from the emerging evidence reviewed in this paper and from expert advice provided by the Australian Government's independent online safety regulator the eSafety Commissioner:

- **Build your awareness and knowledge about pornography** and its influence on young people (e.g. their attitudes and beliefs around sex and intimate relationships) and of available services and resources to facilitate information-sharing and referrals. (See [Further reading and resources](#) below for some independent pornography literacy programs and resources available in Australia.)
- **Help parents and carers and young people understand that pornography exposure is common:** Practitioners and other professionals (e.g. educators) can explain to parents and carers and young people that it is common for young people to be accidentally exposed to pornography. They can anticipate and normalise these concerns and help facilitate open and non-judgemental conversations.
- **Facilitate age-appropriate and non-judgemental conversations about pornography:** Professionals can support parents and carers to approach conversations about pornography calmly and without judgement, as heightened reactions can increase shame and reduce the likelihood of future disclosure (Droubay et al., 2024). They may play a role in encouraging and modelling conversations that are age-appropriate, non-judgemental, respectful and ongoing – about pornography and associated concepts of consent and respectful and realistic relationships. Further, they can clarify for parents and carers that conversations about pornography can support young people's safety and development, not prompt them to access pornography. For example, tools such as the eSafety Commissioner's [Online Safety and Sexual Development guidance](#) may be useful to support parents and carers to have conversations with young people.
- **Facilitate access to trusted referral pathways and resources:** Professionals (e.g. educators, mental health practitioners) can help identify when some young people need additional support; for example, where a young person's exposure to pornography is distressing or persistent. Practitioners can work with parents, carers and young people to understand their broader wellbeing needs and provide referrals for support where appropriate.

Further reading and resources

[The Gist](#): an online guide for young people about sex and relationships produced by the Burnet and University of Melbourne. This website is intended for young people aged 15–24 years.

[Talking about Pornography](#): online resources and workshops for parents and carers and professionals provided by eSafeKids.

[Shades of Pornography](#): a fee-based program provided by Interrelate that helps young people understand what pornography is and its impacts.

[It's Time We Talked](#): a resource that supports young people, parents, schools, government and the community sector to understand and address the influence of pornography from a project led by Maree Crabbe and David Corlett.

[Talking with Teenagers about Pornography at 12–18 years: Parenting Tips](#): a resource that provides some information and conversational tips for parents and carers to discuss pornography with adolescents, produced by the Raising Children's Network.

[Porn – What You Should Know](#): A component of [The Practical Guide to Love, Sex and Relationships](#), this teaching resource is for students in years 7–10, produced by the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University.

[Online Porn](#): eSafety Commissioner's webpage that provides information and advice for parents and carers about online pornography and other sexual content.

[Pornography Use among Adolescents and the Role of Primary Care](#) (Jhe et al., 2022): an article by US-based authors to equip primary care providers with tools that may support them to screen for pornography use, create a confidential and comfortable environment to talk about it, and promote open discussions between young people and parents and carers. May be useful for Australian-based service providers.

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