



IT'S TIME
WE TALKED

***It's time we talked* submission to the
consultation on the Second Action
Plan of the National Plan to End
Violence Against Women and Children
2022-2032**

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Introduction

It's time we talked is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the Second Action Plan of the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032*.

Violence against women and children, and gender-based violence more broadly, is a national and international emergency. Many factors and influences must be addressed to end gender-based violence in Australia. In particular, we must address the specific expressions of gender inequality that most reliably predict violence against women at a population level, known as the 'gendered drivers of violence against women'. As identified in *Change the story*, Australia's shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia these include:

- condoning of violence against women
- men's control of decision-making and limits to women's independence, in public and private life
- rigid gender stereotyping and dominant forms of masculinity
- male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance and control.

In addition, we need to address the factors that reinforce violence against women, and the ways that gender-based violence intersects with a range of other forms of oppression, discrimination and inequalities.

Among the many causes of and contributors to gender-based violence is a growing number of technology-related and technology-facilitated forms of violence. This includes the pervasive influence of industrial online pornography, which commonly reflects, reinforces and eroticises the gendered drivers of violence.

Consistent with *It's time we talked's* work over the last 17 years, this submission will focus on the need for action to prevent pornography's harms to children and young people. This includes the need for specific action to counter the recent, rapid, pornography-related rise in sexual strangulation among young Australians.

About *It's time we talked*

[*It's time we talked*](#) is an Australia-based violence prevention initiative aiming to prevent pornography's harms to children and young people.

It began in 2009 after one of its founders, [REDACTED], observed the increasing role of online pornography in shaping young people's sexual imaginations, expectations and experiences. At the time, [REDACTED] was a community worker in regional Victoria working with young people on sexual violence prevention, sexual diversity and the prevention of sexually transmissible infections. In schools and community settings, young men in particular spoke of how the pornography they were watching promoted models of relationships and sex that are violent towards women.

Seventeen years later, funded almost entirely through philanthropy and fee-for-service work, *It's time we talked* has:

- developed a range of resources, including education resources for use with young people in schools and other settings, parent education resources, and professional learning resources;
- advocated with governments and the community sector, across Australia and internationally;
- conducted professional learning with thousands of teachers, youth workers, health workers and other professionals in Australia and around the world;
- engaged in public discourse through the production of two documentary films (broadcast in Australia and internationally), written articles, other media appearances, and a social media presence.

It's time we talked is based on best practice violence prevention frameworks and grounded in rigorous academic research. The initiative has also conducted scores of interviews with young people, professionals who work with young people, researchers, and people working in the pornography industry, and the sex work industry more broadly.

The voices of young people – including victim-survivors of sexual violence, young people who identify as LGBTQ+, First Nations young people, young people from other diverse cultural backgrounds, and autistic young people – feature strongly in the work and help to tell the story of how industrial online pornography harms children and young people. We have included some written excerpts from our interviews in this submission.

Understanding pornography

Definition of pornography

In this submission, we define “pornography” as sexually explicit media that are primarily intended to sexually arouse a viewer, which typically include nudity and/or sexual activity (Malamuth, 2001).

Pornography includes a diverse range of material. This submission will focus particularly on the kind of pornography to which most children and young people are exposed: free, widely available “mainstream” online content, the vast majority of which is targeted at a male heterosexual audience. It is content that is largely produced and/or distributed by the global pornography industry. We use the term “industrial online pornography” to foreground this industry connection.

What is contemporary pornography?

Grasping industrial online pornography’s impacts on children and young people and its relationship to gender-based violence requires understanding the nature of the content itself.

Mainstream, contemporary pornography is no longer a naked or semi-naked image in the magazines that marked the advent of the modern commercial pornography industry. Today, pornographic content is a vast array of graphic, moving imagery,

often depicting close-ups of breasts, genitals and sexual activity (Séguin et al., 2018; Tarrant, 2016). It may be pre-recorded or live-streamed (Tarrant, 2016).

Despite what can seem like an immense and diverse assortment of instantly accessible content catering to any sexual taste, curiosity, or proclivity (Ogas & Gaddam, 2011), the most popular, free, online pornography to which many children and most young people are exposed tends repeatedly to depict a range of concerning themes, including:

- **Gendered aggression and degradation:** Various content analyses have found significant levels of aggression – such as spanking, gagging, choking, strangulation, slapping, spitting, hair-pulling and verbal abuse – in the most popular pornography (Carrotte et al., 2020; Fritz et al., 2020; Gorman et al., 2010; Klaassen & Peter, 2015).¹ This aggression is directed overwhelmingly towards women who almost always are depicted as enjoying or being indifferent to the aggression. For example, an analysis of 4,009 heterosexual scenes from two of the most viewed pornography sites found that 35-45% of scenes included physical aggression, women were the targets of that aggression in 97% of incidents, and their responses to aggression were either positive or neutral in 92%-97% of incidents (Fritz et al., 2020).
- **Gender stereotypes and inequality:** Pornography that portrays sex between men and women commonly depicts men as dominant, in control, and aggressive while women are portrayed as subservient to men's desires (Gorman et al., 2010; Klaassen & Peter, 2015). Often inequalities between men and women are reflected and reinforced by age differences, with women much more likely than their male counterparts to be young (Willis et al., 2020). This gender stereotyping and inequality is replicated in gay male pornography through depictions of a dominant, hypermasculine character with a more feminized, submissive character, who, like women, is often also a target of aggression (Burke, 2016; Seida & Shor, 2021; Young, 2017).
- **Non-consent:** Not only does pornography regularly fail to portray any negotiation of sexual consent (Willis et al., 2020), it also commonly depicts overtly non-consensual behaviours (Office of Film and Literature Classification, 2019); that is to say it shows various forms of sexual violence. Sometimes, a lack of consent is key to how a pornographic video is promoted. A UK study analysing the titles of over 131,000 videos from the home pages of the most popular pornography websites found that 1 in 8 titles describes behaviours that constitute sexual violence: for example, forced sex, hidden camera, sex with someone who is asleep or substance-impaired, and incest themes (Vera-Gray et al., 2021). This content may be depicting consenting performers enacting a non-consensual scenario, or it may be footage of a

¹ It is worth noting that across studies there is substantial variation in findings regarding the levels of aggression in pornography. A notable outlier is a study by Australian academic Alan McKee who, because of the definition of 'violence' he used, rendered the aggression in mainstream pornography almost invisible. McKee found violence in only 2% of scenes; vastly lower than other analyses. McKee, A. (2005). The objectification of women in mainstream pornographic videos in Australia. *Journal of Sex Research*, 42(4), 277-290.

sexual assault (Kristof, 2020) – and this difference can be difficult, if not impossible, for viewers to distinguish. But whatever a video’s origin, these themes reflect how mainstream pornography sites endorse sexual violence.

- **Incest or ‘family’ themes:** The most popular, mainstream pornographic content often portrays sex between family members, including between parents and children, and between siblings. For example, one study found incest or ‘family’ themes in 46 per cent of the most popular pornography videos (Office of Film and Literature Classification, 2019) and another found incest themes in 11 per cent of pornography video titles (Vera-Gray et al., 2021). The easy accessibility and sheer volume of incest-themed content, and the ways it is depicted, suggest that sex with a family member is normal, sexy and funny. It certainly does not convey how profoundly harmful incest is.
- **Childlike themes:** Mainstream pornography often includes content depicting sex with someone who is, or appears to be, very young. This may be content produced with young adult performers who have been dressed or groomed to appear young, for example, by wearing school uniforms or children’s pyjamas, or by playing roles that emphasise their youthfulness, such as a young babysitter or schoolgirl (Dines, 2009; Jensen, 2010; Peters et al., 2014). The language used in pornography also highlights the prevalence and popularity of content featuring young performers. “Teen” is a prominent category on mainstream pornography sites. “Teen” is also the most common word in pornography titles (Vera-Gray et al., 2021), and is routinely listed as among the most searched terms (Miller & McBain, 2022; Pornhub, 2019). It can be very difficult for viewers to assess accurately the age of those depicted in online pornography and it is important to note that despite its illegality, in addition to childlike portrayals of young adults, child sexual abuse material may also be found on mainstream pornography sites (Kristof, 2020).
- **Racism:** Most performers in mainstream industrial pornography are white, and those who are not are often referred to by their ethnicity and depicted as adhering to racist stereotypes such as an aggressive Black man or a submissive Asian woman (Miller & McBain, 2022; Willis et al., 2020; Zhou & Paul, 2016).

The prevalence of these themes is not accidental. Rather, the content that is available for free on mainstream pornography aggregator sites is carefully curated to attract and maintain viewers’ attention because, like other parts of the online ecosystem (Zuboff, 2019), the pornography industry profits from viewer engagement. The online pornography industry maximises viewer retention through the use of bots and sophisticated algorithms to direct viewers to novel and often more extreme content (Johnson, 2020). The result is the production and promotion of content that reflects and reinforces inequalities and, often, violence (Bridges, 2019; Johnson, 2020).

Much of what is conveyed through mainstream contemporary pornographic content is contrary to the principles that underpin healthy relationships and sexuality – such as respect, equality, safety and consent.

*"They want to see screaming and yelling and very hard f*cking and sweating and just like, you know, you have to destroy the girl."* [REDACTED], **pornography performer**

"That's why rough sex and strong sex work: because it's incredible to look at. As human beings we want to see stuff like that." [REDACTED], **pornography director/producer**

"It's certainly very common to see some sort of violence, whether it's physical or just verbal violence. And it's portrayed as really sexy." **Young man, aged 24**

"Effectively, anything that is illegal in real life, any person that it would be illegal for you to have sex with in real life, there's a whole porn category about it." **Young woman, aged 24**

Children and young people's exposure to pornography

Most Australian children are exposed to pornographic content by the age of 15, with many first seeing it when they are considerably younger (Crabbe et al., 2024; eSafety Commissioner, 2023a). A national study of 15-20 year old Australians found that almost half of boys have seen pornography by the age of 13 and almost half of girls have seen it by the age of 15 (Crabbe et al., 2024).

For years, children and young people have been able to access online pornographic content easily, freely and anonymously through the kinds of internet-enabled devices commonly used by children, including phones, tablets, computers, and gaming devices (eSafety Commissioner, 2023a).

"On your phone, laptops whatever's got internet you can find porn on there." **Young man, aged 18**

"I ended up finding out what porn was through this game." **Young woman, aged 20**

Although children of any gender or age may see pornographic content unintentionally or deliberately, most children's first exposure to pornography is unintentional: through an accidental encounter or when they are shown or sent pornography without their permission (eSafety Commissioner, 2023a; Henry & Talbot, 2019; Martellozzo et al., 2016; Tsaliki, 2011).

"Even when you're not looking for it you find it on the internet." **Young man, aged 18**

Children are more likely to seek out pornography actively as they grow into adolescence (eSafety Commissioner, 2023a). Children and young people seek out pornography for a range of reasons, including because they are curious, for sexual arousal, to learn about what may be expected of them during sex, due to pressure from peers, for entertainment, to address boredom, and for sexual exploration (de Souza, 2023; eSafety Commissioner, 2023a; Horvath et al., 2013).

Boys and young men are more likely than girls and young women to see pornography both intentionally and accidentally, and to view it more often (Andrie et

al., 2021; Crabbe et al., 2024; de Souza, 2023; eSafety Commissioner, 2023a; Horvath et al., 2013; Martellozzo et al., 2016). Significant numbers of young men in particular report viewing pornography frequently. In an Australian study of 15-20 year olds, over half (54 per cent) of young men reported viewing pornography weekly or more often and one in six (16 per cent) reported viewing it daily (Crabbe et al., 2024). This contrasts with 14 per cent of young women reporting weekly viewing and 1 per cent reporting daily viewing.

Children's perceptions of pornography also tend to be highly gendered, with boys and young men much more likely than girls and young women to report feeling positive about pornography (Flood, 2010; Horvath et al., 2013). Although children of any gender or age may find pornographic content upsetting, confusing or distressing, girls and younger children are more likely than boys and older children to report feeling upset by the pornography they have seen (Smahel et al., 2020).

*"Some of the things you can find on the internet are disgusting and horrible and just something that you feel like no human would want." **Young woman, aged 16***

*"I remember I couldn't get it out of my head, and I was upset for a while and yeah I remember I was quite distressed by it." **Young man, aged 16***

Highly compact and mobile technology has enabled children to access pornography anywhere, including at home, school, the home of a friend or partner, or on public or private transport (eSafety Commissioner, 2023a). The most common context for seeing pornography is alone and at home (Crabbe et al., 2024; eSafety Commissioner, 2023a; Horvath et al., 2013).

Children may be exposed to pornographic content through a dedicated pornography site – including any of the highly-ranking pornography aggregator sites that have, at least until recently, provided access to a plethora of free sexually explicit content with almost no warnings or barriers designed to limit or prevent children's access. But they also may be exposed through the feed or messaging functions of social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Facebook or X (formerly Twitter), or via a search engine, video chat website, gaming site or text message, or being shown by someone else (de Souza, 2023; eSafety Commissioner, 2023a).

Pornography has become a default sexuality educator

As noted above, much of what is conveyed through mainstream contemporary pornography is contrary to the principles that underpin healthy relationships and sexuality. Yet for many children and young people, pornography has become a default sexuality educator. It is shaping their sexual imaginations, understandings, expectations and experiences, with significant consequences for their wellbeing and the wellbeing of their partners.

On average, Australian young men see pornography 3 years before their first partnered sexual experience, and young women see it 2 years before theirs (Crabbe et al., 2024). Often, they see pornography before they have kissed or touched the skin of an intimate partner. As such, pornography's shaping of arousal patterns and

of sexual understandings often is occurring without the kind of counter-reference points they may develop from interpersonal sexual experiences.

In research from around the world, young people report that pornography has impacted on their and others' sexual attitudes and behaviours (de Souza, 2023; Doornwaard et al., 2017; Häggström-Nordin et al., 2009; Martellozzo et al., 2016; Mattebo et al., 2012; Office of Film and Literature Classification, 2018; Our Watch, 2020; Robb & Mann, 2023; Tydén & Rogala, 2004).

*"When boys start having sex, they imagine porn and like everything that goes on in porn." **Young woman, aged 20***

*"Most people find their education on sex and relationships through porn." **Young man, aged 18***

*"Most people, most men especially, but also a lot of women, their first sexual experience is watching porn. And if it's not watching porn, it's probably having sex with someone who has watched porn." **Young woman, aged 22***

Young people often convey an awareness that pornography's depictions are unrealistic or unhealthy and express some concerns about how it might shape some people's expectations of bodies, gender roles and sex (Doornwaard et al., 2017; Office of Film and Literature Classification, 2018; Our Watch, 2020; Smith, 2013). However, while users' accounts of pornography's impacts on them provide important insights into their perceptions and experiences, users' self-reflections should not be viewed as the final answer to the question of pornography's effects (Crabbe & Flood, 2021).

It can be difficult to separate pornography's potential impacts on children and young people from other influences that shape their understandings and experiences. Families, peers, cultural context and broader society, and other forms of media such as social media, television, films, video games and advertising, play a role in children and young people's development (eSafety Commissioner, 2023b). Pornography can also impact these other influences, leading to a scenario in which pornography's gendered scripts are reinforced through multiple contexts. For example, a young person may see sexual strangulation in pornography as well as on social media and television programs, and hear about it in conversations with peers, with the effect of it seeming a "normal" part of sex.

Further, pornography does not impact on all children and young people in the same ways and to the same extent: a range of risk and protective factors influence the nature and extent of pornography's impacts (Wright, 2014).

Notwithstanding this complexity, there is evidence that contemporary pornography is impacting on children and young people in a range of ways. While some claim that pornography doesn't harm children (McKee, 2010), or focus on the potential for it to contribute positively to young people's sexual socialisation and experiences (Attwood et al., 2018; McKee et al., 2008), such positions downplay important negative influences, particularly concerning gendered inequalities and violence

(Antevska & Gavey, 2015) and ignores a wide body of research that demonstrates pornography's association with a range of gendered harms.

Pornography's connections to gendered violence

A large and growing body of research and practice evidence elucidates pornography's relationship to gendered violence, including sexual violence, and the attitudes that underpin these forms of violence. There are some variations in findings,² gaps in the research, and limitations on what can be concluded from some research methodologies. However, notwithstanding these limitations, there is compelling evidence that pornography is associated with, and contributes to, a range of gendered harms, including:

- **Gender stereotypical and sexist beliefs:** Pornography use is predictive of more sexualized, sexually objectifying and stereotypic gender views of women (Brown & L'Engle, 2009; Hald et al., 2013; Peter & Valkenburg, 2010, 2011; Wright & Bae, 2015; Wright & Funk, 2014). Young women in particular often report concerns about pornography's depictions of gender stereotypes and how these impact on expectations that women's role is subservience to men and that there is an obligation on women to prioritise men's pleasure in sexual encounters (Ashton et al., 2019; de Souza, 2023; Litsou et al., 2020; Mattebo et al., 2012; Rothman et al., 2015; Tholander et al., 2022). Young women's concerns that their male partners have transferred the objectification of women in pornography on to them are supported by a significant body of research that finds repeated exposure to pornography is related to viewing women as sex objects, including among adolescents (Omori et al., 2011; Peter & Valkenburg, 2009; Ward et al., 2015; Wright & Tokunaga, 2016).
- **Risky sexual behaviours:** Pornography use is associated with risky sexual behaviours (Lim et al., 2017), including sexual strangulation (Wright et al., 2021), discussed in more detail below.
- **Violence-supportive attitudes:** Pornography use is associated with a range of violence-supportive attitudes, including rape myth acceptance, hostile sexist attitudes towards girls and women, and a higher tolerance for violence against women and girls (Borgogna et al., 2022; Hedrick, 2021).
- **Violent behaviours:** Pornography use is also associated with, and predictive of, violent behaviours (Malamuth et al., 2000; Wright et al., 2015). For example, several longitudinal studies among adolescents have found that pornography consumption predicts aggressive behaviour over time, including sexual harassment, sexual assault, coercive sex and rape (Brown & L'Engle, 2009; Dawson et al., 2019; Waterman et al., 2022; Ybarra et al., 2011; Ybarra & Thompson, 2018). Other studies have found associations between

² See Wright 2021 and Wright et al 2023 for discussion of why a tendency among pornography researchers to "over-control" for third variables may lead to null results and account for some of the variations in pornography effects research. Wright, P. J. (2021). Overcontrol in pornography research: Let it go, let it go.... *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 50(2), 387-392. , Wright, P. J., Tokunaga, R. S., & Herbenick, D. (2023). Model specification in media effects research. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 52(8), 3181-3188.

pornography use and teen dating violence (Huntington et al., 2022; Rostad et al., 2019), unwanted online sexual solicitation perpetration (Chang et al., 2016), electronic sexual coercion perpetration (Thulin et al., 2023), sexual harassment (Kennair & Bendixen, 2012), and sexual violence (Bonino et al., 2006; D'Abreu & Krahé, 2014; Huntington et al., 2022; Stanley et al., 2018).

- **Viewing child sexual abuse material:** Early, frequent exposure to (adult) pornography is associated with a higher likelihood of viewing child sexual abuse material (CSAM) (Napier et al., 2024; Seto et al., 2015). Most people who have seen CSAM are male and first see it as minors, intentionally or accidentally, and accidental exposure while seeking adult pornography is a common pathway to first CSAM exposure (Napier et al., 2025).
- **Dating and sexual violence victimisation:** Pornography use is associated with violence victimisation, including dating and sexual violence victimisation (Bonino et al., 2006; Huntington et al., 2022; Rothman & Adhia, 2016). One study of young women found this association was strongest among young women who were first exposed to pornography unintentionally and at a younger age (Harsey et al., 2021). Others found the connection is also present among boys (Rostad et al., 2019), including boys who have themselves engaged in harmful sexual behaviour (Thomsen et al., 2025).

Pornography's influence has very practical implications for children and young people's experiences of sexual and gendered violence. We would like to highlight two related emerging themes in the research and practice evidence that illustrate something of the scale and nature of pornography's contributions to gendered harm.

The normalisation of 'rough', coerced and painful sexual scripts

Research from around the world suggests that pornography's gendered and often aggressive portrayals have become a significant influence on boys' and young men's sexual scripts – and on the cultural contexts in which young people are navigating their sexuality (Gavey, 2025) – contributing to unpleasant, violent, coerced and/or painful experiences for their female sexual partners (Faustino & Gavey, 2022; Gavey & Brewster, 2025; Marston & Lewis, 2014; Rothman et al., 2015; Vera Cruz & Sheridan, 2022). These include experiences of slapping, spitting, “face-fucking,” coerced anal sex, and sexual strangulation. In our own interviews, young people – and young women in particular – repeatedly report that pornography is impacting negatively on their experiences of sex and relationships.

*“My boyfriend when I was 16 wanted to watch pornography with me and I initially found that quite alarming...It parlayed into him slapping me or pushing me really aggressively against walls with a hand on my throat... I definitely picked up the idea that I should be submissive to that.” **Young woman, aged 24***

*“There's a normalisation of sex acts that push beyond people's limits.” **Young woman, aged 23***

“Like if you're not okay with being choked and slapped – and these are considered standard sexual acts – that's something that I then think puts a lot of women in that

*position where if they're not comfortable with those certain things, they're not necessarily totally open about saying that because they don't want to seem like a prude or they don't want to seem like they're boring." **Young woman, aged 22***

Pornography eroticises the gendered drivers of violence against women through its promotion of male sexual aggression, dominance and entitlement and female sexual subservience, and we can see this in action in its shaping of young people's sexual realities. The recent, rapid rise in sexual strangulation is a particularly concerning reflection of this phenomenon, discussed in more detail as a separate case study below.

The rise in sexual harm committed by children and young people

In Australia, children and young people are now the most common perpetrators of child sexual abuse (Mathews et al., 2024). There is evidence that pornography is a significant contributing factor in an increase in harmful sexual behaviour committed by children and young people against other children and young people, both within Australia and around the world (Gerhard-Burnham et al., 2016; McKibbin, Green, et al., 2024; McKibbin et al., 2017; Mori et al., 2023; Sandvik et al., 2017). There is a change in both the pattern of harmful sexual behaviours (for example, a decrease in the time between first experimenting with harmful sexual behaviours and engaging in penetrative acts) and in the factors influencing the child practicing it. Whereas previously children displaying harmful sexual behaviours often were mimicking abuse they themselves had suffered, there is increasing evidence that children without those experiences of abuse are engaging in harmful sexual behaviours as a result of the pornography they have seen. When we interviewed Professor Simon Hackett, a global expert in harmful sexual behaviours based in the UK, he explained that:

*"Reports around children's harmful sexual behaviours have exploded over the past few years. It's clear, from the reports about those children and young people, that exposure to pornography is a key driver of that behaviour and accounts for a significant proportion of the increase in the referral rates that we're seeing." **Professor Simon Hackett***

Sexual strangulation: A case study of pornography's contribution to gendered inequality and violence

As discussed, mainstream pornography regularly portrays gendered inequality, gender stereotypes, non-consensual behaviour and aggression. It has also become a key educator, shaping sexual norms. One of the ways in which this is evident is the rise in prevalence and acceptance of sexual strangulation.

The rise in sexual strangulation

Over nearly two decades *It's time we talked* has interviewed hundreds of young people about their experiences of pornography and its influence. In recent years, we noticed young people speaking about sexual strangulation as a normative part of their sexual encounters.

*“There’s definitely violent practices like choking and slapping which are almost seen as vanilla now, especially choking. Choking is very mainstream.” **Young woman, aged 18***

*“We’ve accepted that in sexual encounters it’ll probably happen. They won’t ask first.” **Young woman, aged 18***

These observations are consistent with an emerging body of academic literature which has found that:

- Sexual strangulation is much more common among young people than any other age group (Herbenick et al., 2025).
- It is most often done by men to women, and it is common among sexual and gender minorities (Sharman et al., 2025).
- More than half of young women have been strangled during sex, mostly by their male partners (Herbenick, Patterson, et al., 2021; Sharman et al., 2025).
- While men are less likely than women to be strangled during sex, men who are gay or bisexual are more likely than heterosexual men to have been on the receiving end of strangulation (Herbenick, Fu, et al., 2021; Sharman et al., 2025).
- While women are less likely than men to strangle a partner during sex, lesbian and bisexual women are more likely than heterosexual women to have done so (Sharman et al., 2025).
- Some research indicates that sexual strangulation is particularly common among transgender and non-binary people – both as the person strangling and the one being strangled (Sharman et al., 2025).

Although there are significant gaps in the research, including, for example, the gender and power dynamics of strangulation within gay and lesbian sexual interactions, it is clear that sexual strangulation is a very gendered practice.

What is sexual strangulation?

Many people use the word “choking” when talking about sexual strangulation, but this is technically inaccurate. Choking occurs when something blocks a person’s airway from *inside* the throat (like food) and impacts on their ability to breathe. Strangulation, on the other hand, occurs when pressure is applied to the *outside* of someone’s neck (with hands, arms, or objects such as clothing, belts or ropes, for example), impacting their breathing and/or blood flow. Although some sexual acts do involve choking – including the forceful insertion of a penis or hand in someone’s throat – our focus here is the rapid, recent rise in sexual strangulation.

Strangulation is inherently dangerous

Strangulation can have a range of immediate, short-term and long-term effects which range from mild to severe and life-threatening.

The neck is a fragile part of the body containing structures that are critical for survival. Strangulation can cut off oxygen supply to the brain with only a very small amount of pressure.

Brains need a steady supply of oxygen meaning that restricting blood flow or breathing for even a short period can have devastating effects. Many effects – even very serious ones – are not visible. Some may not be noticeable until a considerable time after the event, which may mean that people do not connect them directly to experiences of strangulation. There is a wide range of potential consequences during or after strangulation including:

- Fear, panic and/or a trauma response
- Difficulty speaking, breathing, thinking and making decisions
- Neck pain
- Feel faintness or dizziness
- Loss of consciousness
- Loss of bladder and bowel control
- Seizures
- Memory loss
- Confusion, and concentration and other cognitive difficulties
- Anxiety, depression
- Strokes, miscarriage, death.

It's time we talked has interviewed a range of medical experts about sexual strangulation. They say that there is no safe way to strangle.

"There's no safe way to be strangled. It's so unpredictable because the structures in the neck are so critical and there's so much variability between people that we can't predict the point at which damage occurs. So, there's no safe way to strangle someone." [REDACTED], **Forensic medical practitioner, Canberra Hospital**

"It doesn't have to be a severe fatal or near fatal exposure [to strangulation]. Mild exposure incurring repetitively over time can be worse than just one strong effect because you don't give the brain enough time to heal. That will take its course into a more degenerative condition." [REDACTED], **Clinical neuroscientist, Indiana University**

Research correlates strangulation with negative impacts to both brain function and structure (Huibregtse et al., 2022).

Pornography as key to sexual strangulation's normalisation

Young people themselves and the academic literature suggest that online pornography has been the most significant influence on this cultural shift of sexual strangulation into the mainstream.

"Because that's what they're seeing in porn, [they think] 'Okay, I see rough positions, she must like that. I see choking, she must like that.'" **Young woman, aged 22**

"Strangulation is really common in porn." **Young woman, aged 20**

"Strangulation and choking are something that presents in gay porn. It's one of the elements of the broader themes of domination and submission in the sexual script of porn." **Young man, aged 24**

At the same time that pornography has become an increasing presence within culture, including a dominant influence on sexual culture, research indicates there is more strangulation shown in mainstream pornography now than there used to be. According to one study comparing the content in the most popular pornography across the two and a half decades to 2024, sexual strangulation has gone from almost non-existent to featuring in 15% of scenes (Shor & Liu, 2025).

This combination of an increase in the prevalence of sexual strangulation in pornography and the ubiquity of pornography as part of our online and sexual worlds has meant that the pornography industry has become the most important promoter and information source – or the major sponsor – of sexual strangulation. Pornography is the most common way young people first come across sexual strangulation as well as being the most significant source of information and depictions of sexual strangulation (Sharman et al., 2025).

*“I think it's about mirroring porn, and sort of just doing what we were taught to do, through avenues like porn and chatting with friends, about probably what they've picked up through porn as well.” **Young woman, aged 24***

Strangulation and relationship violence

It is impossible to ignore the way the gendered patterns in sexual strangulation mimic the reality of relationship violence – where it is mostly men using violence against women – and the role strangulation plays in these contexts.

Medical experts and frontline family violence workers say strangulation is a major red flag in relationships. It is often used by perpetrators to exert control and silence their partner, and sometimes to kill them. It is also a strong predictor of future violence, serious injury or even homicide in intimate partner relationships (Zilkens et al., 2016).

*“We know that it's an indicator of lethality and we ask about it when we do our risk assessments for high-risk situations. The American data shows that you're 7.5 times more likely to be murdered by your violent partner if they have already attempted to strangle you and predominantly it's women who are victims of these homicides. The New South Wales data, for example, backs that up; in the DV (Domestic Violence) death review stats you can see that in a quarter to a third of all completed domestic violence homicides the abuser had previously strangled the victim prior to the fatal assault. So, it's a lethality indicator, it's a red flag so we should do something about it.” [REDACTED], **Domestic and Family Violence specialist social worker***

Many young people are also concerned about this connection.

*“I don't understand how you can put a bed beneath someone while they're doing something, and say, 'That's hot.' But then, take the bed out, and they're doing the exact same behaviour, and it's like, really problematic and cause for concern in a relationship.” **Young woman, aged 24***

In response to the rapid, recent rise in sexual strangulation, *It's time we talked* developed the [Breathless campaign](#), to build awareness of its harms.

Pornography's impacts on minority groups

One of the common arguments for young people's access to pornography is a claim that it is an important source of information for some groups, particularly minority groups – with the implication that any benefits pornography provides for these minority groups outweigh its detrimental impacts. Such a position seems to assume that these groups either are watching pornography that is absent depictions of the violence and inequalities that are so common in mainstream pornography, or that they are somehow more immune to its harms. There is limited research investigating the ways pornography's influence may be experienced differently by different groups, but existing literature and anecdotal evidence indicate that its influence may be amplified for some already vulnerable or marginalised groups and may contribute to experiences of violence perpetration and/or victimisation.

LGBTQ+ young people

For gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans and queer young people, pornography can take on another layer of significance compared with the experiences of cisgender heterosexual young people.

Growing up in contexts in which same sex and trans desire and relationships often are relatively invisible – and often also viewed negatively – many LGBTQ+ young people describe pornography as providing a space in which their sexuality or gender identity is represented. They often note, and lament, the absence of access to relevant information in relationships and sexuality education – at school, home, among their peers, and in other forms of media (Arrington-Sanders et al., 2015; Harvey, 2020). This contrasts with pornography, where young people can easily and anonymously access content that, to some extent, portrays their sexual and gender identity openly and in explicit and intricate detail (Arrington-Sanders et al., 2015).

As such, pornography can play a significant role in a young person's exploring their sexual or gender identity – which likely contributes to why, on average, young people from sexual and gender minorities first see pornography younger than other young people and also consume it at higher rates (Bóthe et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2020; Robb & Mann, 2023).

Young people often describe using pornography as a means of self-discovery, exploration, and for determining their interests and attractions (Arrington-Sanders et al., 2015; Bóthe et al., 2019; Harvey, 2020; McCormack & Wignall, 2017; Widman et al., 2021). Some young people report being shown heterosexual pornography by family members aiming to encourage interest in heterosexuality and discourage same-sex sexuality (Arrington-Sanders et al., 2015).

Young people talk about learning from pornography and re-enacting what they've seen (Arrington-Sanders et al., 2015; Harvey, 2020). In various studies, LGBTQ+ young people describe how they have used pornography to learn about sexual roles, the mechanics of sex, sexual performance scripts such as what sounds they should make, sexual activities and techniques, and models for how sex should feel (Harvey, 2020; McCormack and Wignall, 2017; Arrington-Sanders et al., 2015).

They often express concerns about the unrealistic nature of the depictions, and the pressure this can create (Harvey, 2020). They also report that it does not reflect their experiences and practices (Harvey 2020). Some describe how LGBTQ+ pornography's reproduction of heterosexual norms left them feeling confused, "wrong" or "dirty" (Harvey, 2020, p45; McCormack and Wignall, 2017). Young gay men often report that the gender stereotypes commonly depicted in gay male pornography create expectations or demands for them to conform to one or the other of these roles and left them feeling limited and vulnerable.

"I think what young gay men are learning is you've got to have sex like this. It's got to be rough. It's got to be with a daddy or whatever." **Young man, aged 27**

"Those types of porn categories do influence what you seek out in sex." **Young man, aged 24**

"I'm constantly asked this question, I'm constantly evaluated on that question, 'Are you a top or a bottom.' Because people will make assumptions about what's going to happen and who's going to be the one in power." **Young man, aged 27**

Similarly, the limited ways in which trans people are represented in pornography and the levels of aggression directed towards them, can impact negatively not only on a trans person's own sense of self, but also how they are perceived and expected to be by others (Zoe Belle Gender Collective, 2021).

"I didn't feel great about myself after watching it... It gives the impression like 'Oh, this is how people see you or will see and treat you if you were like ever to get close to someone. Or even just from a stranger on the street, like this is how the world views you." **Young trans woman, aged 20**

First Nations and CALD young people

There are numerous ways in which pornography's influence may be amplified for First Nations and culturally and linguistically diverse young people, including if they have limited access to relationships and sexuality education that is tailored to their cultural contexts and needs. They also may be particularly impacted by the racism in pornography.

As discussed, pornography commonly depicts racist stereotypes. There is also evidence that the ethnicity of performers is a factor in determining the porn that young people seek out (Rothman et al, 2015; Arrington-Sanders et al, 2015).

If young people seek out pornography with performers with whom they feel better able to identify, then young people from ethnic groups that are fetishized and stereotyped in pornography are more likely to be exposed to those depictions. And sexual script theory (Gagnon & Simon, 2005) suggests that this will increase the likelihood of them being influenced by these portrayals.

Some young people report that pornography's racist stereotypes make them feel self-conscious, disgusted or victimised (Robb and Mann, 2023, p22). Young people

we have interviewed also describe how pornography's racism impacts on them through their own exposure to it, but also through its impacts on others.

*"It kind of creates this illusion that you have to be like this if you're this specific colour and you have to be like that if you're that specific colour." **Young man, aged 18***

*"White men have this like fetish for small Asian women, and they think that they're like docile and submissive. It's called 'yellow fever.' That's what people call it." **Young woman, aged 18***

*"It feels diminishing to be fetishized." **Young woman, aged 19***

Neurodivergent young people

Autistic young people are significantly overrepresented among young people who have engaged in harmful sexual behaviour. There is widespread concern among the therapists and other practitioners who work with autistic young people that pornography's influence is contributing to this phenomenon and to an increased risk of sexual victimisation (Attwood et al., 2014; Crabbe & Lawson, 2024; McKibbin, Humphreys, et al., 2024; Palermo & Bogaerts, 2017).

Several factors can amplify pornography's impacts on autistic young people, including a tendency towards literal interpretations (including of media), lack of access to age and developmentally appropriate sexuality education, challenges interpreting facial and body cues, pressure to keep up with peers, and, for many, an elevated comfort using technology which, combined with challenges with social interactions, can lead to extended periods spent online. Autistic people's [monotropic cognitive style](#) can also interact with the "attention economy" business model of online pornography to make them more susceptible to developing compulsive patterns of pornography use that negatively impact their engagement with school, work, sleep and relationships.

*"That was the hard bit trying to refrain from those videos because wherever you go on your phone it will always come up like out of nowhere because it's just trying to grab your attention and bring you back to that stage again... Every time I saw videos like that it just really triggered my mind." **Autistic young man, aged 28***

*"I work with young people who are masturbating five or six times a day. And good on you, if you can masturbate five or six times a day and ejaculate, that's great except, this is impacting on their lives. They can't leave the house because they've got to wank to porn five or six times a day. They're losing friends. They can't go to work. And they're suffering. They're really, really suffering through this." [REDACTED], **sexologist and counsellor***

These factors may also be relevant for young people with other forms of neurodivergence, such as ADHD.

Pornography's impacts on autistic young people are discussed in more detail in the resources developed through the [Porn Is Not the Norm](#) project (see below for more information).

Opportunities for preventative action

Preventing pornography's harms to children and young people requires multiple, complementary strategies with contributions from a range of stakeholders – including governments, the technology sector, the pornography industry, researchers, parents, educators, and other professionals who work with children, young people and their families (eSafety Commissioner, 2023b). Strategies fall into two, broad, complementary approaches:

- **Prevent or limit exposure and access** – through ‘upstream’ strategies such as laws and regulations requiring effective age assurance mechanisms and safety-by-design, and ‘downstream’ methods such as the use of technical solutions like content filters and parental controls, and supervision and limits on children’s technology access.
- **Build resilience to limit harms when exposure occurs** – supporting children and young people to develop the knowledge, attitudes, skills and behaviours that can help minimise pornography’s negative effects and promote their wellbeing.

In practice, this requires:

1. **Legislation and regulation:** Enforcing existing laws and regulations, and where necessary, developing new ones to prevent children and young people from being exposed to pornography that routinely portrays inequality and aggression. Pornography producers and distributors, social media companies and other elements of the online ecosystem need to be held responsible for the material they create and/or distribute. This is the most important thing that governments can do. While significant progress has been made – and *It’s time we talked* commends the Australian Government for its leadership on efforts to prevent the pornography industry’s reach into children and young people’s lives – there remains a huge amount of work to do. The success of Australia’s existing efforts will depend significantly on industries’ compliance and therefore on whether the eSafety Commissioner has the tools required for effective enforcement. Australia could also learn from the UK’s recent legislation banning pornography with depictions of [strangulation, suffocation, incest and adults roleplaying as children](#) and the Council of Europe’s recent [resolution on violent pornography](#).
2. **Building understanding and capacity:** Promoting understanding of the issues and the skills to address them across the community – including among parents and carers, professionals who work with children and young people and their families, and policy makers. This includes, for example:
 - a. Developing and disseminating information for parents and carers
 - b. Workforce development across a range of sectors, including government and non-government workforces.

These are challenging and sensitive issues and building the knowledge, comfort, confidence and capacity of the adults in children and young people's lives is critical for effective action. Again, important progress has already been made on this action, but there is much more to do. Promoting an awareness of the issues across the community should include challenging the narratives that undermine action to prevent pornography's harms to children and young people (see below) as well as promoting cultures that reject inequality and violence and that instead embrace equality, respect and safety. Such awareness also helps to create an enabling or authorising environment in which governments are supported to regulate appropriately in the best interests of children and young people.

3. **Education for children and young people:** Developing and implementing age-appropriate, whole of school and community education for children and young people that addresses pornography – and other real-world influences that shape young people's sexual understandings and experiences, including social media, and their partners and peers – as part of relationships and sexuality education. We cannot expect young people to evaluate pornography's depictions and influence critically if we do not support them to develop the relevant skills (Crabbe & Flood, 2021). Currently, there is enormous variation in the quantity and quality of relationships and sexuality education delivered around Australia, including delivery of content addressing pornography's influence, with inconsistencies between states, territories and educational sectors, and within them, and between and within individual schools. The Federal Government can play an important role in ensuring all Australian children and young people have equitable access to the education they need to navigate healthy, respectful relationships.
4. **Support for victim-survivors:** Providing appropriate support for victim-survivors of pornography-related harms, including health care, counselling services and safety planning.
5. **Access to expert treatment:** Providing expert treatment and support for those who have engaged in pornography-related harm against others, including children and young people whose pornography exposure has played a role in them engaging in harmful sexual behaviour.
6. **Ongoing research:** All of this needs to be underpinned by ongoing, high-quality research into prevalence, drivers, patterns, harms, risk and protective factors, effective responses, and emerging technologies and concerns. Contrary to some academic studies, such research must be based on credible frameworks and involve rigorous and ethical methodologies.

CASE STUDY: Sexual strangulation opportunities for prevention

The above points need to be applied urgently to the rise in pornography-inspired sexual strangulation. In particular:

1. **Prevent the promotion of sexual strangulation:** Content promoting strangulation, including 'how to' content (i.e. misinformation about how to

strangle ‘correctly’ or ‘safely’), should be banned. This includes content distributed on social media, dating apps, and within pornography. Heavy penalties, including criminal liability for company officials whose companies fail to comply, should be enforced (recognising that financial and other commercial penalties are inadequate when profits are so large that fines lose their deterrence value).

2. **Build workforce capacity:** A workforce development package to build understanding and response capacity about sexual strangulation should be rolled out across a wide variety of sectors including, for example, education, health, violence prevention and response, and law enforcement including police, courts and coroners.
3. **Public campaign:** A [public education campaign](#) directed at young people should be expanded.
4. **Education:** Sexual strangulation should be incorporated, in age and context appropriate ways, in school-based relationships and sexuality education programs.
5. **Equip parents and carers:** Information for parents and carers should be developed and disseminated.
6. **Research:** Ongoing research to understand the issues better and to drive effective prevention responses should be undertaken.

Challenges that can undermine action

While there is a growing understanding of the role of pornography as a contributor to gender-based violence, including peer-to-peer sexual harm among children and young people, ongoing challenges to efforts to prevent pornography’s harms to children and young people remain. These challenges include:

- A commonly held misconception, promoted by the pornography industry and its proponents, that pornography is harmless fantasy;
- Assertions by some researchers and industry advocates that there is not compelling evidence of pornography’s harms to children and young people;
- Mis- and disinformation online about the apparent safety of some of the practices, such as sexual strangulation, promoted through mainstream pornography;
- Efforts by some researchers and activists to downplay the inequality and aggression in the free, mainstream pornography that many children and most young people are exposed to (including incest and child-themed content), instead emphasising pornography’s so-called ‘diversity’ and its catering to different sexual preferences;
- Efforts by some researchers and activists to downplay or dispute the academic and practice evidence of pornography’s harms to children and young people;

- Promotion by industry advocates and some researchers that any critique of mainstream pornography and its contributions to sexual harm is ‘shaming’ industry participants, sex workers, LGBTIQ+ people and/or pornography consumers, and efforts by industry to deplatform or silence critics on this basis;
- Research with young people using poor conceptual frameworks and methodologies that obscure pornography’s negative impacts on young people;
- Fear on the part of some across a range of sectors, including within the prevention/response sectors, that criticism of mainstream pornography is inconsistent with sex positivity, or support for sex workers’ right to be safe at work.

***It’s time we talked’s* resources**

It’s time we talked has developed a range of resources to support parents, carers and a wide range of professionals to prevent the harms associated with children and young people’s exposure and access to online industrial pornography.

Most of *It’s time we talked’s* resources focus specifically on equipping the adults in children and young people’s lives to understand and address pornography’s influence. The resources to support a ‘general’ audience can be found [here](#). These resources include [parent tip sheets](#), a variety of [professional learning resources](#), and [a secondary school package](#) with a 480-page manual which articulates a whole school approach, and incorporates curriculum, policy, and other support materials.

The [Porn is Not the Norm](#) project includes resources for use with parents, teachers, and other professionals to support them to navigate online pornography’s harms with the autistic young people in their lives. *Porn Is Not the Norm* was developed with autistic autism expert, [REDACTED]. We also conducted interviews with autistic young people. The *Porn Is Not the Norm* project was a response to the overrepresentation of autistic young people in cases of harmful sexual behavior and the link between this and their exposure to and consumption of online pornography. The resources include [professional learning](#), [parent education](#), [parent tip sheets](#), and [a resource package](#) with activities for use with autistic young people.

It’s time we talked has also worked with local communities to develop resources that are tailored to their particular contexts and take a broader approach to gender-based violence prevention and media literacy education. In these resources, pornography is only one of several themes explored. For example, we developed a resource package called [Talking Respect](#) in collaboration with services and young people in the Northern Territory. The *Talking Respect* resources address themes such as social media, healthy relationships, relationship violence, sexual pressure and consent, gender stereotypes and jealousy, as well as pornography. The broader themes all connect with the issue of pornography and provide a suitable context for discussion of the more challenging themes.

It's time we talked developed the [Breathless](#) campaign to:

- raise awareness about the prevalence and risks of sexual strangulation;
- support critical thinking about the influences – such as pornography and social media – that promote it;
- make it easier for young people to access information from more reputable and trustworthy sources; and
- encourage informed conversations about strangulation – and about safety, respect, equality, mutual pleasure and consent.

The campaign [website](#) and social media presence include videos with young people, victim-survivors and experts. A series of free, downloadable [information sheets](#) is also available via the website.

Conclusion

Gender-based violence is arguably the most far-reaching public health issue in Australia, impacting across social, economic, cultural, age, ability, and sexuality characteristics. *It's time we talked* commends the Federal Government on its efforts to confront this complex, multifaceted and long-term issue.

One of the factors contributing to the ongoing scourge of gendered violence is its eroticisation in easily accessible mainstream pornography. We encourage the Government to redouble its efforts to prevent the online pornography industry, including the range of actors within the 'digital stack,' (eSafety Commissioner, 2023b) from peddling eroticised violence to Australian children and young people, and to fund efforts to equip children and young people with the skills and capacities to critique such content if and when they are exposed to it. We also encourage the Government to take the actions required to tackle the rapid, recent, dangerous rise in sexual strangulation.

We thank the Minister and her Department for the opportunity to contribute to this Second National Plan consultation and look forward to their ongoing work.

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