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# Exposure to Pornography Among Youth in Australia

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**Full title**

Exposure to Pornography Among Youth in Australia

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Youth and Pornography

**Abstract**

Youth in Australia are routinely exposed to sexually explicit images. Among 16 and 17-year-olds, three-quarters of boys and one-tenth of girls have ever watched an X-rated movie. Three-quarters of 16 and 17-year-olds have been exposed accidentally to pornographic websites, while 38 per cent of boys and two per cent of girls have deliberately accessed them. Internet pornography is a particularly pervasive source of minors' exposure to pornography, both accidental and deliberate. Two features of children's exposure to pornography mirror those among adults. First, males are more likely to seek out, and more frequent consumers of, both X-rated movies and pornographic websites. Second, Internet users of any age find it difficult to avoid unwanted encounters with sexually explicit materials.

**Keywords**

children, pornography, internet, sexuality, gender.

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**Bionote**

Dr Michael Flood is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society at La Trobe University. His research and activist interests include men and masculinities, sexualities and especially male heterosexuality, interpersonal violence, and sexual and reproductive health.

Children and young people in Australia are routinely exposed to sexually explicit images. They encounter pornography while on the Internet, some watch X-rated videos and, like adults, they live in a culture increasingly saturated in sexualised representations. The exposure of children to sexually explicit materials is an issue of widespread community concern, yet until recently there had not been a single Australian study that focuses on the prevalence of this exposure or assesses its likely impact. A study by the Australia Institute, a public interest thinktank, undertook both tasks, publishing two reports (Flood & Hamilton 2003a, 2003b).

### **Children, sex and pornography**

Children's and young people's exposure to sexually explicit materials is only one of a number of issues relating to children and sexuality which have been the subject of public controversy and policy. Cultural anxieties have been articulated in recent decades about premarital teenage sex, homosexuality, teenage pregnancy, child abuse, child pornography, and sexualised products for pre-teen girls. Such fears also have deep roots, in long histories of efforts to 'protect children' (Heins 2001). Moral panics about young people's sexual activity fail to acknowledge that most young people move into adulthood as healthy and responsible sexual beings (Roker & Coleman 1998: 1). At the same time, as Levine (2002: xxxiii) notes, 'Sex among [Australia's] youths, like sex among its adults, is too often neither gender-egalitarian, nor pleasurable, nor safe.'

Public concerns about young people's exposure to pornography have been prompted in part by six shifts in young people's sexual lives over the last few decades. First, children are now starting puberty and adolescence earlier and staying in it for longer than ever before (Roker and Coleman 1998: 4-5). Second, the average age of first intercourse has declined (Smith *et al.* 2003: 2). Third, younger people engage in a wider variety of sexual behaviours than older people, including oral sex and anal intercourse. Fourth, young people now have a greater number of sexual partners, and over a

lifetime will have a substantially greater number of partners than did their parents (Moore & Rosenthal 1998: 50). Fifth, some young people are participating in an increasingly visible gay and lesbian community, and about one in ten secondary school students is sexually attracted either to the same sex only or to both sexes (Dempsey *et al.* 2001). Finally, today's children are growing up in a sexualised cultural environment. Late twentieth-century Western cultures saw a proliferation of sexual imagery and an explosion of popular sexual debate (Strasburger & Wilson 2002: 147-150). While sexual speech and behaviour have long been around for children to witness, children now move in a 'hypermediated' environment in which pictures and words have unprecedented cultural influence (Levine 2002: 4-5).

The mass media plays a powerful role in the socialisation of children and adolescents (Goldman 2000: 16). In fact, the media may be particularly important in shaping young people's sexualities given their limited access to other sources of sexual information (Huston *et al.*: 6, 13). Parents seldom provide detailed information and communicate about sexuality-related topics only with difficulty (Rosenthal & Feldman 1999), while school sexuality education often focuses on the biology of reproduction and neglects sexual behaviour, romance and interpersonal relations.

Given the increasing sexualisation or 'pornographication' of mainstream media (McNair 1996: 23), X-rated movies and 'adult' websites are hardly the only sources of young people's encounters with sexually explicit representations. There is an increased testing and blurring of boundaries between pornography and mainstream media and art, an adoption of the language and visual codes of pornography, and endless 'sex talk' in popular culture (Attwood 2002: 98). While representations which may be harmful to children and adolescents are plentiful outside pornography, this discussion focuses on pornography because it is at the centre of contemporary debates regarding youth and sexually explicit representations.

Pornography is defined as ‘sexually explicit media that are primarily intended to sexually arouse the audience’ (Malamuth 2001: 11817). ‘Sexually explicit’ representations include images of female or male nudity or semi-nudity, implied sexual activity, and actual sexual activity. While this definition is broad enough to include media involving only text, my primary concern is the image-centred media of X-rated movies (videos and DVDs) and Internet pornography. The term ‘pornography’ has often been used pejoratively, referring to representations of bodies and sexual activity which are offensive, obscene, harmful or otherwise problematic, but here it is used neutrally. There is disagreement regarding the ‘pornographic’ nature of various representations, but there is likely to be greater community consensus regarding the two forms of sexually explicit material on which this paper focuses.

### **Paths to exposure: Deliberate versus accidental**

Young people can be exposed to pornographic material either deliberately or accidentally, and the distinction between these two paths is critical in understanding young people’s encounters particularly with Internet pornography. First, children may deliberately seek sexually explicit materials. They do this for reasons which overlap with those of adults: curiosity, interest in information which may benefit their sexual and reproductive health or relations, and a desire for sexual stimulation. Minors may look for, borrow, steal, or (illegally) hire or purchase pornographic magazines and films, or persuade older people to do so on their behalf. The commercial hire or sale of X-rated movies to minors is probably rare, given the financial penalties for retailers and high political costs for the pornography industry as a whole. On the Internet, minors may search for sexually explicit material using a search engine, go to a particular web site, ask in a chat room for sexually explicit pictures, visit a chat room focused on sexual dialogue, or sign up to a mailing list which sends out sexually explicit images.

Second, young people are exposed to pornography through accidental or inadvertent means.

Minors may stumble across pornographic magazines and films which are the property of older family members, or which have been discarded, or may be deliberately introduced to such materials by others. On the Internet in particular, it is easy for children and indeed all Internet users inadvertently to encounter pornography, or to be exposed to pornography by the deliberate and intrusive actions of others (Thornburgh & Lin 2002: 136-138). Young computer users may receive unsolicited e-mail containing sexually explicit material or links to such material; improperly guess or mistype website addresses or requests for information; search for terms with both sexual and non-sexual meaning and stumble across sexually explicit material; or click on links without really knowing what they will find (Thornburgh & Lin 2002: 139). In this discussion, the term 'exposure' refers to both deliberate and accidental viewing of pornography. The terms 'use' and 'consumption' refer only to forms of deliberate exposure.

Legally, minors' lack of access to sexually explicit materials is very clear. Individuals under 18 years of age cannot purchase or view R- and X-rated films and publications which are 'Category 1 restricted' or 'Category 2 restricted', and neither children nor adults can view 'Refused Classification' materials. In R-rated depictions, sexual activity can be realistically simulated, and nudity in a sexual context is allowed but should not include obvious genital contact. X-rated movies contain 'real depictions of actual sexual intercourse and other sexual activity between consenting adults' (Office of Film and Literature Classification 2000: 12-14).

At the same time, it is easy to encounter sexually explicit materials on the Internet. Three distinct characteristics of Internet pornography facilitate minors' deliberate access and inadvertent exposure to pornography. First, sexually explicit material is available free in large quantities. The Internet is an ideal environment for pornography as it is an excellent medium for the storage, display and



transfer of images and text. Users can gain easy and affordable access to pornographic materials across geographic boundaries and age groups, they can view pornographic materials in anonymity, they can select and customise the materials they wish to download, and they can store images discreetly and conceal them from others (Lo & Wei 2002: 30).

The commercial online adult entertainment industry offers a very wide range of content.

Commercial websites routinely include free images which are 'teasers' for paid subscriptions to gain access to, or be regularly e-mailed, further images (Thornburgh & Lin 2002: 128-129). Collections amassed by individuals are another common source of free images. Many websites include long lists of numerous links to other websites containing free pictures. One estimate identifies that 70 to 80 per cent of adult material online is carried on free sites (Rosoff 1999). Further noncommercial carriers include individuals sharing pictures online, bulletin boards and newsgroups containing sexually explicit material, chat rooms and instant messages involving 'cybersex' (online dialogue centred on sexual interaction), personal profiles and web pages (Thornburgh & Lin 2002: 129-130).

Children have sought out and found sexual material for a long time but today 'the process is easier, faster, more anonymous, and likely to bring to the computer screen anything a child wants' (and sometimes things the child does not want) (Strasburger & Wilson 2002: 308-309). A sexually curious child can type in sexual words in a search engine and will be given a list of literally millions of sites in response. The child can then easily gain access to the sites listed. To illustrate, a search for 'sex pictures' using the popular search engine Google yields over thirty million 'hits' in one-tenth of a second. Lack of money may prevent children from gaining access to pornographic videos and magazines, yet they can spend hours wandering online through a vast collection of free images and video clips.

The second reason that children are easily exposed to online pornography is that there are virtually no age-related barriers to access. Three-quarters of commercial pornographic websites display adult content on the first page, where anyone can access it, often through sexually explicit ads for other sites. Only one-third of such websites offer a notice indicating that the viewer is entering an 'adult' site (Thornburgh & Lin 2002: 78). Typical notices read, 'You must be 18 or older to continue.' However, there is no mechanism that actually prevents a minor from entering the site, other than that person's own sense of lawfulness. Moreover, many sexually explicit websites offer links directly to free images on other websites and thus bypass any warnings which may be offered on the opening pages of those sites. A more substantive age-related barrier to access is represented by age-verification software. Users may be required to provide verification of their adult status, using either a credit card number (on the assumption that only adults have these) or programs such as 'Adult Check'. However, only 3 per cent of commercial adult sites require these to proceed past the first page of the site; most allow the user to take a 'free preview' (Thornburgh & Lin 2002: 79).

Young people's exposure to Internet pornography is facilitated by a third feature of the medium – its indiscriminate and sometimes coercive relationship to potential consumers. Internet pornography is coercive in three ways: the use of pop-up advertising and traffic forwarding, 'spam' e-mails, and the manipulation of search-engine processes to maximise traffic to adult sites. An individual viewing 'softcore' websites will find that they are frequently subject to 'pop-ups' – unsolicited windows containing images and links – exposing them to sexually explicit materials which they have not chosen to view.

Adult websites often use the method of 'traffic forwarding' or 'mousetrapping' where the user is forwarded automatically and involuntarily to another site, while 25 per cent of commercial sites incorporate devices to hinder the user from leaving them (Thornburgh & Lin 2002: 75-79). Similar

strategies are used with electronic mail where individuals receive unsolicited commercial e-mails or 'spam' promoting pornographic websites or sending pornographic images themselves. A U.S. study by the Spam Recycling Center attributed a third of all 'spam' to pornography sites (Brunker 2000). Advertisers have little incentive to attract children to their sites from the standpoint of securing paying customers as most children will not have the ability to pay. However, by displaying ads for other adult sites, web site owners can make money in three ways: for each display of the ad, for each 'click' on the ad, and for each actual subscription to the other site. Most adult web sites operate on the first two models, so they have little incentive to differentiate between adult and child viewers (Thornburgh & Lin 2002: 76).

Although this discussion focuses on children's exposure to pornography, it should be noted that use of the Internet brings other dangers for children. In interacting online with others, young people may be subject to personal attacks, unwanted or inappropriate sexual advances, or recruitment into vulnerable sexual situations. The Internet is a new medium for the enactment of old forms of child abuse, including child pornography, paedophile advocacy, the promotion of child sex tourism, and the commercial exploitation of children through online advertising (Stanley 2001). At the same time, the Internet is an extraordinarily valuable, and indeed essential, educational tool for children and young people. Furthermore, the Internet also fosters a wide variety of pleasurable social and sexual interactions among young people, delivers responsible information and advice on sexual and reproductive health, allows youth's exploration of diverse sexualities (Hillier *et al.* 2001), and is a means of sexual pleasure and expression.

### **Australian youth's exposure to pornography**

To what extent have children in Australia been exposed to pornography? To assess this, the Australia Institute commissioned a telephone survey from the market research company Newspoll.

The survey was conducted in September 2002 and included 200 respondents (100 males and 100 females) aged 16 to 17 years. Youths younger than 16 could not be interviewed for ethical reasons. The respondents were selected by means of a stratified random sample of households (by phone number) incorporating quotas set for age and sex, the survey was restricted to Sydney and Melbourne, and interviewers could be female or male. Throughout this discussion, the terms ‘children’ and ‘minors’ are used interchangeably to refer to all those under 18 years of age. Describing this study’s teenage sample as ‘children’, ‘boys’ or ‘girls’ does seem strange given that this population is only one or two years below the age of adulthood, but it makes clear that these individuals are below the legal age for access to ‘adult’, pornographic media.

Participants were asked about their exposure to ‘X-rated videos’ and ‘sex sites on the Internet’. Some respondents may have reported exposure to videos and DVDs which were not in fact X-rated but focused on sexually explicit content. Similarly, some participants may have taken ‘sex sites’ to refer to any websites with sexuality-related content such as those focused on sexual health, although the term and the preceding question do suggest that the purpose of relevant sites should be sexual rather than educational. Such responses would lead to over-reporting of exposure, as would boasting or bravado (although these are less likely in an individual phone interview than in a group interview). Other factors may lead to the under-reporting particularly of deliberate consumption of pornography. Although the telephone survey was anonymous and confidentiality was guaranteed, some respondents may have been reluctant to admit to these activities or concerned that their anonymity would not be protected.

#### *Exposure to X-rated movies*

Our telephone survey began by gauging youth’s perceptions of the extent of pornography consumption among their peers. When asked whether watching X-rated videos is widespread among

boys of their age, five out of six boys (84 per cent) and the same percentage of girls said that it is. Thus, watching pornographic videos is seen to be common, if not normal, behaviour among boys. When asked whether watching X-rated videos is widespread among girls, only four per cent of girls agreed. Boys overestimate girls' use of pornography, in that 15 per cent of boys believe that watching X-rated videos is widespread among girls. This may reflect an assumption that girls' patterns of consumption mirror boys' own. It may reflect boys' over-estimations of levels of sexual activity among their peers, or a kind of 'wishful thinking' about girls' interest in sexually explicit materials.

Respondents were next asked: 'Have you ever watched X-rated videos yourself?' If the respondent agreed then they were asked: 'How often would that be?' The results are shown in Table 1. Just under three-quarters (73 per cent) of boys report that they have watched an X-rated video. One in twenty watch them on a weekly basis while more than a fifth watch an X-rated video at least once a month. Boys' and girls' perception that watching X-rated videos is widespread amongst 16-17 year-old boys therefore proves to be accurate, although only around one third of boys watch them on a regular basis (at least once every two to three months).

Among girls, only 11 per cent report that they have watched an X-rated video, all of them less often than once every two to three months. The 15 per cent of boys (and four per cent of girls) who believe that watching X-rated videos is widespread amongst 16-17 year old girls are clearly wrong in their assessment.

[Table 1 about here.]

This study suggests that of the one in ten 16-17-year-old girls who has ever seen an X-rated video, very few if any are regular consumers. Canadian research among teenagers with an average age of

14 gives a similar finding. While 90 per cent of boys and 60 per cent of girls had watched pornography (defined more broadly in the Canadian study), one-third of the boys but only two per cent of the girls did so at least once a month. Typically, girls watched pornography only once, because a boyfriend or somebody wanted them to or because they were curious, and then did not watch again (Check 1995: 89-90). Similarly, a Swedish study found that 30 per cent of adolescent boys and only three per cent of adolescent girls were watching pornography at least once a week (Forsberg 2001: 161).

While respondents in our study were not asked how they had come to watch an X-rated video, other research finds that boys and girls follow different paths to exposure. An early American study notes that most females were introduced to X-rated materials by someone else, usually male and usually older. In contrast, while the majority of males were also exposed to pornography for the first time through the encouragement of others, in their case this was more likely to be by friends and other males (Bryant & Brown 1989: 46).

#### *Exposure to Internet pornography: (a) Accidental*

The survey also asked young people about their exposure to 'sex sites on the Internet'. Nearly nine out of ten 16-17 year-old boys (88 per cent) believe that looking at sex sites on the Internet is widespread among boys of the same age, and 83 per cent of girls agree. On the other hand, only seven per cent of girls believe that looking at sex sites on the Internet is widespread among girls of the same age. As in the case of X-rated videos, a substantially higher proportion of boys (16 per cent) believe that many girls consume Internet sex sites.

Children's exposure to Internet pornography may be deliberate or accidental. Respondents to the survey were first asked, 'When using the Internet yourself, have you ever seen sex sites accidentally

or when you didn't mean to?' They were then asked how often the accidental exposure had occurred. The results are shown in Table 1.

Eighty-four per cent of boys and 60 per cent of girls say they have been exposed accidentally to sex sites on the Internet. Our results thus replicate other Australian research which finds that children and adolescents who use the Internet routinely encounter pornography. In Internet-using households with children under 18, close to half of 11-17 year olds had seen or experienced something on the Internet which they thought was offensive or disgusting, and pornography was the material most commonly cited (Aisbett 2001: 41). In a more recent Australian study among Internet-connected households with children aged eight to 13 years, 19 per cent of children said that they had accidentally found websites their parents would prefer them not to see 'a few times', and a further 19 per cent had done so 'once'. Almost half of the sites (45 per cent) contained nudity or pornography (NetRatings Australia 2005: 44). Older children, and boys, were more likely to have encountered such websites.

American research further documents the ubiquity of children's accidental encounters with Internet pornography. A 2001 study found that 31 per cent of children aged 10 to 17 with a computer at home had seen a 'pornographic' web site, including 45 per cent of those aged 14 to 17 (Thornburgh & Lin 2002: 132-133). In another study, of 15 to 17 year-olds who had ever gone online, 70 per cent had accidentally stumbled across pornography (Kaiser Family Foundation 2001). Similar rates of exposure have been documented in two of the largest studies on this issue. In a US survey of 1,500 Internet-using youth aged 10 to 17, participants were asked about unwanted exposure to sexual material ('pictures of naked people or people having sex') on the internet (Mitchell *et al.* 2003: 337). One quarter of the youth had one or more unwanted exposures to sexual pictures while online in the past year (Mitchell *et al.* 2003: 340-342). In a UK-based national survey of 1,511 9-19 year-olds,

more than half (57 per cent) had come into contact with online pornography, and most was viewed unintentionally (Livingstone & Bober 2004).

If Australian children's patterns of exposure to Internet pornography are similar to those among their US counterparts, then rates of exposure will be lower among children younger than the 16 and 17-year-olds we surveyed. Mitchell *et al.* (2003) report that older children were more likely than younger children to encounter unwanted sexual material, with more than 60 per cent of unwanted exposures among youths aged 15 or older.

As frequencies of Internet use are very similar for boys and girls, the greater accidental exposure to sex sites of boys in our study may be explained in three ways. First, boys use the Internet deliberately for sex much more than girls do, and boys are therefore likely to have 'cookies' stored on their hard-drives facilitating further, unwanted access to sex sites. Second, boys' patterns of Internet use are different from those of girls: males are more likely than females to 'surf' the Internet and to visit games sites while females are more likely to visit communications sites (Aisbett 2001: 28-29; NetRatings Australia 2005: 25-31). This may bring boys into greater contact with sexually explicit websites. Third, some boys may be more willing to admit to accidental than deliberate exposure to sex sites and boys' greater deliberate use of Internet sex sites may therefore feed into an over-reporting of accidental exposure.

#### *Exposure to Internet pornography: (b) Deliberate*

Young people may also deliberately seek out sexually explicit material and they are increasingly likely to use the Internet to do so. Respondents in the Newspoll survey were then asked, 'Have you ever searched for or looked at sex sites on the Internet on purpose?' The results are shown in Table 1. Nearly two in five 16-17 year-old boys (38 per cent) have searched the Internet for sex sites. Only



four per cent say they use the Internet for this purpose on a weekly basis, but over one-fifth of boys (22 per cent) access Internet sex sites at least every two or three months.

Among girls, only two per cent say that they have deliberately sought out Internet sex sites, and all have done so only very occasionally. The figure of two per cent of girls who have *deliberately* sought out sex sites stands in stark contrast to the 60 per cent of girls who have had *accidental* exposure to explicit sex on the Internet. Internet users who have no interest in sex sites therefore find it difficult to avoid seeing the images displayed on these sites.

The fact in our Newspann-based survey that teenagers view X-rated videos more than Internet sex sites is surprising as access to Internet pornography is much easier than legal access to X-rated videos. However, at the time of the survey only a third of homes were connected to the Internet. Most Australian homes have the technology to play X-rated videos or DVDs, and one-quarter of adults watched an X-rated film in the last year (Richters *et al.* 2003, p. 186), perhaps facilitating children's access. In addition, there may be an element of self-censorship among young people, as Internet pornography is known to feature 'deviant' sexual practices, which some young people find disturbing or offensive. In addition, it may be felt that since X-rated videos are officially approved for adult use it is acceptable for those who see themselves as near adulthood to view them.

In international research, rates of deliberate consumption of Internet pornography among youth or boys of a similar age vary from 15 per cent to 25 per cent. In the UK-based survey of 9-19 year-olds, 10 per cent had visited a pornographic website on purpose, including 15 per cent of 16-17 year-olds (Livingstone & Bober 2004: 29). This survey also documents the gap between accidental and deliberate exposure: while 15 per cent had viewed a pornographic website on purpose, a further 61 per cent had experienced accidental or unwanted exposure. In the US survey of Internet-using

youth aged 10 to 17, eight per cent had reported seeking out X-rated Internet sites, and this is likely to be an underestimate (Mitchell *et al.* 2003: 349).

### **Boys, sex, and pornography**

Establishing the prevalence and patterning of youth's exposure to pornography is only a first step. It is critical also to assess the significance of this exposure, and this depends on an assessment of the content of pornographic media and the effects of exposure to this. The impacts of exposure are likely to be mediated by the nature of the materials in question, the age and other characteristics of the viewer, whether exposure is deliberate and anticipated or accidental and unwanted, and other aspects of exposure (the duration and intensity of viewing, and whether it is solitary or collective). It should not be assumed that any and all instances of minors' exposure to sexually explicit materials necessarily involve negative effects. At the same time, existing research on children's experience of exposure to Internet pornography and adults' consumption of pornography does suggest that youth's exposure to X-rated movies and Internet pornography will have a range of identifiable and often negative effects, particularly where this exposure is unwanted or is to violent content (Flood & Hamilton 2003a: 36-52).

A detailed account of pornography's content and its effects among youth is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, at least four effects are worthy of consideration, although their assessment depends on wider ethical and political frameworks. First, studies on youth's exposure to sexualised media content e.g. in television programs and music videos suggests that this leads to more liberal sexual attitudes, greater factual knowledge, and an increased belief in peers' sexual activity. Second, younger children may be shocked, disturbed or upset by premature or inadvertent encounters with sexually explicit content. Third, youth may be troubled or disgusted by images in pornography of sexual behaviours which are outside common cultural norms, such as sex involving multiple

partners, sadomasochism, urination, and so on. Fourth, as a substantial literature among young adults has documented (Malamuth *et al.* 2000), males who are frequent users particularly of violent pornography may show strengthening of attitudes supportive of sexual aggression and a greater propensity towards sexual violence. There is considerable debate regarding pornography's impact, with some scholars arguing that viewers interpret pornography in complex ways and claims about media 'effects' are simplistic and overly deterministic. Indeed, pornography has also been seen to have *desirable* effects, for example in challenging restrictive sexual norms and offering positive expressions of non-heterosexual sexualities. But these should not blind us to other, harmful, effects associated with pornography.

Pornography may have a particularly significant role in boys' and young men's peer cultures and sociosexual relations, given the gendered patterns of consumption documented in this study. In general, boys are more interested than girls in visual depictions and more likely to view online adult-oriented sexually explicit material (Thornburgh & Lin 2002: 158-159). Among minors, adolescent males are especially likely to be regular consumers of pornography such as adult videos, while adolescent females find sexual content elsewhere and are less likely to seek out sexually explicit materials (Huston *et al.* 1998: 75). Gendered patterns of pornography consumption are also evident among adults in Australia. In a recent national survey of 19,307 people aged 16 to 59 years, 37.4 per cent of men but only 15.7 per cent of women had watched an X-rated film in the last year (Richters *et al.* 2003: 186). Younger men were the most likely to be consumers of X-rated movies. The gender gap is even larger for Internet pornography: 16.5 per cent of men but only 2.4 per cent of women visited an Internet sex site on purpose in the last year (Richters *et al.* 2003: 185). In general, men are significantly more likely than women to view pornography frequently, to be sexually aroused by it, and to have favourable attitudes towards it (Lo & Wei 2002: 16). At the same time, women's

consumption of pornography is receiving growing attention, in both pornography marketing and scholarship. If Australian youth's deliberate use of pornography is similar to that among adults documented by Potter (1986: 108-109), then it will be more common for boys to view X-rated videos and sexually explicit websites either by themselves or in groups of male peers, and more common for the minority of girls who do look at pornographic videos and websites to do so with a boyfriend.

In most mass-marketed heterosexual pornography,

sex is divorced from intimacy, loving affection, and human connection; all women are constantly available for sex and have insatiable sexual appetites; and all women are sexually satisfied by whatever the men in the film do. (Jensen & Dines 1998: 72)

Heterosexual pornography's 'narrative of female nymphomania and male sexual prowess' (Jensen & Dines 1998: 77-78) does not cater for all heterosexual males' desires, nor are its appeals exclusive to men, but it works in a symbiotic relationship with common constructions of masculine heterosexual sexuality. Pornography consumption may intensify boys' investment in problematic constructions of gender and sexuality which are already part of some boys' peer cultures, such as pressure to gain masculine status through sexual achievement, a sexual double standard of female 'sluts' and male 'studs', narrow images of female sexual desirability, an obsessive focus on bodies and sexual acts, and tolerance for sexual violence (Flood 2002). More widely, young males' use of pornography extends cultural 'pornographication' or what Levy (2005) terms the rise of 'raunch culture'. In 'raunch culture', women make sex objects of themselves and others, there is a cultural expectation that women will exhibit their bodies, female empowerment is signaled only by overt and public sexuality, and sexuality itself is only recognisable in the codes of pornography and prostitution (Levy 2005: 26). Among Australian

youth there are positive signs of the increasing acceptance of norms of gender equality and a growing assertion of sexual desire and agency by young women, but both may be constrained by the sexist sexual codes of much pornography.

## **Conclusion**

Substantial proportions of minors are exposed to sexually explicit materials intended for adults. Significant proportions of youth aged 16 and 17, especially boys, are deliberately consuming pornography: over 40 per cent have seen X-rated videos and 20 per cent have visited sexually explicit websites. In addition, over 70 per cent of this age group have been exposed accidentally to online pornography.

The advent of the Internet may have involved a significant shift in patterns of children's exposure to pornography. As Mitchell *et al.* (2003: 332) note, 'One of the major historical changes introduced by the Internet may not be how many children get exposed to sexual materials... but how many get exposed involuntarily.' In addition, the proportion of exposure represented by online materials may increase, as children's and adults' use of the Internet expands.

There are two reasons to think that children's exposure to pornography, particularly Internet pornography, may increase. First, children's access to and use of the Internet continues to expand. Among families with children aged six to 17 in 2003, 91 per cent had an Internet connection at home. Children are using the Internet at increasingly younger ages, using it more frequently, and for longer periods (NetRatings Australia 2005: 2, 31). Children tend to be heavier users than their parents, more knowledgeable, and often use the Internet with little parental control and minimal supervision (Strasburger & Wilson 2002: 307). All children need access to the Internet, given its power as an educational and community tool, but this access also brings potential risks. Second, new

channels of exposure to pornography are opening up to children and adults alike. Devices such as web-enabled mobile phones, personal digital assistants, and game consoles increasingly allow access to Internet content and, as with the worldwide web, at present there are few age-related barriers to children's exposure to pornography via such devices.

At the same time, other trends point to declining opportunities for minors' exposure to pornography. Over the past few years, parents in Australia have increased their use of a range of strategies to minimise children's exposure to inappropriate Internet content. Among families with children aged six to 17 in 2003 and with Internet access at home, 35 per cent of parents use filtering software (up from 17 per cent in 2001). Ninety-two per cent practise some kind of supervision or monitoring, up from 84 per cent, and most set rules on their children's access to websites or their time online (NetRatings Australia 2005: 57-66).

How should we respond to the evidence of youth's exposure to pornography and its negative effects? When the results of our survey first were released, many media commentators assumed that the appropriate response was to prevent all access to pornography, by children and adults alike, and at the very least that children must be 'protected from sex'. Instead, protecting children from sexual harm does not mean protecting children from sexuality. Children and youth are sexual beings and should be provided with appropriate and compelling materials on sex and sexuality. At the same time, pornography is a poor sex educator. A more appropriate response would seek to minimise children's exposure to pornography, both accidental and deliberate; to minimise the harmful effects of exposure among children when it does occur; to minimise exposure to violent pornography among children and adults alike; to encourage the production of better pornography; and to provide comprehensive sexuality education for children and youth (Flood 2003). To accomplish such goals, the second report by the Australia Institute proposed a strategy with three components: media

literacy and ‘pornography education’, regulation of Internet Service Providers to limit children’s exposure while allowing adults access to classified pornographic materials, and some additional measures by internet-based providers of pornography (Flood & Hamilton 2003b). Community debate regarding issues of youth, sex, and media is likely to continue, and let us hope that it can be informed by appropriate data and understanding rather than by moral panic.

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**Table 1 Exposure to pornographic videos and websites among 16- and 17-year-olds (%)**

<b>Exposure to X-rated videos</b>	<b>Accidental exposure to Internet sex sites</b>		<b>Deliberate exposure to Internet sex sites</b>					
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls				
Every week	5	0	Every week	24	7	Every week	4	0
Every 3 to 4 weeks	16	0	Every 3 to 4 weeks	22	6	Every 3 to 4 weeks	7	0
Every 2 to 3 months	11	0	Every 2 to 3 months	11	11	Every 2 to 3 months	11	0
Less often	40	11	Less often	27	36	Less often	16	2
<i>Totals</i>	<i>73</i>	<i>11</i>		<i>84</i>	<i>60</i>		<i>38</i>	<i>2</i>

Totals may not add due to rounding