

BOYS



AND DIGITAL



PORN



NAVIGATING



SEXUALITY



**IN
THE**

INTERNET AGE

5 PRINCIPLES



Adult responsibility



Intimacy and connection



Question profit logic and real harms



Agency and choice



Access to information about sex and sexuality

5 HARMS



Harsher pornography reaches younger boys



Porn impacts boys' sexual development



Racist and demeaning toward women



Link between porn and sexual aggression



Parents struggle to nurture their sons' healthy sexuality

5 ACTIONS



Let's talk about masculinity



Comprehensive sexuality education



Critical porn literacy



Digital supervision



Public regulation

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Equimundo prepared this paper for the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) under the coordination of José-Roberto Luna and overall guidance from Leyla Sharafi (UNFPA Headquarters) within the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022–25 framework.

This research paper was developed in response to the Evaluation of UNFPA Support to Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, the Formative Evaluation of UNFPA Support to Adolescents and Youth, and the Joint Evaluation of Phase II (2020–2023) of the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage.

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Suggested Citation: Hayes, C., Reichert, M., & Lauro, G. (2025). Boys and Digital Porn: Navigating Sexuality in the Internet Age. Washington, DC: Equimundo.

Reviewers: Sharon Bissell, Joseph Vess, Daniel Lima, Francesco Cecon, Maree Crabbe, Martina Fontana.

About Equimundo: Equimundo works globally to promote care by and for men and boys, reduce violence and inequity, and in doing so, achieve well-being for all. This is achieved through a research-first approach that drives innovative solutions to shift norms, narratives, and policies in the United States and around the world.

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About the Global Boyhood Initiative: The Global Boyhood Initiative is a campaign coordinated by Equimundo and designed to support boys aged 4 to 13 and the adults in their lives with the resources they need to raise, teach, coach, and set an example for boys to become men who embrace healthier versions of manhood and gender equality.

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INTRODUCTION

All children and adolescents have a right to learn about sex and sexuality in developmentally appropriate ways, at a pace that allows them to make emotional, intellectual, and ethical sense of their sexual feelings and reactions and in a manner that presents sexuality as a normal and pleasurable part of human existence and relationships.

This paper explores how online pornography influences adolescent boys' sexual development, attitudes, and behaviors, highlighting both the risks and opportunities involved. It examines how unregulated digital porn shapes boys' understanding of intimacy, consent, and gender roles while often reinforcing harmful stereotypes. The analysis emphasizes the need for comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), porn literacy, and open conversations between adults and adolescents to address these challenges. Additionally, it investigates the tension between boys' natural curiosity and right to sexual agency on the one hand and the risks posed by exploitative industry practices and distorted portrayals of sexuality on the other.

The paper is structured around five guiding principles, the developmental harms of porn use, and recommended actions to promote healthy, informed, and rights-based sexual development for boys in the digital age:

- 1. Introduction:** outlines the context, significance, and rationale for studying boys' relationship with online pornography and sexual development;
- 2. Five principles for a united response:** establishes guiding values for understanding boys' sexuality, including safeguarding well-being, promoting intimacy, questioning industry motives, respecting agency, and ensuring access to accurate information;
- 3. Five harms of porn use:** discusses developmental risks, including early exposure, violent and discriminatory content, distorted sexual scripts, links to aggression, and challenges faced by parents and caregivers;
- 4. Five actions to prevent and respond to harms:** provides recommended strategies, such as improving CSE, teaching porn literacy, engaging adults, fostering positive masculinities, and implementing regulatory measures; and

- 5. Annex & resources:** offers evidence-based tools and educational resources on porn literacy and sexuality education.

With CSE's full implementation still the exception rather than the rule in schools globally,¹ adolescents are looking to digital spaces to find information and greater understanding about the world around them – including about sex and sexuality, increasingly through the consumption of online pornography.² Given the proliferation of largely unmonitored and unregulated internet-enabled technology (such as smartphones and other portable devices), the rapid evolution of social media, and the increased online social engagement of adolescents, pornography is highly present in their online worlds, and many encounter pornography without looking for it during their everyday internet use.³

Commentators in the media often express concern over whether pornography harms the brain in a lasting way, how children and adolescents are learning about sex through pornography, and whether a major problem underscores these debates – that is, despite a high level of concern, *we largely don't know much about what pornography use looks like for children globally due to various moral, ethical, political, and methodological reasons that limit growing the evidence base.*

Some adolescents (ages 10 to 19) may view online pornography as a positive outlet to learn about sexual behaviors without parental control or judgment from peers. The anonymity, endless choices, and lack of oversight of digital porn provide space and an outlet to explore this part of themselves. While some of that can be healthy, much research – including this study – finds that adolescents are often aware of pornography's shortcomings as a source of information and guidance, and that improvements to sexuality and relationship education

are necessary for young people to have safe, accurate tools to make informed decisions about their sexuality.⁴

*The bottom line is that while some online porn can provide boys and others with a sense of freedom and space for potentially healthy exploration, its widespread accessibility and lack of regulation present significant challenges. Pornography in magazines or other traditional formats was more limited and regulated, and it required deliberate effort to access. However, digital porn is ubiquitous, often free, and algorithmically pushed to young audiences – sometimes even without them seeking it out. This technological shift has amplified boys' exposure, making passive encounters far more common and stripping away adult oversight. Because digital porn is seldom discussed openly with caring adults and is not designed as education, it fails to address critical elements such as fostering emotional intimacy, preventing violence, negotiating consent, and understanding modern contraception, leaving boys to navigate complex sexual messages largely on their own.*⁵

With pornography playing an increasingly significant role in adolescent boys' peer cultures and sexual development, there is an absence of forward-looking, positive attention on their sexuality. This is particularly notable given that digital platforms and algorithms are deliberately designed to push explicit content to maximize profit and consumer engagement. *Put simply, most of the discussion of boys' sexuality is deficit-focused, framing boys' sexuality as dangerous and harmful without adequate attention on how to promote the healthy, the positive, and the pleasurable.*

In discussing boys' sexuality, any discussion of boys' sexuality must affirm the diversity in adolescent boys' lived experiences and knowledge based on factors such as age, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religion, cultural background, disability, socioeconomic status, and education level. Adolescence is a crucial period for forming opinions, ideas, beliefs, and attitudes toward gender roles, sexuality, and relationships at a time when adolescents face intense social and peer pressures to conform to societal norms, often without fully developed critical reflection skills.

Research indicates that behaviors and attitudes developed during adolescence can persist into adulthood, both positively

and negatively impacting individuals. Thus, tackling the development of boys' sexuality during adolescence via CSE – which takes a rights-based and gender-focused approach – can help them develop a positive, relational understanding of their sexuality within the context of their emotional and social growth.⁶

LIMITATIONS

As much of the available evidence on adolescents and pornography consumption is for young people ages 14 and up, assessing the impact of porn on young adolescent boys (ages 10 to 13) occurs through a lens of understanding that the primary subjects of focus have not yet reached developmental maturity. However, this narrowed focus presents challenges in gathering a sufficient evidence base, as most of the evidence on pornography is on older adolescents (for several ethical and practical reasons). The situation is much more nuanced when assessing arguments about older adolescents' use of porn, given the need to acknowledge older adolescents' greater sexual agency.

An additional limitation of this report concerns geography: The majority of research on pornography's impact has been conducted in the Global North and focused solely on the audiences, consumption patterns, and relationships with technology primarily situated within it. This research gap means current literature surrounding online porn and adolescence lacks nuance and global applicability, and it can reinforce the inequitable dominance of Western perspectives in research and academia. This report seeks to highlight rigorous research on porn from diverse contexts where possible, with a recognition that emerging media technologies have enabled the movement and flow of pornography across transnational and local networks.⁷

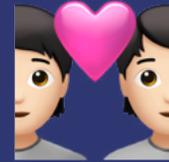
Finally, rather than providing a comprehensive overview of existing evidence on boys and pornography, this paper intends to provoke thought, finding some common ground in a deeply divided field while also challenging the deficit- and problem-focused view on boys' sexuality. It hopes to offer new insights to inform future rights-based and gender-focused action to support the development of adolescent boys' sexuality in the digital age. *And it affirms from the outset that boys (and girls) have the right to healthy, pleasurable sexual exploration and need information and education that is accurate and direct.*

1

WHAT



COMMON



GROUND

CAN BE FOUND?

**5 GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR
A COLLECTIVE APPROACH**

Pornography sits at a fraught intersection of debates on a range of complex topics: rigid societal and cultural norms about sex and gender, the failure of families and schools to openly and honestly discuss sexuality with children, sexual exploitation, religious conservatism, human rights, and divergent feminist views about it. Put simply, the multiple voices -and the arguments among them - frequently drown out the possibility for an approachable conversation. And boys (and others) suffer as a result.

Historically, pornography has been one of the most contentious issues across advocacy communities, including those focused on children's rights, human rights, women's rights, and gender equality, where groups that otherwise align on many principles may sometimes hold sharply divergent views. Their disagreement can be fervent, characterized as an "ongoing standoff" or even "pornography wars."⁸ Emily Rothman, an American social epidemiologist, reflected on this dilemma:

As I spoke to other experts, I felt tremendous pressure to pick a side about pornography. Join one team or the other. I was even told that it was weak-minded of me not to be able to pick out the one correct answer about pornography.⁹

Moving forward in this conversation requires bridging these disagreements, however strongly held, and articulating essential principles for helping adolescents navigate their sexual development in the digital age.

As the American sociologist Kelsey Burke notes, "The pornography wars are never about pornography alone. They are instead about navigating how we should best live and relate to one another in our shared social world."¹⁰

Despite popular narratives positioning stances on porn as mutually exclusive – either "pro" or "anti" – this binary is reductive and unhelpful. At the risk of oversimplifying the diverse "camps" of thought on porn and young people, the various stances can be summarized as follows:

- There are some voices who are critical of porn, which includes those who are "anti-porn" but also others who are critical of adolescents' access to porn but are not anti-porn.
- There are other voices who are particularly critical of the *exploitative, negative, and sometimes violent representations of sexuality and the exploitation of porn actors* in the world of mainstream, largely free, profit-driven digital porn.
- Many advocates from diverse vantage points hold that the *secrecy and silence* about porn use among children and adolescents is personally and socially unhealthy.
- Considerable debate exists on *whether any porn can be feminist* in the sense of being free of the exploitation and domination of women, with some groups arguing that feminist porn exists and affirming their right to produce or consume it.

- There are sexuality experts arguing that sex educators should address porn to promote critical thinking and provoke conversations on safe sex choices, consent, and pleasure.¹¹
- There is also *general agreement that porn has a mostly negative impact on children* by introducing them to harsh, exploitative, misogynistic, and confusing messages.

In sum, while there are divergent and competing views on pornography more broadly, there is an emerging common ground on the need to hold the tech industry accountable for the societal impacts of unregulated exposure. Rather than centering on pro- or anti-porn positions, this consensus focuses on creating safer digital environments and promoting open, honest conversations about sexuality, gender, and relationships, particularly in the context of boys' access to online pornography.

The following five principles seek to extend this common ground and establish a shared foundation. The paper follows this by discussing the risks, harms, and potential benefits from online pornography consumption for adolescent boys, and what to do about it.

PRINCIPLE 1



SAFEGUARD BOYS' WELL-BEING THROUGH ADULT RESPONSIBILITY

Access to pornography, particularly through digital platforms designed to maximize exposure and engagement, can significantly influence the trajectory of boys' sexual development, and adults have a responsibility to understand and address its potential impacts.

Boys' sexuality is not the problem. Their desire to learn about sex, explore positive sexual experiences, and have satisfying and consensual sexual relationships is a basic human and child right. According to the International Conference on Population and Development's Programme of Action,¹² individuals have a human right to be informed about, exert control over, and decide on matters pertaining to their sexuality (encompassing various facets, such as sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, pleasure, intimacy, and reproduction – as defined by World Health Organization).¹³

As reliable sources of guidance remain limited, especially in contexts where formal sexuality education is inadequate, digital pornography often becomes the de facto starting point for boys seeking to understand sexual life – an approach fraught with risk due to its lack of accuracy, ethical grounding, and developmental sensitivity.¹⁴ These include the political

sensitivities of the issues, discomfort and silence, and a lack of parental awareness about boys' porn use. In addition, the porn industry's success in claiming that their products are liberating and silencing critics contributes to the lack of effective action that would enable boys to develop healthy relationships with sexuality and intimacy throughout their lives. What boys hear instead from mainstream narratives is largely a set of stereotypical tropes: that their sexuality is fundamentally objectifying, violent or aggressive, perverse, and harmful instead of a vital and rich part of their lives.

Practically, adult responsibility means empowering parents and educators to have open, informed conversations with boys, pushing for stronger policies on age-appropriate content and sexuality education, and holding tech companies accountable for algorithms that deliberately promote explicit material to young users.

Affirm that boys' sexuality is not the problem - exploitative, violent porn, adult silence, and political in-fighting about it are.

PRINCIPLE 2



AFFIRM THAT THE QUEST FOR INTIMACY, CONNECTION, AND CONSENT IS HEALTHY

Any dialogue with this issue must weigh how porn impacts boys against an ethical standard for human development that respects and protects human rights.¹⁵

A critical question emerges: How does porn foster or undermine boys' capabilities, especially those related to intimacy, healthy sexuality, and authentic self-expression?¹⁶ Research consistently finds that when asked, boys say they long for meaningful connections, including from sexual encounters.¹⁷ Boys want to talk and learn about sex, and porn is a problem largely because the adults around them aren't providing them with accurate information or safe spaces to have conversations about sexuality.

Why does it matter if boys see gender-stereotypical views of sex online? Research suggests that boys and young men who challenge rigid, inequitable definitions of male sexuality may experience more positive outcomes in their intimate relationships later in life. Findings from Equimundo's International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) – a multi-country study on men and masculinities – show that young and adult men with more egalitarian attitudes toward gender were more likely to report being “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their sexual relationships with primary partners.¹⁸ While this does not prove causation, it indicates that adopting rigid beliefs – such as viewing men as inherently dominant in sexual relationships – can be associated with less fulfilling experiences for men themselves, as well as for their female and other partners.

By presenting a stereotypical view of sexuality that is often based on dominating others and has a limited view of male sexual pleasure, porn can cut boys off from understanding and learning about their own sexuality in ways that bring happiness and well-being in their own lives. For many boys, the taboo around talking about sex and sexuality

closes them off from having conversations – with parents, teachers, male peers, and sexual partners – about pleasure, the nuances of consent, and sexuality that go beyond the all-too-common scripts in porn. Through porn, they also often see portrayals of male sexuality that focus on the size of their genitals, unrealistic depictions of sexual intercourse showing an idealization of bodies, and an idealization of sexual performance that focuses on how long men can keep erections and on dominating sexually rather than what mutual sexual pleasure and intimacy can be in real life.

These issues can become even more complex for adolescent boys of diverse sexual orientations (e.g., gay, bisexual, or fluid), as they navigate internal questioning alongside institutional and social homophobia. For some boys, porn is one of their only outlets to receive information about gay sex and gay relationships; at the same time, though, this can be a source that reinforces scripts of domination and abuse. The same issue may occur for boys with disabilities, whose bodies and life experiences may not correspond with the ambivalent representations in porn (which may treat them as being desirable but with “undesired” characteristics).¹⁹

PRINCIPLE 3



QUESTION THE PREDATORY PROFIT MODELS AND REAL HARMS IN MAINSTREAM DIGITAL PORN

Boys' pornography use happens in a cultural context of power imbalances that both reflects and contributes to injustice in relation to girls, women, and LGBTQI+ individuals and other marginalized groups.

A large portion of pornography promotes extreme versions of male supremacy or an ideology rooted in the supposed innate superiority of cisgender men and their right to subjugate women, other men, trans men, and nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people.²⁰ That is, it often expresses and reinforces harmful norms, stereotypes, and expectations around male dominance and female subservience, both explicitly in its content and implicitly in its production and distribution mechanisms. For example, an analysis of 400 of the most popular free online pornographic films found that 41% of professional videos depicted violence against women.²¹

Not all pornography is straight or heteronormative, yet unequal power dynamics can still appear in mainstream LGBTQI+ porn; this includes stereotypical, homophobic, and transphobic depictions, as well as aggression or violence towards LGBTQI+ people – where individuals are sometimes portrayed as sexually subservient to, and the targets of aggression by, hypermasculine men.²² At the same time, it is important to recognize that not all pornography always represents women and LGBTQI+ individuals in harmful ways. A growing field of activists, researchers, and content

producers is arguing for – and creating – pornography that they define as feminist, ethical, and inclusive, aiming to depict consent, mutual pleasure, diverse bodies, and authentic sexualities.²³

Within the feedback loop of porn capitalism, however, boys are conditioned to imagine sexuality through a narrow lens, as most mainstream video streaming sites operate within capital-driven tech infrastructures designed to maximize clicks, engagement, and profit rather than diversity or well-being. Recommendation algorithms, homepage curation, and content categorization are optimized to push the most high-performing, sensational, and extreme material, creating a highly skewed and limiting representation of sex, sexuality, and gender. Recommender algorithms embedded in mainstream pornography sites respond to this cycle by suggesting “related content”: videos that are carefully curated to the user's data profile and more extreme to capture the user's attention.²⁴ This design not only reflects but actively amplifies existing social inequalities, shaping boys' experiences and reinforcing harmful norms – even when viewers seek content that differs from what is algorithmically prioritized.

PRINCIPLE 4



FOSTER THE RIGHT TO SEXUAL AGENCY, EXPLORATION, AND CHOICE

Supporting boys' self-development means making room for their exercise of sexual agency and their healthy sexual exploration.

While they are vulnerable to the overwhelming pressures and pressured choices of boyhood, boys also take – and should have – an active role in their self-development. When it comes to using pornography, adolescent boys are not just responding to manipulation, pressure, or confusion; they are also motivated by a natural curiosity to explore what their bodies can do and by a desire for pleasure, connection, and intimacy. Masturbation or autoeroticism is generally the point of their porn use, and it can also be a way to learn about sex, particularly when other ways of learning are foreclosed to them. Porn viewing may allow boys to exercise their sexual capacities in an independent way, one that need not inherently be harmful to those who view it.

This agency must be contextualized within broader socio-technical structures – namely, the pervasive sexism, harmful imagery, and algorithmically driven design of mass-access online pornography. Digital platforms, optimized for engagement and profit, prioritize sensationalist content that frequently reinforces the idea that sex – and the availability of someone else's body – is something boys can access on demand.²⁵ This dynamic compounds the intense social pressure on boys to assert dominance (that is, exert control over the sexuality of girls and other boys), normalizing entitlement and demand. By promoting boys' critical thinking and reflections on harmful versus positive masculinity, CSE – and other informal discussions with adults or supportive peers – can empower boys to break free from the pressure to

conform to strict norms of masculine and heteronormative sexuality. It can support them in acquiring essential knowledge, skills, and awareness related to healthy sexuality, fostering their overall well-being.²⁶

A capability approach affirms that every boy's substantive freedom – what he is actually able to do and be – is not merely his formal rights. This approach also supports his agency and well-being (including in matters of sexuality) by ensuring the enabling conditions – personal, social, and environmental – are in place to convert opportunities into the lived experiences of agency and healthy sexual development. As a 2023 Australian study found when talking with focus groups, young people believed that they “deserve agency over their interactions with online pornography. For some, this meant being able not to see pornography at all. For others, agency meant being able to choose when and where they viewed pornography.”²⁷ Their sexual activity is not just about pleasure or curiosity; it is also about expressing an emerging sense of a sexual self and a desire for intimacy and connection.

As such, a boy's right to explore and express his sexuality represents a fourth principle, but it is important to acknowledge the challenges boys face in accessing positive and age-appropriate resources and contexts to exercise this in healthy ways as part of their right to develop their personalities.²⁸

PRINCIPLE 5



ENSURE THE RIGHT TO ACCESS OPEN, HONEST, CLEAR INFORMATION ABOUT SEX AND SEXUALITY

Satisfying boys' need for and right to information about sex and sexuality is a critical responsibility for all who care about them.

Research tells us that boys turn to porn for information and to learn something about who they are and what they can do.²⁹ Given the scarcity of good education and lack of flexible, spontaneous discussions on a topic of such great interest, especially as gender has become so politically weaponized and CSE programs have come under fire, boys are seeking to fill the information gap. On their phones and laptops, in isolation and complete privacy, they can easily access highly entertaining, visually explicit content – an information load that can sometimes exceed the initial search.

Research also finds that there is a connection between younger age at first viewing pornography and non-heterosexual identity: Porn viewing has been found to be more frequent among LGBTQI+ adolescents than among their heterosexual counterparts. As noted earlier, for some LGBTQI+ young people, pornography can be an important source of information about sex.³⁰ This finding may in part reflect a lack of representation of LGBTQI+ sexuality in mainstream culture and education, which may lead young people to seek this out via pornography.

This problem is twofold: Pornography is designed primarily for entertainment and arousal; it does not typically provide factual information or promote healthy behaviors and informed, consensual decision-making about sexual health and relationships. But because what exists as education – programs in schools, or conversations in homes or religious spaces – is fraught with moralistic bias, misinformation, misconceptions about how children learn, and adult awkwardness and silence, most boys prefer to learn about sex from pornography or fail to find other credible sources of information.

This abdication of responsibility to provide accurate, helpful information about sex – and to talk with boys about it – drives them into the hands of an industry eager to exploit this unmet need. It does not have to be this way: There has been a greater understanding of systems-level efforts among policymakers and advocates, such as national sexuality education curricula, and growing cultural expectations for parents to be involved in supporting their children's healthy sexual development.

Boys' Sexual Development in the Age of Digital Porn

For example, a 2021 study carried out in public schools in Morelos, Mexico, found that 83% of students in schools with trained CSE teachers reported using a contraceptive method during their last sexual encounter versus 58% in comparison schools – a statistically significant difference.³¹ These efforts emphasize how accurate information protects against harm and encourages authentic connection free from shame.

Specifically, to support boys' critical reflections on sexuality and pornography, governments and communities must invest in CSE (in and out of schools) that is centered on human rights and gender equality, challenging the pervasive gender stereotypes, norms, and unequal values that hinder boys – as well as girls – from fully experiencing their full sexual and emotional development. Evidence-based approaches to help boys navigate porn online should consider the

potential negative impacts that pornography consumption can have on boys' understanding of consent, ideas about intimate relationships, expectations of sex, and views on gender stereotypes. These approaches should also critically reflect on the potential for harms and positive impacts in terms of learning about sex and self-exploration, as well as in understanding their own sexuality.

But formal sexuality education and out-of-school programs can't do this alone. Adults – parents, caregivers, teachers, youth workers, mentors, and peers – must also feel an ethical responsibility to speak with boys openly about sexuality in ways that overcome harmful norms and stereotypes. It would be easy, of course, if sexuality education were universally available, positive, and taught by well-trained facilitators, but even with that, all adults in boys' (and girls') lives would still need to be part of the solution.

2

HOW DOES

ONLINE



PORNOGRAPHY



USE

AFFECT BOYS?

5 HARMS FROM A CHILD
DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE

The world is currently undergoing a remarkable reconsideration of boys' development and a redesign of the institutions that care for them. However, conservative and traditionalist voices continue to promote restrictive definitions of what it means to be a man.

As boys and young men search for their own sexual identities, they are shaped by social institutions (such as the media and school environments), and they are influenced by structural factors and gender socialization through their interactions with peers, family members, and others. They internalize attitudes and beliefs about sexuality that, in turn, affect the quality of their current and future relationships.³²

Significant progress has been made toward gender equality, including efforts to promote healthier masculinities that make it more likely that boys will treat those around them with genuine care. However, the fact remains that ideas and practices that continue to violate boys' basic humanity are woven throughout the major institutions of boyhood. For example, the ubiquity of violence, competition, and bullying in their lives hardens boys and promotes norms and stereotypes of domination and conformity.³³

As numerous studies show, these gendered understandings of human sexuality show up in practice, often discouraging girls and young women from expressing sexual desire due to norms of uncertainty, shame, and guilt, while at the same time encouraging boys' sexual risk-taking behavior and pressuring them to exercise assertiveness in pursuing sexual contact.³⁴ For too many, the notion of "primitive," barely controllable impulses at the root of the male psyche still holds sway in the cultural imagination.

Families and schools, for example, have often operated within gendered social norms that expect boys to suppress emotional expression or vulnerability, and avoid behaviors perceived as "feminine." The common "boys will be boys" refrain points to how peer violence is tacitly permitted, misbehavior is often met with physical discipline, emotional expression is prohibited and policed, and expectations are lowered when it comes to virtues like caring and cooperation.³⁵

Deep-seated taboos among parents and educators prevail worldwide in talking about sexuality with boys and girls. Cultural norms and expectations about boys and men are consequential for their sexual development, and they are reflected in – and shaped by – the content they consume. For example, male sexual pleasure has been porn's "center" or "POV" (point of view); most mainstream porn depicts how men are expected to experience pleasure: always focused on their own pleasure and mostly through penetrative or male-orgasm-centered, heterosexual sex. Yet for some (perhaps many) men, part of the pleasure of sex is the pleasure of (and pleasuring) a partner. The archetype of male sex as selfish and dominant in porn does not reflect many boys' and men's desires, nor does it present human sexuality and the human body beyond genitality.

Given widespread discomfort and, in many contexts, outright taboos around discussing sexuality with young people, adults have often adopted a hands-off approach to this fundamental aspect of child development. In this absence of open dialogue and critical guidance, boys frequently encounter online pornography – which is more ubiquitous and easily accessible than at any point in history – as one of their first and most influential sources of sexual information. The challenge is not simply boys' exposure to digital porn; rather, it is their lack of the social, cognitive, and emotional tools needed to interpret, analyze, and question what they are watching, including its potential harms and limitations. CSE and supportive conversations at home cannot prevent exposure altogether, but they are critical for fostering the media literacy, perspective, and self-awareness necessary to navigate sexual content thoughtfully and responsibly.

A review of the research suggests five distinct ways boys are harmed by their exposure to online porn.

HARM 1



HARSHER PORNOGRAPHY REACHES YOUNGER AND YOUNGER BOYS, WHO OFTEN FIND IT UNINTENTIONALLY

For boys with curiosity about sex and access to a smartphone, porn has never been easier to find.

The ubiquity of online pornography has meant that many boys are exposed to pornographic images before actively seeking them out, and when they are still early in the process of learning the skills to make informed choices about their sexuality. An Australian eSafety Commissioner report found that of the young people who had encountered online pornography, 58% had unintentionally encountered content at least once, and 30% had first encountered content unintentionally before the age of 13. Young people described unintentional encounters with online pornography as frequent, unavoidable, and unwelcome.³⁶

In New Zealand, a study published by the Office of Film and Literature Classification (2018) found that one in four teens first saw pornographic content before the age of 12 and that 71% were not seeking pornography when they saw it for the first time. In terms of gender, the study found that access to this material was more common among male teenagers (75%) than female ones (58%).³⁷ Other research has found unintentional exposure among adolescents to be similarly high: 41% in Taiwan, for example, and 68% in the US.³⁸

According to the recent Common Sense Media survey, 15% of US teenagers are exposed to internet porn by age 10 or younger, and 54% by age 13.³⁹ Additionally, a 2020 Save the Children study in Spain found that the majority of adolescents (68%) report seeing pornography for the first time at age 12 and consuming it frequently thereafter.⁴⁰ In Sweden, a 2021 study found that the share of boys using pornography

frequently increased over the three survey cycles; those who reported using pornography daily increased from 11% in 2004 to 24% in 2014. By contrast, there was no change among girls who reported using pornography daily, while the proportion who never used pornography increased from 40% in 2004 to 51% in 2014.⁴¹ In the UK, a 2023 study on children's exposure found 10% encountered it by age 9, 27% by 11, and 50% by 13.⁴²

Although empirical data remain limited on unintentional pornography exposure among boys in the Global South, broader regional research – such as studies in Eastern Uganda and Southeast Asia – indicates that early and passive exposure is a real concern, with higher rates of early exposure for boys.⁴³ These early interactions, often unplanned or unseen by caregivers, align with findings globally that associate earlier exposure with more premature and risk-prone sexual behaviors, highlighting an urgent need for comprehensive pornography literacy and media-awareness strategies as part of sexual education efforts.

Smartphones put pornographic images in the pockets of anyone who uses them. Today, online porn is by far the easiest way for boys and young people to satisfy curiosity about their bodies, romantic feelings, and sexual desires. In the view of Australian sociologist Michael Flood, “Pornography is a cornerstone of many boys' and men's sexualities.”⁴⁴ This is true even in low-income urban settings where access to technology may be limited: In one study, up to a third of 10- to 14-year-olds in Ecuador, China, the

Democratic Republic of the Congo, Indonesia, and Belgium reported having seen pornographic videos (intentionally or unintentionally).⁴⁵

The Save the Children report in Spain also found consumption occurs mostly in private (93.9%) and on mobile phones, and

it focuses on free online content (98.5%), mostly based on violence and inequality.⁴⁶ As such, boys' natural curiosity about sex is entangled at the intersection of the information economy (which includes tech companies) and the digital pornography industry, making their attention a commodity and gendered tropes about sex a marketing tactic.

THE PORN INDUSTRY SIMPLIFIED

The industry supplying pornography is huge, diverse, and highly adaptive, shapeshifting practically by the day. There is debate around how to fit the complex array of sexually explicit and pornographic content into an umbrella term of a singular "industry," as definitions of what constitutes pornography range across cultural contexts, religions, ages, and more.⁴⁷ Scholar Shira Tarrant has traced an industry that has morphed and grown from the magazine days of *Playboy* in the 1950s through videos on VHS and DVD to today's highly diverse set of internet media and subscription services with annual global revenues of around \$97 billion.⁴⁸

A key innovation came when porn websites mimicked the video uploading and sharing site YouTube to offer free user access to a huge volume of videos. Motivating porn suppliers were the vast rewards available from advertising income, the harvesting of user data, and an ecosystem of vertically integrated livecam and for-pay sites.

Today's industry business model includes making money from advertising, data collection, and various types of paid content and subscriptions. Much broader than film set production companies, today's industry can be thought of as a network or continuum of content, technology, and businesses, with the main power and money located with the distribution companies that own large aggregator sites. The industry also includes a large amount of livestreaming, and mainstream sites include "amateur" content (which may include professional performers or consenting "regular" people with other jobs, but also nonconsensual content and child sexual exploitation and abuse material). Porn companies also make, own, and connect with entities such as pornographic video games and animation companies, and they often promote themselves in popular culture platforms and contexts, such as X, YouTube, and Discord.

Technology that makes content accessible and affordable – much of it free, with some behind paywalls – has driven phenomenal growth. But despite a recent surge in feminist porn and increases in female porn viewership, the industry depends on a dominant market: Most consumers are male.⁴⁹ Assessing porn's impact on boys' development requires grasping the industry's motivations. Simply, they are economic. American scholar Harry Brod explained, "Pornography is a form of commerce – intrinsically, not coincidentally. The commercial aspect of pornography lies at its very roots."⁵⁰ In other words, fostering boys' and young men's healthy sexuality is not foremost in the minds of porn makers.

The industry is now sprawling and highly attuned to changes in demand. Though numbers are hard to track, according to global website traffic data from Statista, the top porn site in the world, Pornhub, received 4.01 *billion* website visits per month in October 2025.⁵¹

The company Aylo (previously called MindGeek) operates several websites that allow third parties to post and distribute adult content and is "one of the top five bandwidth companies in the world," with hundreds of pornographic membership sites and annual revenues of \$460 million in 2021.⁵² Among Aylo's many platforms, Pornhub, its largest free site, was visited 42 billion times in 2019, or roughly 115 million times *per day*, and employed hundreds of programmers and engineers to tailor content to keep these visitors coming back.⁵³

Boys' Sexual Development in the Age of Digital Porn

Recent adaptations in the industry give a sense of its responsiveness to the market. COVID's mass unemployment drove thousands of performers from porn studios to livecam sites, leading to record increases in model sign-ups for the most popular sites. Begun in 2016, OnlyFans is a subscription feed service enabling sex workers – and other influencers – to collect followers and customize content to a fan base seeking a more personal experience.⁵⁴

Crucially, the biggest and perhaps best source of data about what people like to watch on the internet and what they would pay for doesn't come from streaming giants like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, or Hulu. It comes from porn. A 2018 study from the New York University School of Law found that MindGeek (now Aylo) was at the “leading edge” of collecting and analyzing user data, the furthest along in terms of using big data in a feedback loop to recommend content tailor-made for the user.⁵⁵

Revenue is generated through advertising, which necessitates maximizing user attention through data collection, analytics, and machine-learning algorithms.⁵⁶ Pornhub, in particular, operates one of the most sophisticated digital data analysis operations that caters primarily to users and not advertisers. The scale of data collection on porn sites has raised ethical questions about companies like Aylo using children's data to push targeted ads or manipulate their behavior online for profit by serving up content designed to keep them scrolling endlessly.⁵⁷

Attempts to regulate the sprawling flow of online porn have been hindered in most democratic countries by free speech rights and by the internet's global nature, which makes it challenging to enforce national legislation for providers of pornography located outside a country's jurisdiction.⁵⁸ Aylo, operationally located in Montreal, has been sued for child abuse to the tune of \$500 million, investigated by Canadian authorities for sexual exploitation, and demonetized by Visa and Mastercard.⁵⁹

To keep up with an industry so rapidly evolving, so tough to regulate and yet so influential, it is essential to track new research on the online worlds of boys and girls, trends in pornography, and how cultural norms intersect with their developmental vulnerabilities. More importantly, evidence-based approaches are critically needed on curbing the exploitation of boys' sexual development and promoting the healthy construction of boys' sexuality and their engagement with others, particularly in building relationships.

HARM 2

WHAT BOYS ENCOUNTER IN PORN IS FREQUENTLY VIOLENT, RACIST, SEXIST, AND DEMEANING TOWARD WOMEN AND GIRLS

The main motivations behind boys' porn use are not malicious. Boys and others explore online porn for reasons such as curiosity; fantasy; mood management; to relieve boredom, upset, and stress; a sexual outlet; self-knowledge, information, and instruction; sensation-seeking; and exploring sexual identity.⁶⁰ Yet at very young ages, just as they begin to wonder about their bodies and sexualities, boys often receive messages that sex is mostly about **dominance, detachment, self-centeredness, and aggression.**

British social theorist Amia Srinivasan explains what's new about the generations of university students now coming to her classes. Simply put, she writes, "Sex for my students is what porn says it is."⁶¹ Unfettered access and an industry increasingly sophisticated in search engine optimization have meant that younger and younger boys now view pornography that is more and more one-dimensional, distorted, and extreme.

"It's no secret that today's children are guinea pigs in a massive porn experiment."

Peggy Orenstein, *Boys and Sex*⁶²

In researching her book, Orenstein was less troubled by the explicit nature of modern porn than its "persistent

depiction of women as things, and in degrading and compliant roles – less the sex than the *sexism*."⁶³ What she heard in interviews with young men was that "the media scripts boys consume from childhood onward are continuously objectifying, demeaning, hostile, inimical, or indifferent to women and present masculinity as inherently antagonistic to femininity."⁶⁴ Her concern echoes those of pioneering masculinities scholars like sociologist Michael Kimmel, who argued decades ago, "Although most pornographic images are of women, pornography is, at its heart, about men. It is about men's relationship with sexuality, with women, and with each other."⁶⁵ Not only is porn affecting the ways boys are viewing women and girls, but it's also affecting the way they see themselves as future partners and sexual beings.

The control and humiliation of women is what floods the online porn world inhabited by young men and boys. As Laura Bates, author of *Men Who Hate Women*, has written:

This is a generation for whom the boundary between online sex and offline is barely existent and for whom sexual violence has already become devastatingly normalized, in large part because of the way in which it floods the online world young people inhabit.⁶⁶

New artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, such as deepfake and virtual reality (VR), are changing the scale and scope of the porn industry in ways that are not yet clear.

Deepfake technologies like digitally altering an image to make a person appear to be someone else, typically for malicious purposes, are beginning to flood the internet. As reporter Aja Romano notes:

The genre of deepfakes as we know them first grew out of a Reddit forum for photoshopping the heads of female celebrities onto the bodies of porn stars, so it's perhaps unsurprising that satisfying sexually driven fantasies has remained the deepfake's primary purpose.⁶⁷

Deepfake pornography is by far the most prevalent kind of deepfake imagery currently being created and circulated, and it is often used to harass, blackmail, or harm individuals, the overwhelming majority of whom are women.⁶⁸

A Deeptrace Labs study found that 96% of all deepfake videos were pornographic and nonconsensual, and a full 100% of the videos' subjects were women.⁶⁹ The rapid growth in traffic to deepfake porn websites is causing advertisers to flock to these sites.⁷⁰ And as technology advances, users are able to produce more realistic results with less effort, data, and expertise. DeepNude, a computer app launched in 2019, used deep learning image translation algorithms to remove clothes from images, almost always of women, and generate naked body parts in their place.

VR porn, which uses AI algorithms to create realistic 3D environments and characters and allows users to interact with virtual porn actors in a more immersive and interactive way than traditional 2D porn, is radically changing the consumption of porn. VR porn's first-person perspective makes it seem like the actions of the actor are being done directly to the user.⁷¹ Innovation in AI-assisted porn creation is unlikely to slow down. Rachel Thomas, founder of fast.ai, commented on the uncontrollable takeover of porn creation by modern technology and its consequences: "In general, our legal system has been slow to catch up with addressing [this kind of] sexual imagery and the use of AI is deepening and accelerating this problem."⁷²

Pornography contains a range of genres, and the pornography young people view may be diverse, but for

many, it is likely to include mass-marketed or "mainstream" pornography. A range of studies have found mainstream pornography to include significant levels of violent, sexually hostile, sexist, and racist content.⁷³ Content analyses have determined that the most common theme is portraying women as victims and men as perpetrators; other common themes include the abuse or denigration of marginalized and vulnerable people, including children and people with disabilities. A 2020 study of 4,009 heterosexual scenes from two major free pornographic tube sites (Pornhub and Xvideos) found that overall, 45% of Pornhub scenes included at least one act of physical aggression, while 35% of scenes from Xvideos contained aggression. Women were the target of the aggression in 97% of the scenes, and their response to aggression was almost always neutral or positive (and rarely negative). Men were the perpetrators of aggression against women in 76% of scenes.⁷⁴

Very few studies have focused on the role pornography plays in influencing and modeling sexual desire on the basis of race and ethnicity. On the one hand, some argue pornography has the potential to expand and transform the standards of what is beautiful, desirable, and pleasurable to include those at the margins of racialized and gendered hierarchies.⁷⁵ On the other hand, pornography often uses race at the risk of reinforcing patriarchal and racist standards of desire.⁷⁶ Explicitly racist narratives are often present on mainstream porn websites.⁷⁷ Content analyses of pornography indicate Black women are more often the target of sexual and physical aggression compared to White women. Furthermore, research suggests that the most aggressive depictions occur within interracial couples.⁷⁸

In addition to how racial framing in porn distorts views of "others," boys can also internalize depictions of race in relation to their own sexuality. A 2021 University of Indiana study looked at 1,741 pornographic scenes featuring heterosexual couples from two of the largest online pornographic streaming tube sites in the world (Xvideos and Pornhub); researchers found that Black men are more often portrayed as the perpetrators of aggression against women and are depicted as significantly less intimate with their partners in comparison to White men.⁷⁹

In Brian Curtin's review of the mixed-methods analysis *Race and Masculinity in Gay Men's Pornography*, he argues that user-submitted porn found on most streaming sites typically reflects structural racism at large, which is reinforced by viewer comments "discussing" Black men in

hypermasculine terms and perceiving these men's sexuality as a condition of race.⁸⁰ As Black and brown boys attempt to navigate their own sexualities amidst these conditions, disentangling these tropes can make this process more painful and complex.

CAN THE PORN INDUSTRY BE AN ALLY? CAN PORN USE BE POSITIVE? WHAT ABOUT FEMINIST PORN?

A University of Sydney-led research team brought together an international panel of experts (including adolescent health experts, sexual health experts, sex educators, and pornography researchers) to identify criteria that could be used to find pornography that supports healthy sexual development. The team discovered that healthy pornography should have the following elements: "a negotiation of consent onscreen; depictions of safe sex; ethical production; a focus on pleasure for all participants; a variety of sexual practices; [and] a variety of body types, genders, and races."⁸¹ Yet some feminist advocates point out the limitations of this model, which is difficult for many to access considering the content largely exists behind paywalls and may, in some cases, still reinforce gendered violence and racism despite adopting a moniker of "feminist" or "ethical."⁸²

Encouraging the use of, or simply raising awareness about, the existence of feminist porn or more ethical forms of use is an additional strategy considered by some. According to one feminist filmmaker, feminist porn "expresses female pleasure by visibly promoting safe sex – explicitly mentioning consent, showing the performers as real people rather than sex objects, and making sure the camera moves beyond just focusing on the woman while excluding the man's head from the frame."⁸³

In several qualitative studies on adolescents and porn use, many adolescents acknowledged positive aspects of online pornography that could be valuable to them. The Common Sense Media report revealed pornography may play a larger role in exploration for LGBTQI+ teens than for other teens, as intentional pornography exposure was reported to be higher among LGBTQI+ teens (89%) than non-LGBTQI+ teens (70%).⁸⁴ In *The Trouble with Normal*, American scholar Michael Warner wrote that for many LGBTQI+-identifying individuals, porn depicting non-heteronormative sex practices can represent more than just "free speech" to be privately consumed. Its production and demand amount to publicly certifiable recognition of queer desire with the power to destabilize hierarchies of shame.⁸⁵

In the limited analyses of non-heterosexual porn, results paint a mixed picture. McGill University researchers found there were both more displays of aggression *and* more displays of affection and pleasure in same-sex online pornographic videos relative to different-sex videos in a sample of popular same-sex videos on Pornhub.⁸⁶ The effectiveness of efforts to promote ethical porn consumption that eroticizes consent, discourages inequitable attitudes, and promotes safe sex remains challenging to determine.

Further, the idea of "less worse" porn is not as relevant to those focused on addressing porn use among children and adolescents, who generally don't have the financial means to pay for ethical or feminist porn, which is largely behind a paywall. What may be necessary, then, is a path ahead to address pornography that prevents and reduces sexual harm without reinforcing sex negativity, or the idea that sex is shameful and can only be acceptable if it is controlled by strict norms or behaviors. This requires addressing the root causes, including regulating the porn and tech industries to make content safe by design.⁸⁷

But despite these various efforts to fill an educational void, the problem of modern pornography requires more than one-off porn-literacy programs. It calls for a more comprehensive approach to sexuality education online – as well as in schools, the homes of children and adolescents, and all the spaces where boys learn to be men – to effectively navigate the dynamic modern digital world, engaging young people themselves as part of the solution as well as the adults and caregivers in their lives.

HARM 3



PORN CAN DISTORT BOYS' SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT

What young men learn about sex from online pornography is often incorrect and distorted. Research finds that the more porn a boy views, the more sexually “illiterate” he is. A 2021 study found that porn viewers “were more likely to hold erroneous sexual beliefs than adolescents who had not viewed pornography.”⁸⁸

Researchers have found that the more porn is seen as realistic, the more likely it is to influence sexual behavior.⁸⁹ This finding is especially important because many teen boys “aren’t always sure what is fake and what is real in porn”⁹⁰ and because things will become even murkier as AI and generative adversarial networks further obscure content sources.

As boys tell researchers over and over, they certainly recognize that what they are learning changes them. Specifically, it affects how they imagine intimacy and sexuality, understand consent and relational aggression, and accept inequality. In an Australian eSafety Commissioner report on young men’s online worlds, young men revealed their critical, nuanced perspectives on porn’s impacts: “They often experience negative impacts because of their encounters with online pornography, including feelings of shame and a lack of

self-control.” Additionally, young men “indicate they are aware that pornography is generally not a good model of gender equality, consent or respectful relationships.”⁹¹ A separate eSafety Commissioner report specifically focused on porn found that young people recognized negative impacts that online pornography can have on them, particularly in relation to their understanding and expectations of relationships and sex. Most young people surveyed thought there were negative impacts on young people’s understanding of consent (74%), ideas about intimate relationships (76%), expectations of sex (76%), and views on gender stereotypes (64%).⁹²

In US scholar Robert Jensen’s brief history of modern pornography, he found that as content became “increasingly cruel and degrading” over the last decade, “it became more common for men to talk openly about how pornography affects them,” including how it causes them “emotional distress” for how it is “distorting their sexual imaginations and interfering in their sex lives.”⁹³ In an interview that author Peggy Orenstein conducted with a high school senior from California, the young man explained: “I think porn affects your ability to be innocent in a sexual relationship. The whole idea of exploring sex without any preconceived ideas of what it is, you know?”⁹⁴

Associations between boys’ porn use and negative outcomes are “very close to causal.”

Though causality remains contested, powerful theoretical models and advanced statistical methods have enabled researchers to identify associations strong enough that they are, in the words of a Taiwanese research team, “very close to causal.”⁹⁵ In a meta-analysis of studies, Australian sociologist Michael Flood found three types of studies – experimental, correlational, and longitudinal – reporting evidence “robust enough for us to be able to claim that pornography consumption

does have discernible effects.”⁹⁶ These effects, which can include an increase in aggressive attitudes and behaviors, are mediated by several factors: personal characteristics (like age, maturity level, sexual experience, personality, and family background), how they engage with the porn they view (for example, how active they are and how realistic they believe the material is), and the context in which they view it (such as whether alone or in a group and whether their exposure is voluntary).

HARM 4

RESEARCH HAS FOUND A CLEAR LINK BETWEEN PORN USE AND SEXUAL AGGRESSION

One of the most detailed studies on pornography and male sexual aggression was conducted by Indiana University researchers in 2021. The study explored whether higher porn use is linked to increased sexual aggression, and importantly, looked not just at porn use alone but also at how men approach sex. The researchers defined “impersonal sex” as treating someone like an object rather than a partner, and they identified this attitude as a key risk factor for aggression. The study found that men who both used more extreme pornography and had a more impersonal view of sex were more likely to report sexually aggressive behaviors than men with only one of these factors. The study design focused on interactions between these variables, meaning the findings suggest that pornography can amplify risk for those already predisposed to viewing sex in impersonal or exploitative ways rather than causing aggression on its own.⁹⁷

Longitudinal data can go some way in implying a causal relationship because they study a change in attitudes or behaviors over time. To explain the emergence of sexual aggression over time, a study by Ybarra and Thompson (2018) generated six waves of data from 2006 to 2012 from 1,586 young people ages 10 to 21 in the US. The study asked about a range of individual characteristics, including personal victimization, aggressive behavior, exposure to spousal abuse, and exposure to pornography (divided into violent and nonviolent). The longitudinal nature of the data allowed Ybarra and Thompson to predict the probability of a first act of sexual violence, using a range of multivariate logistic regression models and including only first instances of sexual violence. They found that the two strongest predictors of perpetration of a first sexually violent act were prior exposure

to parental/caregiver abuse and exposure to violent (but not nonviolent) pornography.⁹⁸

In a 2016 meta-analysis examining the relationship between pornography consumption and sexual aggression, researchers analyzed 22 studies across seven countries. Overall, the analysis found a general pattern suggesting that consuming violent pornography may act as an exacerbating factor for sexual aggression, with associations stronger for verbal than for physical aggression – though both associations were statistically significant.⁹⁹ However, it is important to note that the meta-analysis also highlighted variation across studies. Some research within the review found no significant relationship between pornography use and sexual aggression, especially when the content was nonviolent or when controlling for other factors, such as peer norms, alcohol use, and pre-existing attitudes toward gender and consent. This suggests that while violent content can increase risk, pornography alone cannot be considered a direct cause of sexual aggression; its impact depends heavily on context, individual predispositions, and broader social and cultural norms.¹⁰⁰

In yet another review of studies meeting a high bar for rigor, the Government Equalities Office in the UK commissioned a report on negative attitudes and behaviors associated with porn use. The report focused on peer-reviewed studies published since 2005 (focused on male subjects ages 16-plus) and found “substantial evidence of an association between the use of pornography and harmful sexual attitudes and behaviours towards women,” particularly when it comes to violent porn.¹⁰¹ Specifically, the report identified four themes

in the “influential relationship” between porn use and men’s attitudes and behavior: viewing women as sex objects; shaping men’s sexual expectations of women; acceptance of sexual aggression toward women; and perpetration of sexual aggression.¹⁰² An Australian review of research came to similar conclusions, finding that “pornography may strengthen attitudes supportive of sexual violence and violence against women.”¹⁰³

A study based on a nationally representative sample of adult men and women in the US found that even without depicting overtly violent sex, pornography may still influence men’s attitudes and behaviors when it shows sexual acts that are degrading, painful, or humiliating to their partners.¹⁰⁴ Other outcomes linked to porn use include more gender-stereotypical beliefs; more performance worries and concern about their appearance; more sexual dissatisfaction; higher rates of sexual intercourse, with more casual encounters; and, in some studies, greater likelihood of perpetrating sexual aggression.¹⁰⁵

For girls, modern porn often produces and reinforces negative depictions of women in hostile and violent situations, promoting imagery of sexual pleasure that is derived from their coercion and objectification. Scholar Amia Srinivasan argues that women and girls face “increased objectification, intensified body expectations, decreasing pleasure, and shrinking options for sex on their terms.”¹⁰⁶ In one interview in

the Australian eSafety Commissioner report, a young woman explained, “[Porn] makes you question almost what you’re doing wrong if your experience doesn’t look like what most videos are portraying.” Another young woman described the emphasis on male pleasure: “That sex is focused on men finishing and not providing the woman any pleasure.”¹⁰⁷

Most troubling is the way porn violence can impact young men who already show higher tendencies toward domination and aggression, as identified in studies measuring traits such as hostile masculinity, endorsement of rigid gender norms, or a history of aggressive behaviors. These risks are compounded by the effects of online platforms, whose algorithms increasingly direct viewers toward more extreme and violent content to sustain engagement and attention.¹⁰⁸

A European study of porn users found 49% “mentioned at least sometimes searching for sexual content or being involved in OSAs [online sexual activities] that were not previously interesting to them or that they considered disgusting.”¹⁰⁹ Recommender algorithms embedded in popular streaming websites that feed users videos based on harvested data can muddy boundaries viewers set about sex, consent, and pleasure. Jennifer Johnson at Virginia Tech has argued that these popular tube site algorithms are based on adult men’s tastes but are employed indiscriminately – though deliberately – with younger male users.¹¹⁰

IS PORN ADDICTIVE?

Porn use can be especially problematic for boys and young men at risk for dependency or addiction. The American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* does not currently have a specific diagnosis called "porn addiction."¹¹¹ Rather, problematic online pornography use (POPU) is a concept studied as a subset of a more general hypersexual or compulsive sexual disorder that involves impaired control, deteriorating lives, and risky use. POPU is essentially characterized by excessive masturbation. Like the clinical manifestations of other addictive disorders, POPU results in a loss of control, excessive time engaged in sex-related behaviors, and negative consequences affecting the individual or others in their life.¹¹²

Yet there is no consensus, and a fair amount of skepticism, about the addictiveness of pornography in a clinical sense. In one large-scale Italian study on the topic among male high school students, nine of 10 young men said they used pornography, and nearly 20% of them said they used it daily. Still, even when their porn use became habitual, "very few consider[ed] this habit an addiction, and even when they d[id], even fewer consider[ed] that this could have a negative effect on them."¹¹³ While some research employs the language of addiction to describe habitual pornography use, self-perceived pornography addiction is a multifaceted construct shaped by individual, social, and contextual influences. In Spain, Mexican journalist Lydia Cacho conducted interviews with hundreds of children who reported feeling "obsessed" or uncontrollable in their consumption of porn.¹¹⁴ Additionally, in a nationally representative sample in the US, roughly 11% of men and 3% of women reported some agreement with the statement "I am addicted to pornography." Across all participants, such feelings were most strongly associated with male gender, younger age, greater religiousness, greater moral incongruence regarding pornography use, and greater use of pornography.¹¹⁵

While porn sites are also an integral part of adult men's cyberspace, younger boys and men seem to be more concerned about porn consumption. Equimundo's *State of American Men 2023* report found that though at least 60% of all ages surveyed visit porn sites at least weekly, Gen Z was most likely to have made attempts to stop and been unsuccessful.¹¹⁶ This finding is both encouraging and worrying; it suggests that many young men are aware of the harm in their lives from excessive porn use, while it also tells of how powerful porn is in its provision of algorithmically driven, simulated pleasure. Regardless of the lack of agreement on porn addiction in clinical terms, the fact is that porn is being seen, often unintentionally, by younger and younger boys – and, therefore, it requires action.

HARM 5



PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS FACE NEW CHALLENGES IN NURTURING THEIR SONS' HEALTHY SEXUALITY IN THE FACE OF THE PORN ONSLAUGHT

All children have a right to learn about sex in developmentally appropriate and accurate ways; at a pace that allows them to make emotional, intellectual, and ethical sense of their sexual feelings and reactions; and in ways that present sexuality as a normal and pleasurable part of human existence and relationships. The ability to tell fact from fiction and make informed choices among online offerings requires critical thinking skills, which are acquired with guidance, practice, maturity, and experience.

Boys need to be thoughtfully engaged in conversations around CSE content, particularly regarding healthy relationships and critical media consumption. This content, together with practical life skills, can equip them with the capabilities to decipher porn images and scripts and to turn away from content that is sexist, violent, racist, offensive, or confusing.¹¹⁷

Unfortunately, the unregulated and unaccountable global porn industry has become boys' primary sexuality educator.¹¹⁸ In many countries, the yawning vacuum for practical, honest, and developmentally appropriate information – created by an “abstinence-only” approach to sexuality education and general avoidance in families and schools – has meant there is a tremendous market opportunity for the pornography industry. In the Australian eSafety Commissioner study on young people and porn, 33% of young people said parents/caregivers are not equipped to help young people, which may prevent help-seeking to manage the impacts of online pornography; some noted that their parents/caregivers were the source of anti-porn stigma in their homes – creating a

potential barrier to young people seeking support from their parents/caregivers.¹¹⁹

Unrealistic portrayals of relationships between men and women impact boys' understanding of healthy and equitable relationships, and **viewing pornography in adolescence is often associated with poorer romantic outcomes.**¹²⁰

In a study on pornography use among 373 heterosexual young men, findings revealed that both the frequency of pornography use and problematic pornography use were related to greater gender role conflict,¹²¹ more avoidant and anxious attachment styles, poorer relationship quality, and less sexual satisfaction.¹²²

In a digital age when younger generations operate and have access to new technologies unfamiliar to their parents, adults responsible for fostering healthy sexuality among boys now require a degree of digital literacy that can seem overwhelming.

In one of the Australian eSafety Commissioner reports, a 16-year-old straight man said, “Some responsibility should be [on] schools and [some] should be [on] parents. Sometimes it's hard for parents to educate, though, because some aren't as tech-savvy as others.”¹²³ Considering generation gaps in the digital literacy divide, increasing educators' and parents' awareness and confidence to have conversations about pornography without shame or stigma can help them prepare for and manage physical, cognitive, and emotional changes as boys grow up within an unregulated digital and technological ecosystem.

3

WHAT



AB
CD

SHOULD

BE DONE?



**PRIORITY ACTIONS
TO PREVENT AND RESPOND
TO THE HARMS
OF DIGITAL PORN**

By understanding the realities of boys' lives and meeting them where they are, solutions can begin to emerge to address their unmet needs.

Clearly, challenges abound with an industry so powerful and adaptive, one that is capitalizing on the curiosities of anyone it can, but largely adolescent boys and their sexual development. Yet there is room for action.

An abstinence-only approach (i.e., "Don't watch porn") fails to acknowledge the scope of the contemporary porn industry and the realities of the cyberworld that digital generations live in, as well as boys' agency and right to safe, private, and autonomous sexual development and exploration.

There is no single, silver-bullet solution. Strategies should operate across the ecosystem, from broad and structural responses – regulation such as age verification and safety by design, and systems that support the implementation of CSE that includes porn literacy education – to direct engagement with classes, individual boys, and peers, and through caregivers and educators.

The following five practical actions are guided by the principles presented at the beginning of this paper and more thoroughly adopt a developmental perspective toward boys.

ACTION 1

PROMOTE DIALOGUE ABOUT MANHOOD AND MASCULINITIES

Deliberate conversations about healthy manhood and masculinities can strengthen boys' resistance to harmful porn and encourage healthier, more responsible, and more pleasurable sexual development.

Equimundo's research and programming, such as the [Global Boyhood Initiative](#) and the [Manhood 2.0](#) program, are premised on the recognition that social ideas about manhood matter. They aim to equip adults with the tools and resources to raise, teach, and coach boys and adolescents to share emotions in healthy ways, accept and connect with others, stand up and speak out against inequality, and break free from stereotypes.

For the same reason, deciphering and critiquing the myths about masculinity must undergird discussions about porn. If, as sociologist Michael Kimmel argues, porn is "about men,"¹²⁴ then solutions must be based on ways the porn industry – and boys' vulnerability to it – depend on misconceptions

about masculinity. Equimundo's research affirms that there is a crisis of connection, of relationship, of meaning and purpose, in the lives of far too many young men.¹²⁵ Their inability to establish satisfying relationships, general social isolation, and immersion in online media (including porn sites) reflect the impact of masculine myths. In many cases, the masculine myths propagated through familial, educational, and digital systems pressure boys into emotional disengagement and hyper-individualism, impeding their ability to form meaningful bonds.¹²⁶ This cultural void helps explain why pornography, beyond mere curiosity, becomes a default source of intimacy and reassurance for those starved of authentic relational experiences.

Boys' Sexual Development in the Age of Digital Porn

The onus is on those responsible for boys – including parents, caregivers, schools, the world of work, online platforms and tech companies, and traditional media – to create structural responses that provide connected, healthy, and safe pathways to adult manhood. There is much to learn from the positive impact of feminist advocacy globally in advancing discussions about women's right to sexual pleasure, access to information about their bodies, and sexual agency. However, shame and stigma around sexual pleasure, agency, and age-appropriate information and education continue to pervade popular discourse and political agendas. Instead, porn has become the default influence for boys' exploration of sexual pleasure and agency.

Yet the research for this paper also finds great promise. There are many boys and young men, not to mention parents (mothers and fathers both) and partners, who are desperate to break free of the confining scripts of manhood, including in relation to sex. One of the most encouraging findings from Equipundo's research is that more and more boys and men have nuanced and critical perspectives about porn's impact on their understanding and expectations of relationships and sex. They report that their encounters with online porn have negative effects, including feelings of shame and a lack of self-control, and indicate they are aware that pornography is generally not a good model of gender equality, consent, or

respectful relationships.¹²⁷ It is their meta-cognition – their awareness of how porn impacts their own thinking – that offers an underappreciated opportunity to meet unmet needs around promoting healthy sexualities and masculinities.

Rather than an abstinence-only sexuality education, a positive masculinities lens on sexual development that encourages shame-free discussions of sexuality and porn use can confront the sprawling industry for its exploitation of boys' curiosities, confusions, and lack of information. Being supported in acknowledging their misgivings about the values and assumptions embedded in porn helps boys exercise their authentic voices, break out of their silence and isolation, and discover their solidarity with other boys.

Boys deserve the space to see their sexuality not as a problem to be prevented but as a source of meaningful self-expression, a path to deeper connection, an opportunity to develop their sexual "citizenship" (a term coined by researchers Jennifer S. Hirsch and Shamus Khan¹²⁸ to acknowledge responsibilities to sexual partners) and, finally, to exercise their right to develop their personality. Real progress requires moving beyond individual insight to structural change. Gender-transformative approaches provide a roadmap for doing so—linking boys' personal reflections about sexuality and respect to wider efforts for equality and healthy relationships.

GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES

Gender-transformative approaches encourage a critical awareness of gender roles, norms, and stereotypes; promote the equitable positions of girls and women and people of diverse gender identities in society; challenge the distribution of resources and allocation of duties between men and women; and challenge the unequal power dynamics underpinning discrimination and oppression. The ultimate aim of gender-transformative approaches is to achieve gender equality, promote health (including sexual and reproductive health and rights), and empower women, girls and gender-nonconforming people by addressing the root causes of gender inequality and redistributing power, resources, and services more equally.¹²⁹ Applied to CSE, gender-transformative approaches ensure that curricula go beyond basic biological information to help young people critically examine gendered expectations, power relations, and consent – empowering both boys and girls to make informed, respectful choices in their relationships.

GENDER-SYNCHRONIZED APPROACHES

Gender-synchronized approaches deliberately combine efforts that transform gender norms and stereotypes for everyone, including boys, girls and people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.¹³⁰ When integrated into sexuality education, these approaches ensure that boys and men are engaged as allies in advancing equality and healthy relationships rather than being treated solely as risk factors or bystanders.

ACTION 2



ADVANCE COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION

Despite evidence that well-conceived CSE results in healthier sexual and reproductive health decision-making, too few adolescent boys have access to these programs globally.

A comprehensive global review by the United Nations found that CSE not only promotes gender equality and equitable social norms, but has a positive impact on safer sexual behaviours, delaying sexual debut and increasing condom use.¹³¹ There has been a movement growing for decades advocating for universal access to CSE, with youth-led and feminist movements in particular taking the lead.¹³² This global movement has spurred a scaling-up of sexuality education and sexual and reproductive health services in many countries. These programs include age-appropriate information and education about healthy relationships, media literacy, and related skills to make responsible choices in their lives – all of which increase children and young people's ability to resist misogynistic and violent themes in pornography.

There is global progress in implementing CSE, yet many countries around the world still face compounding challenges. According to a 2021 United Nations report, 85% of 155 countries surveyed had policies or laws relating to sexuality education, with considerably more countries reporting policies to mandate delivery at the secondary education level than at the primary level.¹³³ Additionally, the existence of policy and legal frameworks does not always equate to comprehensive content or strong implementation. Most countries reported that they had some curricula in place, but more detailed analysis suggests that these often lacked the breadth of topics needed to make sexuality education effective and relevant.¹³⁴

Additionally, regional variation is stark. For example:

- In Europe, where countries like the Netherlands, Sweden, and Germany mandate evidence-based, rights-focused CSE, adolescents report lower rates of teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, and sexual violence, alongside higher satisfaction and better communication in relationships.¹³⁵
- In parts of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, policy adoption has accelerated, but implementation remains patchy due to insufficient teacher training, cultural resistance, and limited funding.¹³⁶
- In Latin America, countries such as Argentina and Uruguay have pioneered gender-transformative CSE frameworks, linking sexuality education to broader efforts around social justice and reducing gender-based violence.¹³⁷

The US, by contrast, continues to face steep political barriers to delivering quality, nationwide CSE: According to a study in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, nearly 50% of US teenagers do not receive sex education that meets national goals.¹³⁸ Forty-one US states have a state-level mandate for sex education, HIV education, or both, yet among those that do, content varies widely – ranging from evidence-based and medically accurate programs to abstinence-only programs that often exclude information on consent, LGBTQI+ identities, and pornography literacy.¹³⁹ This fragmented approach correlates with poorer sexual health outcomes: For example, US teens experience five times the pregnancy rate of their Dutch counterparts, who benefit from standardized, inclusive CSE curricula, lower rates of sexually transmitted infections, fewer abortions, and greater reported satisfaction with sexual relationships.¹⁴⁰

ACTION 3

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PROVIDE CRITICAL PORN LITERACY - IN OTHER WORDS, TEACH BOYS TO BE CRITICAL ABOUT WHAT THEY CONSUME ONLINE

Early evidence shows that porn literacy approaches - which simply means encouraging young people to be critically aware about what they see in the porn they access - can help reduce porn's harms by addressing boys' demand for porn and helping minimize its negative effects when there is exposure.

Media literacy theory guides these interventions to help boys critique the misleading messages and depictions in pornography. Porn literacy education can sensitize boys to perceive how sexual behavior is misrepresented in sexually explicit media, including by drawing attention to how porn is mainly produced for profit by male directors for a male audience and frequently contains unrealistic (and sometimes degrading) portrayals of sexual events.¹⁴¹

One of the best-developed porn literacy programs with a formal academic evaluation is *The Truth About Pornography: A Pornography Literacy Curriculum for High School Students Designed to Reduce Sexual and Dating Violence*. Developed by US public health experts Emily Rothman, Nicole Daley, and Jess Alder, the curriculum is delivered through the Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships initiative at the Boston Public Health Commission. Students sign up through community organizations, such as youth service programs.¹⁴² A pilot study led by Rothman found that students were less likely to see pornography as lucrative, realistic, or a good way to learn about sex after taking the class, and they had a better understanding of the legality of sending nude selfies to underage individuals.¹⁴³

Start Strong's course is one of only a few internationally. Other porn-literacy programs of note include *Your Voice Your View*, a four-session sexual assault prevention workshop for 10th graders that includes an open-ended discussion of pornography and was evaluated by Orchowski and colleagues in 2023.¹⁴⁴ In County Kerry, Ireland, community educators have been delivering a *Healthy Sexuality* program that has included porn literacy segments since 2012.¹⁴⁵ Additionally, in Australia, a curriculum called *In the Picture* has been available since 2014 and is supported by professional learning and parent education resources.¹⁴⁶ The program includes 10 curriculum activities and a suite of resources to support the tailored implementation of a whole-school approach: resources for policy development, equipping staff, partnering with parents and the community sector, addressing school culture, student education, and evaluation. The package is also supported by broader resources, including ones on professional learning and parent education.

Young people's capacity to be critical viewers of pornography indicates the great potential of pornography literacy education to build on and develop these skills. Researchers from York University found promise in

small-group discussions on pornography as pedagogical sites for educators seeking to develop a more expansive and ethically oriented approach to sex and sexuality education.¹⁴⁷ There is strong support among young people for approaches that incorporate nonjudgmental, sex-positive, healthy sexuality education as the best way to equip them to navigate seeing online porn.¹⁴⁸

While these programs represent potentially valuable ways for older adolescents to learn how to better navigate online porn, it should be noted that porn literacy initiatives are still rare and primarily target older adolescents and high school students. Considering the massive amount of unintentional exposure for very young adolescents and younger children, these programs are insufficient to address these issues' scale and scope, and they must be complemented by systems-level approaches that regulate

the industry and protect children from unwanted exposure from very early ages.

Additionally, it should be noted that **there are relatively few studies on the effectiveness of porn literacy interventions**, and more rigorous evaluations are needed to understand their effectiveness across multiple domains related to the construction of boys' sexuality, particularly in the Global South. In a longitudinal study of 1,947 13- to 25-years-olds, Dutch researchers examined the potential of porn literacy education at schools to weaken the relationship between exposure to sexually explicit internet material and viewing women as sex objects. A two-way interaction effect emerged: The relationship between sexually explicit internet material and sexist views became weaker the more users had learned from porn literacy education.¹⁴⁹

ACTION 4



ENGAGE ADULTS TO BE AWARE OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S ACCESS AND EXPOSURE TO PORN

Parents can play a central role in limiting their sons' exposure to sexually explicit online material, educating them, equipping them to navigate porn's influence, and debriefing with them when they are exposed.

As research has increasingly raised alarms about the impact of screentime on teens' well-being, a Pew survey of parents of 13- to 17-year-olds found that a majority were engaging in some form of digital supervision: 61% were monitoring their teens' web activity, 60% were monitoring their social media profiles, and nearly 50% were checking their phones and messages. While installing parental controls on teens' computers and phones was less common, nearly half of parents required teens to share their passwords. Digital grounding was a common form of discipline, and 55% had set limits on daily screen time.¹⁵⁰

These measures raise important questions about how to balance protection with privacy while supporting adolescents' progressive autonomy. While parental oversight can help reduce exposure to harmful content, overly restrictive monitoring may undermine trust, limit opportunities for independent decision-making, and inhibit the development of digital literacy and self-regulation skills. Evidence suggests that effective approaches integrate open communication and co-learning between parents and adolescents, enabling young people to develop the critical

skills to navigate digital spaces safely while also respecting their privacy and evolving capacity for autonomy.¹⁵¹

The American Academy of Pediatrics issued new cyber use guidelines in 2016, shifting from limiting overall screen time to ensuring that children are not alone as they message or watch; the academy instructed parents and caregivers to co-view with your children, help children understand what they are seeing, and help them apply what they learn to the world around them.¹⁵² Within the Global Kids Online network in Latin America, research emphasizes the role of “active mediation,” where parents and educators guide children’s digital use through shared interactions, discussions, and culturally grounded contextual explanation – rather than imposing restrictive or surveillance-based measures.¹⁵³ This aligns with co-viewing principles aimed at fostering understanding rather than just limiting exposure.¹⁵⁴

Strong evidence exists to support the importance of parents having open, affirming, and shame-free conversations with their sons about sex and pornography.¹⁵⁵ In a US study among young adults ages 18 to 26, those whose parents talked to them about pornography held more critical attitudes toward pornography, reported lower levels of pornography use, and exhibited less negative impact on their self-esteem when their partners viewed porn.¹⁵⁶ However, even parents who do have open conversations often start late – typically around older adolescence. Given that roughly half of children encounter porn by age 13, age-appropriate conversations about sexual health at younger ages seem prudent, no matter how sophisticated parental controls for internet access are.¹⁵⁷

Unfortunately, in a Common Sense Media survey, less than half of teens had talked with a trusted adult about porn, even though those who did said the conversations “made them feel like there are helpful resources other than pornography to explore sex or their sexuality.”¹⁵⁸ Given the reluctance of schools to tackle sex and sexuality, much less discuss porn, the responsibility to do so falls to parents or other caregivers. As one writer puts it, boys who come across

porn should “have some sense of what to do when met with material that ought to be brought to the attention of authorities. But that would require much more guidance than adolescents—let alone adults—are given now.”¹⁵⁹

Comprehensive guidance on digital and porn literacy should include knowledge and conversations about technology-facilitated gender-based violence and how to promote the safe and ethical use of technology. Privacy, safety, and security should be part of the conversations with adolescents to preserve their right to develop their personality and respect their privacy online while also promoting critical thinking and measures to safeguard their well-being.¹⁶⁰

Resources should be allocated to supporting and educating parents and caregivers to increase their awareness of boys’ encounters with online pornography (including the difference between unintentional and intentional encounters) and to develop their skills and confidence to have conversations about pornography with their children without shame or stigma, with an emphasis on how to talk to them about seeing pornography unintentionally. As author Peggy Orenstein points out: “Until young people – girls as well as boys – are better educated about gender socialization, sexual consent, ethical engagement, mature relationships, and diverse orientations, we will be stuck in damage control mode.”¹⁶¹

Parents, caregivers, teachers, school leaders, health workers, and a wide range of other professionals who work with children and adolescents – and also policymakers and -shapers – often do not have a comprehensive understanding of pornography’s prevalence, nature, and impacts or what they can do to address them. They also often feel uncomfortable, ill-equipped, and/or unsupported to do the work. Building the capacity of all of these stakeholders to provide helpful digital guidance and space for open conversations with boys about sexuality and porn will contribute to the effective implementation of the actions suggested in this report.

ACTION 5



ADVOCATE FOR PUBLIC REGULATION OF MAINSTREAM PORN INDUSTRY

Regulatory approaches seek to limit - or prevent - children and young people's exposure and access to pornography, often through technological or legislative means.

Controlling boys' access to pornography is a complex issue that requires a calibrated approach. There is a growing consensus that a combination of educational, regulatory, and technological strategies is necessary to combat the industry's potential harmful effects on boys' lives. But proposed interventions to regulate the industry often face key considerations around privacy and security. Regulatory efforts to curb the distribution of child sexual abuse materials online have gained the most traction thus far in holding porn sites to account.

Presently, there is no single international law that uniformly governs the distribution, purchase, or possession of internet pornography across all countries. The regulation of pornography, including internet pornography, varies widely from country to country and is primarily governed by national laws and regulations that typically focus either on banning it or preventing minors from accessing it and ensuring performers are adults.¹⁶² In the UK, a law passed in 2014 to regulate porn content, and in 2025, age verification provisions for pornography sites were rolled into the Online Safety Act.¹⁶³ Iceland debated strong regulations on access and payments in 2013, but the effort lost steam. Australia enacted a limited ban on violent porn in 2007 and has introduced an Online Safety Act, which has enacted age checks to limit children from accessing online porn as well.¹⁶⁴ In Germany, age verification tools are required to prevent children from accessing online content such as pornography and extreme violence.¹⁶⁵

Dedicated porn opponents in the US have also sought regulations at the state level when it comes to protecting children and have found their moment. In 2023, Louisiana passed a law holding pornography websites liable unless they "perform reasonable age verification methods," requiring users to show government ID proving they are 18 or older. Traffic to Pornhub in Louisiana dropped 80 percent. In three other states where the same laws went into effect – Utah, Mississippi, and Virginia – Pornhub simply stopped operating.¹⁶⁶

Regulatory and legal approaches are not without limitations. It is difficult to come up with age verification systems that cannot be circumvented by digital natives or that don't involve some risk for exposing personal identities.¹⁶⁷ Some argue that age restrictions simply detour motivated users to virtual private networks (VPNs) or to other websites and social media platforms that are even less responsible. Some age verification efforts have also been rushed and poorly conceived, increasing the risk that they will not be effective, will not be sustained, and will have unintended adverse consequences. For example, verification systems may block access to sexual and reproductive health information and education, incorrectly classifying this as pornographic.

One potentially complementary strategy to age restriction is requiring content warnings on explicit material, serving as an extra layer of protection from accidental exposure. These warnings can also offer "instant help" for children

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who have been exposed to material they find offensive or confusing.¹⁶⁸ Online safety design should construct these features considering best practices in help-seeking behaviors for children that are safe and gender-sensitive. Tech companies have a critical role and responsibility in designing technology that centers the rights and well-being of children and adolescents by embedding privacy into the design specifications of information technologies, establishing user safety at the center of product development, and designing controls to prevent the misuse of technological applications by malicious parties.¹⁶⁹

Over the past decade, legal challenges within the United States have focused on the industry leader formerly known as MindGeek (now Aylo Holdings S.À.R.L., owned by the Canadian private equity fund Ethical Capital Partners). In 2021, the company settled a lawsuit with 50 plaintiffs for hosting nonconsensual videos and was named in other class action suits.¹⁷⁰ In 2023, the holding company reached a settlement in federal court in Brooklyn that acknowledged it had profited from content featuring hundreds of sex trafficking victims.¹⁷¹

In addition to government pressure and actions from financial tech (fintech) companies like Visa and Mastercard, Big Tech companies have also made life difficult for the porn industry by banning apps and refusing services. For example, when Google released its Google Glass VR product and a porn coder created the porn app Tits & Glass, Google changed its terms of service and barred adult content.¹⁷²

In another interesting development, at the end of 2023, the US Federal Trade Commission put forth new regulations to protect children's privacy from online companies. The goal is to shift responsibility from parents "to apps and other digital services while curbing how platforms may use and monetize children's data."¹⁷³ The Kids Online Safety Act, currently gaining traction in US Congress, could have the potential to strengthen efforts across the child safety ecosystem, through its emphasis on "duty of care" provisions, requiring companies to take reasonable steps to prevent harm to minors.¹⁷⁴ Together with the growing popularity of age verification laws, such regulations suggest an emerging consensus that families need regulatory help to protect their sons from companies motivated exclusively by profits.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

A variety of real opportunities exist to change how boys' human development, gender socialization, and sexuality are compromised by pornography, including both demand- and supply-side strategies. Obviously, the overarching goal is to strengthen young men and boys' desire to be connected, have real intimacy, and understand that sex and sexuality are about connection, consent, and mutual pleasure rather than consumption. Boys who are supported in recognizing and growing into their best selves will not be those shaped by algorithms that drive them into hours of content undermining healthy, respectful sex and relationships, but rather those who find the will and support to pursue real, honest, and equitable connections.

There is no single strategy that will address porn's harms to boys (and their partners and communities); this should be tackled on a range of levels of the ecological model, with multiple complementary strategies. And we need to do so with the knowledge that there is big money behind porn, as well as strong ideological investments in the status quo of an unregulated online environment and tech ecosystem.

Key to the effective implementation of all of these actions are:

1. Building knowledge and evidence: Further research is urgently needed to deepen our understanding of the gaps, emerging challenges, and effective strategies for addressing the impact of the pornography industry on boys' lives. While existing studies provide valuable insights, much of the available evidence comes from high-income contexts and does not adequately reflect the realities of adolescent boys in the Global South, where cultural norms, digital access, and regulatory environments differ significantly. Adopting a masculinities lens is critical to understanding how boys' identities, expectations, and social pressures shape their engagement with pornography, sexual decision-making, and relationships.

Future research should prioritize exploring the lived experiences of marginalized and minority young people, including LGBTQI+ youth, adolescents from rural or remote areas, and those who speak a language other than English at home. Greater investment is also needed in locally driven, Global South-based studies that elevate young people's voices and examine how masculine norms intersect with digital consumption patterns. Such evidence must inform the design of context-specific, gender-transformative interventions – including CSE, porn literacy, and parental engagement – that not only reduce harm but also promote healthy, rights-based approaches to boys' sexuality and relationships.

2. Strengthening public awareness: We need to engage broad public audiences on these issues to build understanding; shift the narrative about porn's role in adolescent boys' lives, which often minimizes its influence (i.e., “it's normal, not a big deal”); and point people (boys, parents, professionals, and policymakers) toward accurate information and resources. This is not just about awareness – it's also about building political will: creating the conditions for stronger laws, policies, and investments that support CSE, porn literacy, tech regulation, and youth well-being. Doing so requires working closely with policymakers, parliamentarians, and other decision-makers while building broad coalitions of stakeholders – including parents, educators, youth-led organizations, mental health professionals, and feminist advocates – who see adolescent sexual health and rights as a collective priority. This strategy can draw on lessons from feminist advocacy movements, which have successfully reframed debates around sexual pleasure, consent, and bodily autonomy to mobilize public support and influence policy at the national and international levels.

3. Promoting evidence-informed policymaking: Effectively responding to adolescent exposure to digital pornography and related risks requires evidence-driven policies that are grounded in robust global and local data. Policymakers need access to high-quality, disaggregated evidence on boys' digital behaviors, exposure pathways, and the impact of pornography on sexual development. Investments should focus on building research capacity in low- and middle-income countries to address current gaps in the data, especially around regional differences, intersectional impacts, and culturally responsive approaches.

Evidence-informed policymaking should be complemented by participatory processes that center adolescents' voices – ensuring that boys, girls, and gender-diverse youth are meaningfully engaged in shaping policies that affect their digital and sexual rights. Linking data with multisectoral collaboration – across health, education, technology, and child protection systems – will be essential to achieving structural change and scaling effective interventions globally.

4. Designing and testing new approaches: Available evidence on the topic comes primarily from programs that have been tested and implemented with older adolescents. Yet statistics tell us of the need to reach younger boys – and the adults in their lives – to equip them to navigate online pornography from an early age, especially given the widespread reality of unintentional exposure. These approaches should use a gender-transformative lens and meet boys where they're at – where they have space

to talk openly with other boys about their experiences encountering porn, where they listen to women and girls about their views of porn, and where the digital spaces they often frequent are addressed and used.

The existing cadre of programs that engage men would do well to address porn more directly, as evidence shows its far-reaching, but underdiscussed, impact on boys' lives.¹⁷⁵ Additionally, incorporating digital tools, such as fun and engaging video content (e.g., [AMAZE](#)), can appeal to boys by using mediums that resonate with their lived realities and interests. Streamers and influencers are underexplored stakeholders who may have the power to shape narratives about boys' sexuality in ways parents, educators, or authority figures don't, as their authority can be dismissed as out of touch or "cringe."¹⁷⁶

As educators, advocates, and parents step into this challenging space, we must make a concerted effort to affirm the positive. We must believe in boys' inherently relational nature and their desire to connect, and we must understand their porn use as rooted in a healthy desire for self-knowledge and sexual pleasure that has been distorted and made harmful – not by boys themselves but by a profit-making, uncontrolled, technologically equipped industry. In sum, we must always keep top of mind in this conversation and debate that boys' life-affirming, human desire for sexuality and intimacy is part of their human development and not the problem.

ANNEX: RESOURCES REPRESENTING GOOD PRACTICE IN PORN EDUCATION/ LITERACY AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION

RESOURCES FOR PARENTS AND EDUCATORS

1. ***Many Ways of Being*** (US): This inclusive, youth-centered curriculum by Equimundo focuses on gender equity, healthy relationships, and safer sex practices.
2. ***CSE Academy*** (global): Developed by Rutgers International and UNFPA, the academy offers open courses on sexuality education that can support parents to have informed conversations in their families.
3. ***The Practical Guide to Love, Sex and Relationships*** (Australia): This teaching guide focuses on Years 7 to 10; the project was funded by the Australian government.
4. ***It's time we talked*** (Australia): This violence prevention project (formerly Reality & Risk) supports young people, parents, schools, government, and the community sector to understand and address the influence of pornography (a key curriculum is *In The Picture*).
5. ***The Light Project*** (New Zealand): Resources for parents, educators, and health professionals address porn use among youth.
6. ***The Truth About Pornography*** (US): Developed for high school students, this porn-literacy curriculum from the Rothman Violence Prevention Research Lab aims to reduce sexual and dating violence.
7. ***Respectful Relationships*** (Australia): The Victorian state government offers a curriculum that addresses pornography's influence as part of Respectful Relationships (gender-based violence prevention).

RESOURCES FOR YOUTH

1. ***CSE Academy*** (global): The academy was developed by Rutgers International and UNFPA in partnership with several national, regional, and global organizations; it offers three open courses from beginner to advanced learning for young people, educators, and parents.
2. ***In the Know*** (New Zealand): Developed by the Light Project, which was established in 2017 by a small team of sexual and public health experts, this site aims to help young people and youth professionals learn about porn and how it's shaping youth sexual culture, as well as access resources and support services.

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3. **AMAZE** (global): This site offers engaging, educational, age-appropriate, often humorous sex education videos and resources for young adults about bodies, relationships, sex, and porn.
4. **Sex, Etc.** (US): Aiming to help teens learn about healthy sex and porn. Sex, Etc. is published by Answer, a national organization that provides and promotes unfettered access to CSE for young people and the adults who teach them.
5. **Keep It Real Online** (New Zealand): The New Zealand government has a resource hub for young people on porn use.
6. **Teen Source** (US): Launched in 2001 as an online hub for teen-friendly sexual and reproductive health information and resources, this website features accurate and reliable information about sexually transmitted infections, birth control, healthy relationships, and teen rights to accessing sensitive services in California. The site also features youth-generated blogs and videos.
7. **It Gets Better – Queer Sex Ed** (US): The It Gets Better Project's mission is to uplift, empower, and connect LGBTQ+ youth around the globe.
8. **Scarleteen** (US): This site offers inclusive, comprehensive, and supportive sexuality and relationships information for teens and emerging adults.
9. **The Trevor Project** (US): The organization offers information and support to LGBTQ+ young people with resources on subjects such as sexual orientation, mental health, and gender identity.
10. **It's time we talked** (Australia): This violence prevention project (formerly Reality & Risk) supports young people, parents, schools, government, and the community sector to understand and address the influence of pornography. The project's Porn Is Not the Norm initiative focuses on supporting autistic young people in navigating porn's influence.

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