

The Online Safety Bill: Impact of Pornography on Children

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Summary

- Children still are not protected from accessing harmful pornographic content, which poses a **serious risk to their mental health**, and their **understanding of consent and healthy relationships**.
- Many children are **stumbling across pornographic content accidentally**, including children as young as 7.¹
- Barnardo's frontline workers say that **children are participating in acts they have seen in pornographic videos**, despite feeling uncomfortable and scared.
- The Government's Equalities Office, found that there was '**substantial evidence of an association' between the use of pornography and harmful attitudes and behaviours towards women and girls**.²
- Pornographic content which suggests sexual activity with children is extremely harmful but is rife on mainstream pornography sites. This content promotes an interest in child sexual abuse material and in some cases can lead to abuse online and offline. Such content would be illegal offline, on DVD or Blu Ray, but is **prevalent across mainstream pornography sites**.
- According to the Centre to End All Sexual Exploitation (CEASE), online pornography which depicts sexual activity with performers pretending to be children **normalises children as objects of sexual desire and drives the demand for 'real' child sexual abuse material**.³
- Increasingly extreme pornography can legitimise abusive behaviour, meaning that some excessive users of pornography can spiral into viewing child sexual abuse material, and potentially even abusing children.⁴
- YouGov polling for Barnardo's found that **almost 70 per cent of UK adults (69%) agree that pornography which would be illegal on DVD should also be illegal online**.⁵

1. Impact of pornography on children

Since the decision not to enact Part 3 of the Digital Economy Act in October 2019, millions of children have continued to access pornographic content, many stumbling across harmful content accidentally.

- In 2015/16, pornography was accessed 1.4 million times by UK children every month.⁶ With children and young people's screentime increasing during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, it is likely that this figure is now

¹ BBFC, 2019. 'Children see pornography as young as seven, new report finds', <https://www.bbfc.co.uk/about-us/news/children-see-pornography-as-young-as-seven-new-report-finds>

² <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/key-documents/28604/view/INQ006736.pdf>

³ https://cease.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/210607_CEASE_Expose_Big_Porn_Report.pdf

⁴ <https://www.lucyfaithfull.org.uk/featured-news/isolation-unemployment-and-escalating-pornography-habits-contribute-to-a-record-rise-in-people-seeking-help-to-stop-viewing-sexual-images-of-children.htm>

⁵ <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/news/almost-70-uk-adults-support-tighter-controls-online-pornography-content>

⁶ DCMS, 2015, Digital Economy Act Consultation.

higher.⁷ According to research by Ofcom, almost all children went online in 2021 (99%) and more than a third of children (36%) said that they had seen something 'worrying or nasty' online in the past 12 months.⁸

- Research by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) has found that children are coming across pornography online from as young as seven. Their study also shows that half of 11- to 13-year-olds have seen pornography at some point. This rises to two thirds of 14 to 15-year-olds and four in five 16 to 17-year-olds.⁹
- In a recent survey of Barnardo's frontline practitioners conducted in July 2022, 41% think that the way young people are accessing and consuming pornographic material is changing. Of this group, 84% believe that pornographic material is becoming easier to access or there is greater access.
- Children under 10 are increasingly visiting commercial porn mega-sites like Pornhub, and this group accounts for one in every ten visitors and 22% of underage visitors to the site.¹⁰
- Many children's first experience of viewing pornographic content is accidental, through:
 - Google searches where many described unwittingly searching terms such as 'sex' or 'porn' without understanding what these words meant
 - Receiving links to videos on pornographic sites from friends without knowing what the content would include
 - Adverts or pop-ups on film streaming, sports streaming, or gaming websites, where host content is often shared illegally
 - Being shown videos on a friends' phone. This often happens as children start secondary school, aged 11 or 12 years old.¹¹
- The Ofsted Review into peer-on-peer abuse in schools found that the prevalence of children and young people seeing explicit material they do not want to see and being pressured to send 'nudes' is a much wider problem than schools can address.¹²

Viewing pornography can damage children's mental health, distorting children's understanding of healthy relationships, and normalising abusive sexual behaviour.

- Barnardo's frontline workers say that children are participating in acts they have seen in pornographic videos, despite feeling uncomfortable and scared. Children and young people are seeing these acts are an expected part of a relationship and believe that if they feel otherwise there must be something wrong with them, rather than identifying abuse.

⁷ Trott M et al., 2022. 'Changes and correlates of screen time in adults and children during the COVID-19 pandemic: A systematic review and meta-analysis', The Lancet, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/eclinm/article/PIIS2589-5370\(22\)00182-1/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/eclinm/article/PIIS2589-5370(22)00182-1/fulltext)

⁸ Ofcom, 2022. 'Children and parents: media use and attitudes report 2022'.

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0024/234609/childrens-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2022.pdf

⁹ BBFC, 2019. 'Children see pornography as young as seven, new report finds', <https://www.bbfc.co.uk/about-us/news/children-see-pornography-as-young-as-seven-new-report-finds>

¹⁰ Net Nanny, 2017. 'The Detrimental Effects of Pornography on Small Children', <https://www.netnanny.com/blog/the-detrimental-effects-of-pornography-on-small-children/>

¹¹ The Guardian, 2020. 'Porn survey reveals extent of UK teenagers' viewing habits', <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/jan/31/porn-survey-uk-teenagers-viewing-habits-bbfc>

¹² Ofsted, 2021. 'Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges', <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges>

- In a Barnardo's survey of frontline practitioners in 2021:
 - More than a quarter (26%) of Barnardo's frontline workers who responded to the survey had supported vulnerable children who had accessed pornography
 - Nearly a third (32%) of workers said it had led to the children they support developing unrealistic expectations of sex and relationships
 - 28% said that it led to children displaying inappropriate sexualised behaviour
 - Nearly a quarter (22%) said underage viewing of pornography negatively affected mental health and wellbeing.
 - 12% said that it normalised abusive or exploitative behaviour.
- A survey by the NSPCC and the Children's Commissioner for England found that 44% of boys aged between 11 and 16 who regularly viewed pornographic content reported that it gave them ideas about the type of sex that they wanted to try.¹³
- Research shows that 88% of scenes in online pornography show physical aggression, and 94% of this is directed at women. This reinforces gender stereotypes and leads to higher rates of gender-related violence amongst young people.¹⁴
- Barnardo's frontline services say children they support are watching pornography depicting illegal acts, violence and child abuse. We see first-hand that watching this content harms children's mental health and can normalise aggressive, coercive and harmful sexual activity

Barnardo's Case Study

A recently opened Barnardo's Harmful Sexual Behaviour service has seen over half of their referrals so far cite the viewing of pornography as a factor in the children's behaviour.

Children such as George. George is now 17 and has experienced significant trauma in childhood. He has a history of viewing pornography involving BDSM and torture and has an ongoing desire to continue to watch pornography of this nature. He has fantasies of sexually harming younger girls.

Billy is 14 and has been watching extreme pornography for several years. He has expressed that he 'wants to rape a girl' at school. He has also experienced childhood trauma.

****Please note all names have been changed****

¹³ NSPCC, Children's Commissioner and Middlesex University London, 2017. "'I wasn't sure it was normal to watch it": A quantitative and qualitative examination of the impact of online pornography on the values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of children and young people.' <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/MDX-NSPCC-OCC-Online-Pornography-Report.pdf>

¹⁴ Bridges AJ et al., 2010. 'Aggression and sexual behaviour in best-selling pornography videos: a content analysis update', Violence Against Women, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20980228/>

2. Pornographic content that is illegal offline, but legal online

- Online pornography platforms host videos depicting sexual activity with actors or characters who look like children: petite, young-looking performers made to look underage through props such as stuffed toys, lollipops and school uniforms and sexual activity between family members, particularly step-families. Although not strictly illegal, this is extremely harmful, sexualising children and driving the demand for 'real' child sexual abuse material.
- Depictions of sexual activity which may relate to children are extremely prevalent online. In 2019, 39 billion searches were made on Pornhub, with one of the most frequent search terms being 'teen'.¹⁵ In 2021, 'step mom' was the 7th most searched term on Pornhub worldwide.¹⁶
- Although commercial pornography sites such as Pornhub have banned certain search tags and depictions such as 'children', 'underage' and 'child young', CEASE have found that content which clearly suggest underage sexual activity remains prevalent. Pornhub search tags including 'babysitter', 'classroom teacher', 'young', 'virgin', 'little', 'tiny', 'exxxtrasmall' and 'barely legal' are still permitted. Examples of titles of hosted videos include 'F***ing my cute stepdaughter while she studies for a test' and 'Cute schoolgirl gets f***ed by her English teacher'.¹⁷
- This pornographic content is having real-world impacts. A report from ECPAT in 2018 referenced that an increase in arrests for the production of child sexual abuse materials appeared to be largely driven by 'youth-produced sexual images' which were taken by children 17 years or under, and which met the legal definitions in the US for 'child pornography'. In most of these cases the person arrested was an adult who had solicited images from a minor.¹⁸
- Such depictions of sexual activity with the title 'teen' are often particularly violent. According to a study which analysed the content of the three most accessed pornographic websites in the UK (Pornhub, Xhamster and Xvideos), the three most common words in videos which contained coercion and exploitation were 'schoolgirl', 'girl', and 'teen'.¹⁹ Although 'teen' could legitimately refer to those over 18, much of the content did have a focus on sex with underage girls, with titles including terms such as 'pigtails', 'homework' and 'braces'.²⁰ Further, the most frequent form of sexual violence found in pornographic content was sexual activity between family members.²¹

¹⁵ https://www.police-foundation.org.uk/2017/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/turning_the_tide_FINAL-.pdf

¹⁶ <https://www.pornhub.com/insights/yir-2021>

¹⁷ https://cease.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/210607_CEASE_Expose_Big_Porn_Report.pdf

¹⁸ <https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ECPAT-International-Report-Trends-in-Online-Child-Sexual-Abuse-Material-2018.pdf>

¹⁹ Vera-Gray et al, 2021. Sexual Violence as a sexual script in mainstream online pornography.

<https://academic.oup.com/bjc/article/61/5/1243/6208896>

²⁰ Vera-Gray et al, 2021. Sexual Violence as a sexual script in mainstream online pornography.

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²¹ Vera-Gray et al, 2021. Sexual Violence as a sexual script in mainstream online pornography.

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- The Government's Equalities Office, found that there was 'substantial evidence of an association' between the use of pornography and harmful attitudes and behaviours towards women and girls.²²

Case Study from Lucy Faithfull Foundation²³

Peter, 40, is an academic and now lives alone. He has no children, nor does he have direct contact with any. He was arrested for engaging in sexual communication with a child online, including sending explicit images of himself and requesting self-generated sexual images from a child. Following his arrest, the police provided him with Lucy Faithfull Foundation's Stop It Now! helpline details and he has had regular contact with the helpline over several months.

During his calls, Peter spoke about his poor mental health over a number of years, including anxiety, depression and self-harm. He explained that he had begun viewing legal adult pornography online about 10 years ago, and that this behaviour had escalated quickly to sexual chat with adults and then sexual communication with children of varying ages, mostly pubescent girls.

Peter disclosed that he had been engaging in such conversations with children for the last five years and that the severity and frequency of his online behaviour had escalated during lockdown. He believes this was, at least in part, due to him being inactive and feeling isolated.

- Evidence shows that excessive consumption of legal adult pornography can result in offenders viewing illegal child sexual abuse material. As increasingly extreme pornography becomes available on mainstream sites – including pornography which depicts sexual activity with 'child-like' performers – the threshold of what is 'acceptable' is lowered, legitimising further deviant behaviour.²⁴ The user may also 'spiral' seeking more and more extreme pornography to fulfil them, resulting in seeking illegal child sexual abuse material.²⁵
- For some adults, consuming extreme pornography can act as a gateway to illegal child sexual abuse material, and potential abuse of children online and offline.
- Chief Constable Simon Bailey told the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse that 'creating a group of men who will look at pornography and the pornography gets harder and harder and harder, to the point where they are simply getting no sexual stimulation from it at all, so the next click is child abuse imagery. This is a real problem'.²⁶
- The Lucy Faithfull Foundation, a UK-wide charity dedicated to the prevention of child sexual abuse, have warned that what they are seeing 'on a daily

²² <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/key-documents/28604/view/INQ006736.pdf>

²³

https://www.lucyfaithfull.org.uk/files/LFF_Annual_Report_2020_2021.pdf?utm_source=lucyfaithfull.org.uk&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=Annual-report-20-21

²⁴ https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/dec/15/how-extreme-porn-has-become-a-gateway-drug-into-child-abuse?fbclid=IwAR0JjqKIZxs6xyyV8ZzYyPmoYKZTpijF8d_cdDGdHww1IaVqxWTLmZTu5wU%3e

²⁵ <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-20036653.html>

²⁶ <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/reports-recommendations/publications/inquiry/final-report>

basis is the conflation of easy access to hardcore and deviant pornography and an interest in child molestation. The link is unambiguous'.²⁷ Their data shows that the consumption of online legal adult pornography increased during the pandemic. This increase led to some people to look for 'riskier' material and begin viewing child sexual abuse material. In addition, contact with the Stop It Now! Helpline and online self-help modules to stop viewing sexual images of children also increased by 107%.²⁸

- Interviews with offenders who viewed child sexual abuse material in the UK indicate that most had not intentionally sought out child sexual abuse material, but it was the result of 'entrenched pornography use' and spiralling online behaviour.²⁹ Their initial engagement with child sexual abuse material was often incidental rather than purposeful, and nine out of ten offenders said that they initially found child sexual abuse material through online pop-ups and linked material.³⁰
- The largest every survey on the thoughts and behaviours of people who watched child sexual abuse material online has found significant evidence that those who watch illegal material are at high risk of going on to contact or abuse a child directly.³¹
- Almost half (42%) of respondents to the survey said that they had sought direct contact with children through online platforms after viewing child sexual abuse material, and 58% reported feeling afraid that viewing child sexual abuse material might lead them to committing abuse in person.³²
- As well as the impact on adults, pornographic content that depicts sexual activity with 'child-like' performers or between step-family members can impact children. As long as harmful, abusive content remains online, children will be able to access it. Children like Elizabeth,³³ a 15-year-old girl supported by Barnardo's who has been sexually abused by a much older relative for a number of years. Elizabeth turned to pornography to try and understand her own sexual abuse, however the content she found on pornography sites depicted older relatives having sex with young girls and the girls enjoying it. It wasn't until she disclosed her abuse that she realised that it was not normal.

²⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/dec/15/how-extreme-porn-has-become-a-gateway-drug-into-child-abuse>

²⁸ <https://www.lucyfaithfull.org.uk/featured-news/isolation-unemployment-and-escalating-pornography-habits-contribute-to-a-record-rise-in-people-seeking-help-to-stop-viewing-sexual-images-of-children.htm>

²⁹ https://www.police-foundation.org.uk/2017/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/turning_the_tide_FINAL-.pdf

³⁰ <https://www.iwf.org.uk/news-media/news/new-research-shows-action-needed-to-stop-people-seeing-indecent-images-of-children-for-the-first-time/>

³¹ Risk Factors for Child Sexual Abuse Material Users Contacting Children Online: Results of an Anonymous Multilingual Survey on the Dark Web <https://tsjournal.org/index.php/jots/article/view/29>

³² Risk Factors for Child Sexual Abuse Material Users Contacting Children Online: Results of an Anonymous Multilingual Survey on the Dark Web <https://tsjournal.org/index.php/jots/article/view/29>

³³ Please note all names have been changed.

Case Study from Lucy Faithfull Foundation³⁴

Hector, 38, is married with three children and works full time in the finance industry. He was recently arrested for having accessed sexual images of children online. After his arrest, Hector attempted suicide and was admitted to a psychiatric hospital for a short period.

He contacted Lucy Faithfull Foundation's Stop It Now! helpline for advice and support after being given their details by the police. Hector told the helpline that his childhood had included many damaging experiences including sexual abuse within the family, early exposure to adult pornography and neglect. He told the helpline that as an adult, he would binge watch pornography and "lose time" accessing sexual content online. He referred to this behaviour as "an addiction".

Hector said he had made many attempts to desist in his illegal online behaviour, but all eventually ended in failure. He stated he didn't know how to stop and stay stopped.

Suggested questions:

1. What reassurance can the Secretary of State provide to Barnardo's and other children's charities that age verification to prevent children accessing pornographic content will be robustly and effectively implemented?
2. Does the Secretary of State agree with Barnardo's that age verification must be implemented as soon as possible, and would she support a time limit to enforce pornography platforms to introduce it at the earliest opportunity?
3. What consideration has the Minister given to ensuring that pornographic sites remove content that promotes a sexual interest in children, ensuring a parity between online and offline standards?
4. Whether the Ministers shares the concerns of Barnardo's, CEASE, and other organisations that continued access to legal pornographic content online, which depicts sexual activity with children, is extremely harmful to children?

About Barnardo's

Barnardo's is the UK's largest national children's charity. In 2020/21, we reached 382,872 children, young people, parents and carers through our 791 services and partnerships across the UK. Our goal is to achieve better outcomes for more children. To achieve this, we work with partners to build stronger families, safer childhoods and positive futures.

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