

Teens' porn viewing habits report demands strategic response

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Carys Moseley comments on a recent report on teenagers' porn viewing habits.

Recently the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) was reported to have published a study on British teenagers' viewing of online pornography¹. The findings are only available on request purportedly due to the study containing graphic material. We obtained a copy of the findings from the BBFC and they are important to consider in the present culture and the debate over Relationships and Sex Education.

The report is divided into five parts: 1) how do children first come into contact with pornography?, 2) how do children use pornography as they get older?, 3) what motivates young people to watch pornography as they get older?, 4) what are the negative consequences of watching pornography for young people?, 5) what do young people and parents think about age-verification?.

The research is said by the BBFC to show the importance of age-verification checks for internet porn sites, something the government recently rejected, no doubt thanks to pressure from the porn industry.

Children can find porn online too easily

The statistics for children viewing online porn are shocking; 51% of children aged 11-13 have seen online porn at some time. This figure rises to 66% of 14-15 year-olds and 79% of 16-17 year olds. The survey authors argue that even this constitutes under-reporting of the true extent. The routes for viewing porn included ads or pop-ups on sites streaming film, sport or gaming, often of illegal content, friends sharing links without indicating what the content was, and google searches for terms such as 'sex' or 'porn' without necessarily understanding what these meant.

The report issues the stark warning:

'Pornography is currently one click away from children of all ages in the UK.'

This is the biggest finding of the report and is hardly surprising to those who have been watching the continuous unfolding of the results of the sexual revolution.

Although most children said they had viewed porn unintentionally, this figure declined with age and the researchers again believe this was being underreported.

Parents need to face reality

Another major finding is that most parents (75%) think their children are not accessing porn online, but most children admit that they are. In other words, parents are naive and out of touch. There are two important questions here. First, why are parents out of touch? Is it due to a growing indifference to children due to being too busy? Or is it that parents are too ready to assume that children have the same level of maturity and understanding as they do to be able to not click on ads that come up? This kind of heart-searching is uncomfortable but is much needed if society as a whole is to confront this massive problem.

The second question is how parents can be proactive in preventing their children accessing porn online. We could add a third question of how parents can educate children properly to relinquish the influence of any pornography they have already seen.

How do children use porn as they get older?

Although most respondents to the survey said they searched for pornography on dedicated porn websites, a lot also said they had seen it on social media, most commonly Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter. Some respondents reported seeing porn popping up on the 'Explore' page on Instagram.

Respondents told the researchers that porn 'actors' posted content onto Twitter and that they followed their accounts on there as well, something that should really be great cause for concern as it is an obvious attempt to corrupt minors.

'Porn as sex ed' excuse doesn't stand up

In Section 3 on 'What motivates young people to watch pornography as they get older?', one of the motivations given for using porn was 'to learn about sex'. (The other was for personal gratification.) However, we need to be very precise about what the findings really imply here.

A majority (63%) of the 276 children who admitted to searching for porn intentionally claimed to have done so to 'learn about sex'. However, those 276 children were a minority of the total 722 who had ever seen porn in the first place. This means that just under a quarter of all the children who had ever seen porn had done so to 'learn about sex'.

One fifth (20%) of the 722 children agreed with the statement 'watching porn helps me understand what is normal in sexual relationships.' One third disagreed with this, 19% neither agreed or disagreed, and the rest said this was irrelevant as they weren't having sex.

Concerning effect on self-image

The survey uncovers a concerning trend for a minority of teenagers to want to compare themselves to the people depicted in porn. For example, 19% of girls and 17% of boys said they had 'learnt if I look normal naked', and 15% of boys and 10% of girls said they had 'learnt what is expected of men sexually'.

This is deeply concerning as it shows a minority of children are intensely preoccupied with physical appearance and are overvaluing it, showing a deeply flawed view of human dignity.

Also, given the widespread complaints about aggression and violence against women in porn, these figures are alarming. Equally concerning given the content is how 14% of boys and 8% of girls said they had learnt 'ideas to try sexually'.

Porn undermines normal heterosexual relations

Another major finding of the report – but again no surprise to those watching the culture closely – is that some girls are watching porn to learn what they think boys want. The researchers report that the boys reported themselves to be clueless. There is a huge discrepancy here that needs to be addressed. Either that or some respondents were not honest.

It is good to see that many boys and girls are upset by violent and aggressive porn. The girls are afraid that this is normalising aggression by boys towards girls and men towards women.

Nearly half of children believe porn makes people less respectful of the opposite sex. The crucial thing now is to show the rest that this really matters.

Is porn fuelling same-sex attraction and behaviour?

The report reveals that nearly all LGB respondents said they had accessed porn to learn about sex, and many said they had come to realise their sexuality through watching porn. Nearly half (46%) said that using porn had aided them to 'learn which gender(s) they were attracted to'. In other words, using porn is influencing some teenagers into being sexually attracted to the same sex.

The report also found that some girls who were particularly upset by male violence against women in porn were turning increasingly to lesbian porn as an alternative. This only confirms what close observation of contemporary culture is already showing, which is that same-sex relations are 'the new normal' for an increasing minority of young women.

The report should have been made publicly available

Whilst the report itself is welcome, the fact that the BBFC declined to make it available online to the public is arguably a problem. It concerns a matter of great and grave public interest.

Given the purported concern for the graphic, i.e. obscene and probably criminal nature of the screenshots shown from porn sites, there was an obvious option to simply not show these screenshots, but to keep the textual analysis describing in more clinical terms what was involved. The public knows what words like 'rape', 'sexual assault', 'incest' and 'bestiality' mean. These are well-established psychological terms for the sexual perversions and crimes depicted.

Strategic response needed

Frankly, the content reported and depicted deserves a strategic response. Even in the present highly libertarian culture we inhabit, people are still horrified and outraged by the normalisation of aggression and violence against women by men in what is now pushed as 'normal' 'straight' pornography. This in itself should be confronted unapologetically and prosecuted.

Are some children at greater risk?

As has already been shown, the report's slant is towards the need for more sexually explicit Relationships and Sex Education in schools. There are many things that need saying here, but one is that we still don't know much about the children who are more likely to say they are using porn to 'learn about sex'. These are a minority of children.

We have to ask the question as to whether they have this mindset because they have already witnessed a split between sexual behaviour and love in the family. What proportion of these children are from broken homes or have been in the care system or with more than one set of foster parents? Children

in the care system are at greater risk of being prostituted, something that is highly relevant when we recall that porn is basically prostitution on camera.

The need for a comprehensive Christian response

This report shows very clearly that porn is now everywhere as far as children are concerned. Given the amount of information there is as to how damaging pornography is for adults – the negative effect on marriage, relationships, sexuality and families, and the proven link with human trafficking and prostitution – there is every reason to formulate a comprehensive Christian response. The challenge is out there for everyone now.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/jan/31/porn-survey-uk-teenagers-viewing-habits-bbfc>