

Children,
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EXPERT VIEW

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Having spoken to thousands of parents and children for the EU Kids Online studies in recent years, Professor Sonia Livingstone highlights the growing concern about young people accessing sexual images online.

Children, internet, pornography – it's an explosive mix of words and it makes a lot of parents anxious. The newspaper headlines screaming about a porn-addicted generation doesn't help matters, especially when many parents feel out of their depth dealing with new and complex technologies that didn't exist when they were growing up. So what is really going on?

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There's no doubt that pornography is easier to obtain than ever before, much of it is more graphic, and some of it is more violent or degrading. Comparisons with the 'top shelf' magazines or videos that used to be passed around in the playground don't really capture today's reality of being able to find explicit hard-core sexual or violent content at a single click on the internet, without having to ask anyone and without leaving a trace (if you know how to delete your history and cookies, which many children do).

But that doesn't mean kids are all looking at porn all the time. First, you do have to go looking for it – the days have mostly gone when sexual or violent content arrived unwanted in your email inbox, or from mistyping a search term, or as a pop-up on your screen when you're looking for something else. In response to considerable public disquiet and with some Government prompting, the industry seems to have sorted this out for the most part, at least on commonly used websites.

But kids will go looking for it. There will be a craze at school ("Have you seen this site?") and off they go. After all, children love exploring the internet (especially going where they are told not to go) and, once they are into their teenage years, we'd expect curiosity about sexual matters. Some of them, however, will find rather more than they bargained for; more too than their parents or welfare professionals think they should see.

So is there a problem? Parents are certainly concerned. The EU Kids Online survey of 1,000 British children and parents shows that 31% of parents of 9 to 16-year-olds 'worry a lot' about their child seeing inappropriate content on the internet. And about the same number (30%) of parents of teens worry about this as do parents of younger children (32%).

The children's survey responses document the extent of the problem clearly. Around one quarter of 9 to 16-year-olds said they had seen sexual images in the past year – although interestingly, 16% had seen them on TV, film or DVDs, while 11% had seen them on the internet, 10% in magazines, and 5% on mobile phones. So the internet is not the only source of pornography.

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A quarter of 9 to 16-year-olds have seen sexual images in the past year – more so on TV and film than on the internet.

Among those who saw sexual images online, four in ten of their parents thought they had not, suggesting that parents may not recognise what's happening. When we asked the 11 to 16-year-olds

just what they had seen, the results included 8% who said they had seen nudity online, 6% who had seen images of people having sex, 6% who had seen people's genitals and 2% who had seen violent sexual images. Interestingly, research suggests that pornography is more likely to be harmful if it is abusive or degrading to women. That makes sense – arguably, we should be more worried about violence or hostility on the internet than about sexual content.

Even so, risk is not the same as harm – indeed, risk refers to the probability of harm, and that probability may be low, depending on the child's circumstances. So being exposed to pornography may not always be harmful: among those who saw sexual images online, only a quarter said they were upset by this, for example. It's difficult to know if more have seen porn than admit to it and even harder to know whether more are upset or harmed in some way.

But even a minority of children is a lot of children. Also, the children who are more upset by seeing online pornography tend to be younger – suggesting they are too immature for, or unprepared for, such images – and are more likely to be girls, which hints at a deeper concern over sexual expectations, or even sexual pressure, to look and act in certain ways. It's also possible that the boys' 'bravado' covers up an anxiety about social pressures on them – we just don't have the evidence for this yet.

So it seems reasonable for parents to expect the industry to do more to stop the most explicit or violent pornography being available to children (and remember that children may think that images of consensual sex are violent – certainly much pornography includes little, if any,

context of sex in a respectful relationship). Pornography is not easily accessible to children in libraries, on television or pasted on bus stops – the public environment is managed by other means. But the internet is, in many ways, regarded and used as a public resource and pornography simply has no place in children's play and learning spaces.

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Only around half of parents of 9 to 16-year-olds have installed filters or Parental Controls on their child's computer.

But it also seems reasonable that parents should do more to install filters or Parental Controls on their children's computer. My survey shows that only 54% of the parents of 9 to 16-year-olds do this already. Many parents say they don't know which filter is best, or how it works, or how to install and use it.

Much more work is needed on the part of industry to ensure all parents know about easy-to-use and effective filters. In fact, many think it would be far easier if these were pre-installed or included with virus and spam prevention tools – especially given the proliferation of devices by which children now go online.

Of course, some kids will still go looking for pornography, and some will find it by accident. But harm depends on the age and maturity of the child. So parents should be provided with effective tools if they wish to use them and they should make an active choice about the use of filters in the best interests of their child. ■