

Pornography Linked to Developmental Risks for Children and Teens

Underage Pornography Use Now the Norm in Our Society

January 14, 2025, Provo, Utah - With the internet at the center of many young people's lives, children and adolescents now have more access to pornography than any generation in history. Research has shown that most children and teens today have been exposed to pornography before the age of 18 and the rate of habitual use of pornography among teens is more than twice as high as it used to be. Dozens of studies have also documented the potential harms of this pornography consumption on young people, including increased mental health problems, unhealthy sexual scripts and behaviors, increased sexual aggression, potential compulsive struggles, decreased future relationship stability, and other developmental challenges.

Scholars from the Wheatley Institute at Brigham Young University and the Institute for Family Studies recently examined research studies from the last 20 years to document trends in pornography use among children and teens and to identify how that use may be harmful to their development in significant ways. They originally submitted their findings as [an amicus brief](#) to the U.S. Supreme Court in connection to the court's hearing of a case involving age verification on websites providing material that could be harmful to minors. Their findings were also released today in a report titled, "*Unprotected from Porn: The Rise of Underage Pornography Use and the Ways it is Harming Our Children.*"

"In today's digital world, a growing concern for many parents is how to protect their children from sexual media and online pornography," said Jason Carroll, Director of the Family Initiative at the Wheatley Institute and a co-author of the report. "Despite pornography's designation as being for 'mature audiences,' studies consistently find that large portions of underage minors access online pornographic content on a regular basis."

The report documents how the rise in underage pornography use has been paralleled by more extreme and harmful types of pornography being available online. The authors detail how a growing body of research has consistently shown that a large portion of the sexual media available online is not only sexually explicit, but also regularly depicts rape, violence against women, deviant sexual behaviors such as incest and sex with minors. They also review a growing number of studies that show that a significant portion of children and teens are directly seeking out and viewing these types of harmful online sexual materials.

"The alarming rise in pornography consumption by adolescents is a worrisome trend and a growing body of research is showing just how harmful it can be to their development and behavior, both short and long term," said Brian Willoughby, a Fellow at the Wheatley Institute and a co-author of the report. "When all of the various ways that pornography can harm child development are considered, there is really no defensible argument for children and adolescents having unrestricted access to sexual media and pornographic materials of any form."

The report argues that studies to date also confirm that while pornography poses a significant risk to all users, the likelihood of harm is increased among underage children and teens due to their sensitive developmental stage of life. And the risk of lasting harm is even greater for teens with a set of existing risk factors that make them particularly vulnerable to the threats of pornography. Studies also show that many of these risks continue into adulthood and have deleterious effects on later relationship quality and adult wellbeing. The authors note that such effects have been documented across dozens of studies, including large national surveys, recent meta-analyses (studies designed to systematically assess the results of previous research), and critical reviews of scientific literature, the highest standards for social science research.

The report outlines several strategies for protecting children from pornography. The authors note that parents have the primary responsibility to safeguard their children from these harms and that research shows that one of the best predictors of child wellbeing is the quality of the parent-child relationship. They also note how important it is for parents to teach their children the risks of viewing pornography and setting boundaries with technology.

However, the report's authors conclude that parents should not be left alone to safeguard their children from an unregulated industry of sexual media, pornography websites, and social media platforms. "Without reservation, we support efforts to hold both the producers of pornography and social media platforms accountable for failing to ensure they are not contributing to and profiting from underage engagement with pornography," said Michael Toscano, a Senior Fellow and the Director of the Family First Technology Initiative at the Institute for Family Studies. "We also support the new movement to implement device-based age-verification and require parental supervision for minor social media accounts, parental consent for app downloads, and accurate app ratings from the industry. These would all create a safer digital app environment for kids in which parents are effectively involved."

The full report can be viewed here: <https://wheatley.byu.edu/Unprotected-From-Porn>

The IFS press release on the amicus brief can be viewed here: <https://ifstudies.org/press-release/ifs-submits-amicus-brief-to-scotus-in-support-of-age-verification-of-pornography-sites>

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