

## Government Pornography Review: regulation, legislation and enforcement

### Internet Matters response to Call for Evidence

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#### About Internet Matters

Internet Matters is a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to supporting parents and professionals to keep children safe and well online. We are one of the most popular information sources among parents - in 2022/23 we received over 9 million visits to our site.

In addition to our expert guides and resources for parents and teachers, we also have a Policy and Research function.<sup>1</sup> We use our insights to champion the views and interests of families, making evidence-based recommendations to all those with influence over children's digital lives. This includes our industry partners as well as government, policymakers and parliamentarians. Internet Matters is represented on the Government's Media Literacy Taskforce Steering Board and the Executive Board of the UK Council for Internet Safety (UKCIS), as well as Ofcom's Making Sense of Media Panel. We chair UKCIS's Vulnerable Users Working Group.

#### About this submission

We have focussed our response to Call for Evidence where our data and engagement with families lend greatest insights. This is in response to questions around **public attitudes to pornography**, where we provide granular detail from our latest data on parents' and teachers' attitudes to pornography, and around **education resources for both children and parents** on the potential harms of viewing pornography (in particular content which depicts or promotes violence towards women and girls).

#### About our data

Internet Matters conducts an extensive research programme which is designed to provide us with insight into families' experiences of digital platforms and technologies. **To inform our response to this consultation, we are drawing upon our two major data sources on the prevalence and impact of online harms:**

- We conduct a twice-yearly '**digital tracker survey**' with a nationally representative sample of over 2,000 parents and 1,000 children aged 9-16. In this survey we ask children and parents about attitudes towards, and children's exposure to, sexual content and pornography.
- Our flagship **Digital Wellbeing Index** is an annual study designed to assess the impact of digital technology on children's lives – both positive and negative – and the factors which shape children's outcomes. The study is based on a four-dimensional framework of digital wellbeing (developmental, emotional, physical and social) developed in collaboration with the University of Leicester. Findings are based on a detailed household survey of 1,000 children and their parents.

We also conduct regular **deep dive research projects** on particular themes, including emerging tech (examples include the metaverse and cryptocurrencies) and thematic issues (examples include vulnerability, online misogyny and image-based abuse). In 2019 we published deep-dive into the views of parents and caregivers on online pornography and age verification (designed to coincide with the Government's first move to pass AV laws on pornography sites via the Digital Economies Act).<sup>2</sup> While recognising time has passed since this research – not least the periods of Covid lockdown and passage of Online Safety Act – our ongoing research (as described above) shows that there is sustained parental concern in this area.

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<sup>1</sup> More about our data sources and underlying evidence for our response to this consultation is set out in answer to Q.1

<sup>2</sup> Internet Matters (2019) *We need to talk about pornography: Children, parents, and age verification*. [Link](#).

## Key points

- Parents are very concerned about their children being exposed to online pornography. In our most recent survey (November 2023), just under two thirds (64%) of parents stated that they were concerned about their child viewing pornography online.
- Parents of vulnerable children and children who are eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) are particularly concerned:
  - o **70% of parents of vulnerable children (those with SEND and/or health conditions) are concerned about their child being exposed to pornography**, compared to 61% of parents of non-vulnerable children.
  - o **69% of parents of children eligible for FSM are concerned about their child viewing pornographic content online**, compared to 61% of parents of non-FSM eligible children.
- Perhaps surprisingly, we find that dads are more concerned than mums about online pornography: **66% of dads versus 61% of mums**. We also find that younger parents are more concerned than older parents: **over two-thirds (69%) of younger parents are concerned about their child being exposed to online pornography, compared to 57% of parents aged 55 and above**. It is possible that dads and younger parents are more familiar with modern pornography and are concerned about its potential impact on children.
- Sources of parental concern include impacts on sexual behaviours, attitudes to girls (and women) and impacts on self-esteem and body image.
- Teachers are also worried about the impacts of children viewing online pornography, but many feel unsure about how to approach teaching on the subject.
- Despite the welcome introduction of statutory RSHE, including teaching about the potential harms of viewing online pornography, our wider research finds that children's experiences of RSHE are – on the whole – negative. Barriers to effective RSHE include: teacher knowledge and training on sensitive topics, class size, mixed-gender groups, and short lesson time.
- There is a wealth of excellent resources for parents, caregivers and teachers to support their role in protecting children from online pornography, including issues around harmful depictions of women and sexual violence. However, without formalised support (for example, through the Department for Education (DfE), Department for Science, Innovation and Tech (DSIT), and Ofcom), it can be very difficult for parents and teachers to determine the quality and validity of information.
- We recommend:
  - o **Greater focus from Government on driving up awareness of parental controls**, especially broadband filters, which can play a key role in reducing children's exposure to pornography, especially accidental exposure. This should include signposting to key resources by trusted organisations such as Internet Matters. More broadly, the Government and/or Ofcom could play a much-needed role in **kitemarking quality resources and advice** from online safety/media literacy providers (on pornography and other online safety topics) so that parents and teachers better understand what advice they can trust.
  - o **The DfE should conduct a wider review of online safety teaching in schools**, including consideration of: training of specialist teachers to deliver sensitive topics (including pornography); timetabling and curriculum overlap; and consolidation of guidance. The review should also consider how to strengthen links between school and home, ensuring that rules around appropriate use of digital technologies and messages are consistent.
  - o **Within its review of the RSHE statutory guidance, the DfE should strengthen guidance around teaching about online pornography** – ensuring that information is provided in a way that is inclusive to boys (and young men) and sets out how much online pornography presents an unrealistic presentation of sex and relationships that can be detrimental to both boys, girls and LGBTQ+ children.

# 1. What evidence can you provide on the public's attitudes towards pornography? This can include positive or negative attitudes from individuals of any age.

## Parents are very concerned about children's access to online pornography

### - Background

Pornography is not a new source of concern – parents have long felt anxious about children's exposure to sexualised and potentially sexualising content. However, in the context of non-age-verified and largely unregulated online pornography, and at a time when pornography (including hardcore and classified 'extreme' and illegal content<sup>3</sup>) has never been more accessible, parental concern about online pornography has taken a new urgency. While the long-term impacts of childhood exposure to online pornography, particularly the 'tube site' format of online pornography giants,<sup>4</sup> is still being researched and understood, what is clear and irrefutable is the fact that many children (particularly teenagers) are turning to pornography to learn about sex and relationships. This is particularly the case in the absence of quality Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) provision on this topic.<sup>5,6</sup>

Many parents find approaching age-appropriate conversations about sex and relationships difficult at the best of times. With pornography now seen by many as a 'normal' or inevitable part of growing up, parents find it hugely difficult to raise the subject of pornography in a sensitive and age-appropriate way.<sup>7</sup> This is particularly the case when parents themselves are largely unaware of the age and route through which their children are first exposed to online pornography.<sup>8</sup>

Parents' concerns have also accelerated with the types of pornographic content widely available to children online. It has been largely documented that pornography which is widely accessible (and indeed presented to a first-time visitor) on mainstream pornography sites has become progressively aggressive<sup>9</sup> and 'deviant' in recent years - including depictions of 'consensual' violence against women, in which female actors (particularly younger performers) are depicted as responding neutrally or 'positively' to pain-inducing and degrading sex acts.<sup>10</sup> It has been suggested that the presentation of de-personalised and objectifying sex acts (i.e. depictions which do not prioritise the quality of the relationship, communication or consent) forms part of the underlying business model for 'tube' site companies.<sup>11</sup> Online pornography sites (such as Pornhub, XVideos, xnxx and XHamster)<sup>12</sup> derive profit from short-term engagement - the average time that viewers spend on pornography sites being just over 10 minutes<sup>13</sup> – and clicks on targeted advertisements to premium services. It is now widely understood by many parents that the world of 'mainstream' online pornography is not equivalent to 'top-shelf' magazines that they may have accessed when growing up.

Parents' concerns about online pornography are not unfounded. There is a rich and growing body of evidence which suggests that online pornography (alongside other social influences, such as home environment, peer relationships, faith, other forms of media and experiences of abuse) plays a role in shaping **the 'sexual scripts' of viewers**.<sup>14</sup> Sexual scripts are the templates within which individuals understand the boundaries of 'normal' sexual interactions – and, in contrast, what constitutes unacceptable or transgressive sexual behaviour.<sup>15</sup> It is understood that sexual scripts are particularly malleable during childhood and adolescence. The prevailing themes of content found on mainstream pornography sites – male dominance over women (and girls), sexual interest in younger women (including content featuring 'teenage' and 'barely legal' female performers), aggression, coercion and degradation – may inform what young viewers understand as appropriate, 'consensual' and pleasurable within sexual relationships.<sup>16,17</sup> This is deeply concerning, not least given growing evidence of sexual harassment and abuse perpetrated by young people themselves – for example, in a recent survey Internet Matters found that a quarter (25%) of teenagers under the age of 16 are aware of a form of image-based abuse (IBA) being perpetrated against another young person, which is approximately 745,000 children in the UK. Among children who have experienced IBA, over half (55%) reported another young person as the perpetrator.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For example, research by the BBFC found that children were more likely than adults to encounter 'non-photographic pornography' which includes illegal non-photographic depictions of child sexual abuse. Source: BBFC (2022) 'New BBFC research reveals children are more exposed to sites specialising in non-photographic pornography, compared to adults'. [Link](#).

<sup>4</sup> In particular, the 'tube site' format of industry giants, such as Pornhub and XVideos. 'Tube sites' provide users with vast volumes of pornographic content, presented in an 'infinite' scroll and tagged by categories including publisher outlet, content type, performer etc. On most sites, users are able to upload their own content and comment on others' content, and as such most are classified as 'user-to-user' (Part 3) services under the Online Safety Act.

<sup>5</sup> Internet Matters (2023) *Internet Matters' response to the Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) review*. [Link](#).

<sup>6</sup> Internet Matters (2023) 'Internet Matters x Nominet research: RSHE lessons are not meeting children's needs'. [Link](#).

<sup>7</sup> Internet Matters (2019) *We need to talk about pornography: Children, parents, and age verification*. [Link](#).

<sup>8</sup> BBFC and Revealing Reality (2020) 'Young people, Pornography & Age-verification'. [Link](#).

<sup>9</sup> Vera-Gray, F. McGlynn, C. Kureshi, I. and Butterworth, K. (2021) 'Sexual violence as a sexual script in mainstream online pornography'. *British Journal of Criminology*. [Link](#).

<sup>10</sup> For example, a study of over 4,000 scenes from two Pornhub and XVideos found that 45% of Pornhub scenes included at least one act of aggression, and 35% of those on XVideos. Women were the target in 97% of scenes. Female actors' responses to aggression in scenes were mostly neutral or positive, and rarely negative. Source: Fritz, Malic, Paul & Zhou (2020) 'A Descriptive Analysis of the Types, Targets and Relative Frequency of Aggression in Mainstream Pornography', *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*. p.8 [Link](#).

<sup>11</sup> Hanson, E. and PSHE Association (2021) 'Pornography and human futures'. *Fully Human*. [Link](#).

<sup>12</sup> In 2020, these sites combined received over 11 billion visitors each month. Source: Visual Capitalist (2021) 'The 50 Most Visited Websites in the World'. [Link](#).

<sup>13</sup> The Guardian (2018) 'The growth of internet porn tells us more about ourselves than technology'. [Link](#).

<sup>14</sup> Braithwaite, S. et al. (2015) 'The Influence of Pornography on Sexual Scripts and Hooking Up Among Emerging Adults in College', *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 44: 111–23. [Link](#).

<sup>15</sup> Simon, W. and Gagnon, J. (2003) 'Sexual Scripts: Origins, Influences and Changes', *Qualitative Sociology*, 26: 491–7. [Link](#).

<sup>16</sup> Tokunaga, R. and Wright, P. (2019) 'Pornography and Impersonal Sex', *Human Communication Research* 45. [Link](#).

<sup>17</sup> For example, research by the Office of Children's Commissioner for England found that frequent users of pornography are more likely to engage in physically aggressive sex acts, Office of the Children's Commissioner (2023) 'A lot of it is actually just abuse' – *Young people and pornography*. [Link](#).

<sup>18</sup> Internet Matters (2023) *"It's really easy to go down that path": Young people's experiences of online misogyny and image-based abuse*. [Link](#).

- Our data on parental concerns

We conduct a twice-yearly 'digital tracker' survey of a nationally representative sample of 1,000 children aged 9-17 and 2,000 parents (not necessarily of the same household). The survey provides us with insights into how children and families are engaging with digital technologies, the kinds of harms that children are encountering online, and the extent of parents' awareness about harmful experiences. We also ask parents about their primary sources of concern around harmful online content and behaviour.

We find that exposure to pornography is a key area of concern for parents over consistent tracking waves. In our last survey, just under two thirds (64%) of parents stated that they are concerned about their child viewing pornography online. There are a number of key breakdowns within this headline figure.

(1) Vulnerability

**Parents of vulnerable children are significantly more likely to be concerned about their child being exposed to online pornography, than non-vulnerable children.** For the purposes of the digital tracker survey, we define vulnerability as children with a diagnosed mental or physical health need, and/or a special educational need (SEN). 70% of parents of vulnerable children are concerned about their child being exposed to pornography, compared to 61% of parents of non-vulnerable children, a statistically significant difference.

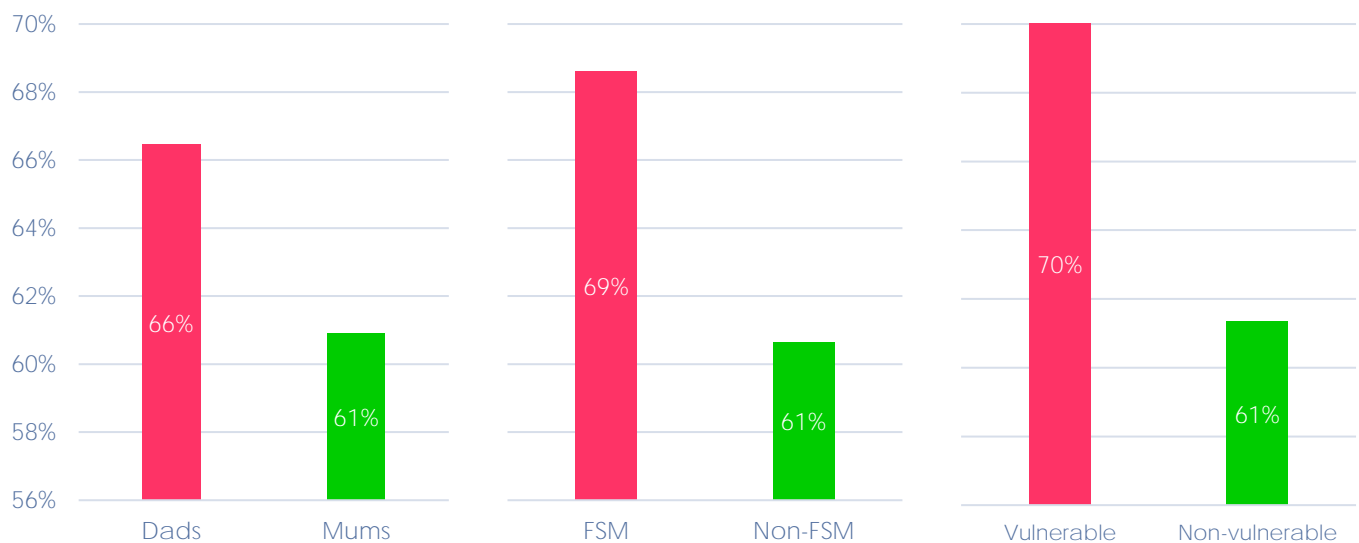


Figure 1 – Percentage of parents concerned about their child viewing online pornography, by demographic factors (gender of parent, child's free school meal (FSM) status and child vulnerability), fieldwork November 2023, sample of 2,000 parents of children aged 3-17.

**Parents with children who are eligible for free school meals (FSM) – a proxy for financial disadvantage – are also more likely than parents of non-FSM children to be concerned about pornography.** 69% of those eligible for FSM are concerned about their child viewing pornographic content online, compared to 61% of parents of non-FSM eligible children, a statistically significant difference.

(2) Parental age

Younger parents (those aged between 25-34) are significantly more likely to be concerned than older parents (those aged 55+) about pornography. **Over two-thirds (69%) of younger parents are concerned about their child being exposed to online pornography, compared to 57% of parents aged 55 and above.** It is likely that younger parents are more familiar with the 'tube' format pornography sites which first appeared in 2006, having possibly experienced these sites in their own childhoods/youth, and are more worried as a result.

(3) Gender (parent and child)

Differences in concern occur between mums and dads. We find that **dads (66%) are more likely to be concerned about their child being exposed to pornography than mums (61%).** This perhaps goes counter to some assumptions about gendered concerns about pornography, with many assuming that women would be more likely to have concerns about misogynistic and sexually violent content. The difference perhaps speaks to dads' own experiences of exposure to online pornography when they were growing up, and knowledge of online pornography via their own current consumption habits. We base this assumption on the fact that boys and men of all age groups are more likely than girls and women to consume pornography.<sup>19</sup>

However, we do find that **levels of concern about pornography consumption are fairly consistent between parents of boys (65% of parents concerned) and parents of girls (66% of parents concerned).**

<sup>19</sup> Ballester-Arnal, R., García-Barba, M., Castro-Calvo, J. et al. (2023) 'Pornography Consumption in People of Different Age Groups: an Analysis Based on Gender, Contents, and Consequences'. *Sex Res Soc Policy* 20, 766-779. [Link](#).

- Sources of parental concerns

In 2019 we published a deep-dive from our bi-annual tracker data into parents' attitudes to online pornography and age verification proposals.<sup>20</sup> The research coincided with developing (and later suspended) Government plans to impose age verification requirements on online pornography sites through the Digital Economy Act (DEA) 2017.<sup>21</sup>

The research explored key concerns among parents about their children viewing pornography. While much has developed in the 5 years since this publication – not least shelved proposals for the DEA, Covid-19 lockdowns, and the passage of the Online Safety Act. However our ongoing research with parents (including via our bi-annual digital tracker survey) shows that parents' concerns about pornography consumption have sustained. Therefore, the deeper insights into sources of concern remain relevant.

This research found that parents' key concerns about pornography consumption were (in order of concern level): impacts on sexual behaviour and providing a source of sexual education particularly for violent content; harmful portrayals of women including depictions of abuse, which may be mirrored in children's real-life relationships; and portrayals of unrealistic body types which may lead to self-esteem issues and impacts on physical health.<sup>22</sup>

Pornography is also an area of acute concern for teachers – and one in which they would like more support

Our research also shows that teachers are very concerned about childhood exposure to pornography. This is perhaps unsurprising. Alongside parents, teachers are at the frontline of (a) talking to children about the possible harms of online pornography, (b) restricting, as far as possible, children's access to online pornography, and (c) managing the consequences of pornography consumption – seen, for example, within the high prevalence of child-on-child sexual violence in schools documented in recent years.<sup>23</sup>

In 2022, Internet Matters conducted a survey of teachers across a range of online safety issues, quantitative analysis was complemented with qualitative research with teachers in schools.<sup>24</sup> We found that **there is clear awareness among teachers of the importance of supporting pupils in relation to pornographic/sexualised content and related topics – such as the sharing of sexual images – but little confidence in doing so.**

For example, 'viewing violent and sexual content' topped the list of topics which teachers feel least confident discussing with children. A third (33%) of teachers stated that they would feel less confident talking to pupils about viewing violent or sexual content, compared to 10 other topics relating to online safety, such as sharing sexual images, hate speech, and impacts of digital technologies on health and wellbeing.



Figure 2 - Topics teachers feel **less confident** speaking to students about [Q: Which of the following topics would you personally feel less confident speaking to students about, if any?], spring 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Internet Matters (2019) 'We need to talk about pornography: Children, parents, and age verification'. [Link](#).

<sup>21</sup> Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), January 2018, 'Guidance from the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to the Age-Verification Regulator for Online Pornography'. [Link](#).

<sup>22</sup> Internet Matters (2019) *We need to talk about pornography: Children, parents, and age verification*. [Link](#).

<sup>23</sup> Ofsted (2021) 'Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges: Ofsted's findings and recommendations on sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online sexual abuse.' [Link](#).

<sup>24</sup> Internet Matters (2023) *Data briefing: online safety in schools*. [Link](#).



**35.1 What education / information are you aware of being available for children about the impact of viewing pornography? This can include some types of legal pornography which conveys violent or misogynistic assumptions about sex and relationships. In your view, how effective is this education / information?**

We see children's online safety and wellbeing as a shared responsibility between service providers, Government and regulators, as well as parents and the professionals who support families and children – for example teachers and social workers. Although it is shared, certain topics (particularly those which are sensitive or challenging to address) can fall between in the stalls, leaving some children – especially those who are otherwise vulnerable – without adequate protection from serious online risks. In the absence of regulation and age verification, this has left many children vulnerable to online harms such as viewing pornography.<sup>25</sup>

- **Current delivery of teaching about pornography through schools**

**Parents don't feel that schools are doing enough to educate children about pornography.**<sup>26</sup> Our 2019 research found, for example, that parents feel that pornography is skimmed over in RSHE lessons because teachers find it 'awkward' or are non-subject specialists, or that priority is given to other online safety topics – such as cyberbullying.

**This is reflected in children's own experiences of RSHE lessons which are, on the whole, negative.**<sup>27</sup> For example, through our Nominet-funded research into prevention strategies for self-generated CSAM,<sup>28</sup> we found that children aged 11-17 experience the following barriers to effective RSHE on sensitive online safety topics:

- **RSHE lessons lack detail and advice:** Children frequently described RSHE as unhelpful and lacking detail, nuance and direct advice.
- **Teachers are often non-subject specialists:** Teachers are often not trained to deliver RSHE, they are seen by children as wanting to speed through the topic because they find it 'awkward', uncomfortable or because they don't want to open out to discussion or questions.
- **Class sizes are too large:** children find it difficult to share experiences or to ask questions in large classes of up to 30 pupils. Some pupils identified that they were taught RSHE in form groups that they do not know as well as their learning groups, and this increased the discomfort and awkwardness.
- **Classes are often mixed-gender:** Girls, in particular, told us that find it hard to share and discuss issues around sex and relationships in front of boys, for fear of being teased or bullied.
- **Boys do not always take RSHE lessons seriously:** Boys feel that there is a lack of seriousness around RSHE which can lead to a breakdown in behaviour and control. Breakdown in boys' behaviour was cited as a key barrier for girls feeling comfortable to engage in RSHE lessons.

Layered on top of these issues, online safety and media literacy teaching (including lessons about inappropriate online content) is currently split across multiple subjects in the curriculum. This includes Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE), ICT/Computing, Media Studies, English, form time, ad-hoc sessions, and safeguarding and behaviour responses.<sup>29</sup> The overlapping topic areas and objectives across each of these curriculum areas can lead to confusion among schools and teachers – with certain topics repeated and others not explored in enough depth.

We are aware of excellent and evidence-based resources aimed at children around the potential harms of online pornography – not least resources from Internet Matters,<sup>30</sup> the PSHE Association,<sup>31</sup> NCA CEOP (ThinkUKnow)<sup>32</sup> and Childnet.<sup>33</sup> However, given the barriers set out above, many children are simply not receiving adequate support and guidance through school. Where parents do not feel equipped or motivated to have these conversations at home (more on support for parents is set out in answer to Q.36) – **a significant number of children lack any effective support around online pornography and other sensitive online safety topics.**

This is concerning, as we know that poor-quality teaching about sensitive online safety topics (such as pornography, sexual abuse, self-harm and suicide content) can do more harm than good. For example, unsafe teaching approaches can alert children to the existence of harmful content, or alienate certain groups and further entrench harmful attitudes.

**We believe that much more could and should be done by the Government to formalise and promote high-quality teaching about online pornography.**<sup>34</sup> This should aim to build strong dialogues with parents and caregivers, ensuring that messages about online pornography (its potential impact, as well as clear and consistent rules around access to pornography) delivered at home and at school are consistent.

<sup>25</sup> Internet Matters (2021) *Refuge and Risk Life Online for Vulnerable Young People*. [Link](#).

<sup>26</sup> Internet Matters (2019) 'We need to talk about pornography: Children, parents, and age verification'. [Link](#).

<sup>27</sup> Internet Matters (December 2023) 'Internet Matters x Nominet research: RSHE lessons are not meeting children's needs'. [Link](#).

<sup>28</sup> Research into effective prevention messages and methodologies, full results to be shared in forthcoming publication - due Spring 2024.

<sup>29</sup> For more information on the different areas covered by these subjects and interventions, see Internet Matters (2023) *Written evidence to the Education Select Committee's Inquiry into the effects of screentime*. [Link](#).

<sup>30</sup> For example: <https://www.internetmatters.org/connecting-safely-online/advice-for-young-people/the-hard-stuff-on-social-media/i-have-seen-porn-what-do-i-do/>

<sup>31</sup> For example: <https://pshe-association.org.uk/resource/addressing-pornography-pshe-guidance>

<sup>32</sup> For example: <https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/maintenance.html>

<sup>33</sup> For example: <https://www.childnet.com/resources/pshe-toolkit/myth-vs-reality/>

<sup>34</sup> Internet Matters, 2023, *Internet Matters' response to the Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) review*. [Link](#).

- **Key principles for effective educational resources on violent or misogynistic pornography**

We think there are a number of principles that Government, schools and third sector organisations should consider when developing resources for children on pornography which conveys violent or misogynistic content. From our recent research into young people's experiences of online misogyny, we are conscious that poor-quality approaches to gender equality and misogynistic content may inadvertently alienate boys and young men and entrench harmful ideas, for example by implicitly 'blaming' boys for issues affecting girls.<sup>35,36</sup>

Our suggested principles for educational resources on online pornography are:

- **A critical media literacy approach.** We think that it is important for education approaches to online pornography to take a media literacy approach – aiming to equip children with the skills to critically consume online information. For example, within the context of online pornography, this could include consideration of the business models of online pornography platforms, and how to determine if depictions of sex and relationships in pornography are harmful, manipulative or misleading.
- **Tailored messaging for boys and girls.** Through our research into the prevention of self-generated child sexual abuse material (CSAM) among 11-13-year-olds, we understand that different messages are needed to cut through to boys and girls.<sup>37</sup> This reflects the different pressures felt by boys and girls – for example, boys are more likely to feel pressure from boys in older year groups – and, as such, messages around resisting male peer pressure as seen as more effective. Whereas for girls, information on healthy and respectful relationships is likely to be more effective – including that pressure within romantic relationships is not acceptable.
- **Inclusivity towards boys (and men).** demonstrating how gender stereotypes presenting in pornography are detrimental to male viewers, as well as to women and girls. For example, drawing attention to impacts on self-esteem, sexual satisfaction, and harmful presentations of male roles in sex and intimate relationships.
- **Strong counter information on what healthy, consenting and communicative relationships look like.**

- **Recommendations:**

**We recommend that the Department for Education conducts a wider review of online safety and media literacy teaching in schools (alongside the ongoing review of RSHE curriculum content), including effective teaching about online pornography.** This review should look to rationalise and consolidate statutory and non-statutory guidance about online safety (which is currently touched upon in at least 13 pieces of guidance).<sup>38</sup> The Department should also consider implementation of online safety teaching, including teaching about pornography, considering where further resourcing and support for schools and teachers to deliver sensitive topics may be needed (including through external delivery). The review should also consider whether RSHE teaching should be delivered by teachers with specific training on delivery of RSHE (i.e. not as an add-on to their other teaching responsibilities) and whether additional considerations are needed for children with special educational needs (SEN). We will be considering these points in a wider piece of research into media literacy education in schools, which will be published in Spring 2024.

**In the meantime, we recommend that schools look to build relationships with parents** – for example, ensuring that RSHE lessons are accompanied with corresponding information for parents on setting up parental controls and having constructive, age-appropriate conversations about online pornography, alongside other online safety issues.

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<sup>35</sup> Internet Matters (2023) 'It's really easy to go down that path': young people's experiences of online misogyny and image-based abuse. [Link](#).

<sup>36</sup> Kings College London Policy Institute (2024) *Emerging tensions? How younger generations are dividing on masculinity and gender equality*. [Link](#).

<sup>37</sup> Internet Matters (December 2023) 'Internet Matters x Nominet research: Young people's views on preventing nude image-sharing'. [Link](#).

<sup>38</sup> See Annex for full list.

**36. In your view, how could parents / carers be better supported to educate their children about pornography?  
Please provide any evidence you have to support this.**

Education and empowerment are central to Internet Matters' mission. We produce tailored resources for parents, carers and professionals across a range of online safety topics, including pornography.<sup>39</sup> This is because we understand that parents are the first port-of-call for most children on online safety topics: **children who have experienced an online harm, including illegal harms, are far more likely to report their experience to a parent (48%) than to the platform (25%), and 82% of children say they go to their parents for information about how to stay safe online – their top information source.**<sup>40</sup>

And while age verification and regulation of online pornography services is absolutely essential, it will not be a silver bullet (noting, for example, the lack of developed policy around VPN use in Ofcom's draft proposals on Part 5 pornography providers).<sup>41</sup> Parents and caregivers will continue to be central to ensuring that children are safe and well online, including by protecting them from the harmful impacts of pornography through parental controls and quality conversations.<sup>42</sup>

**Our 2019 research found that parents need more support:**<sup>43</sup>

- Over a third (39%) do not feel comfortable discussing pornography with their child
- Over a third (34%) do not know what to do to prevent their children from viewing pornography

In this research, almost half (46%) of parents said that they would go to specialist charities for support and advice if they were concerned about their child viewing pornography.

Indeed there are already a number of excellent resources available to parents, provided by third-sector organisations including Internet Matters. We provide advice for parents on setting up parental controls and content filtering tools,<sup>44</sup> as well as guidance on having conversations with children about online pornography.<sup>45</sup> All of our resources are evidence-based and free to access. Our key points of advice for parents include:

- Set up safe, as soon as a child is given their first device.
- Find out what your child already knows about the topics, using this an opportunity to ask more questions.
- Provide positive messages about healthy, loving relationships.
- Ask about their experiences, and take a no-blame approach to whatever a child shares.
- Remain natural and straightforward, using everyday moments (such as car journeys) to raise the conversation.

Our guide for parents on talking about online pornography includes age-appropriate advice for young children (5-10), tweens (11-12) and teens (13 and above).

However, **we do understand how challenging it can be for parents and caregivers to source information that they can trust.** While we invest energy into outreach to parents and caregivers, for example through schools, social media and parenting networks, it remains a challenge to reach all parents – particularly those who are digitally excluded or otherwise marginalised (and whose children, our research suggests, may be at greatest risk of online harm).<sup>46</sup>

- **Recommendations:**

Parental controls are a valuable tool which can be used by parents to reduce children's exposure to online pornography, and other online harms. However, usage of these tools could be significantly improved. **There should be greater focus from Government on driving up awareness of parental controls,** especially broadband filters. The Government should signpost to key resources by trusted organisations (such as Internet Matters) and encourage schools to do the same. More broadly, the Government and/or Ofcom could play a much-needed role in **kitemarking quality resources and advice from online safety/media literacy providers (on pornography and other online safety topics)** so that parents and teachers better understand what advice they can trust.

**Annex**

Statutory and non-statutory guidance for schools relating to online safety

Document	Status	Date published / last updated
Mobile phones in schools: Guidance for schools on prohibiting the use of mobile phones throughout the school day ( <a href="#">link</a> )	Non-statutory	10 February 2024 (published)

<sup>39</sup> Internet Matters, 'Online pornography advice hub and resources', [Link](#).

<sup>40</sup> Internet Matters (2023) Digital tracking survey, nationally representative sample of 1,000 children aged 9-17. Fieldwork November 2023.

<sup>41</sup> Internet Matters (2024) *Internet Matters' response to Ofcom's consultation on age assurance guidance*. [Link](#).

<sup>42</sup> Note that we remain concerned about the lack of role for families in Ofcom's current approach to online safety regulation Internet Matters (2024) *Internet Matters response to Ofcom's approach to protecting users from illegal harms online*. [Link](#).

<sup>43</sup> Internet Matters (2019) *We need to talk about pornography: Children, parents, and age verification*. [Link](#).

<sup>44</sup> Internet Matters, 'Set Up Safe: Get kids tech set up safe'. [Link](#).

<sup>45</sup> Internet Matters (2023) *Protecting children from online pornography: how to start a conversation and manage what your children see online*. [Link](#).

<sup>46</sup> Internet Matters (2021) *Refuge and Risk Life Online for Vulnerable Young People*. [Link](#).



National curriculum in England: computing programmes of study ( <a href="#">link</a> )	Statutory	11 September 2013 (published)
Safeguarding devices: Information on content filtering and mobile device management to ensure devices are safe to use by young people and families ( <a href="#">link</a> )	Non-statutory	19 April 2020 (published)
Teacher training: online relationships and media ( <a href="#">link</a> )	Non-statutory	24 September 2020 (published)
Teacher training: internet safety and harms ( <a href="#">link</a> )	Non-statutory	24 September 2020 (published)
Teacher training: being safe ( <a href="#">link</a> )	Non-statutory	24 September 2020 (published)
Sharing nudes and semi-nudes: advice for education settings working with children and young people ( <a href="#">link</a> )	Non-statutory	23 December 2020 (published)
Harmful online challenges and online hoaxes ( <a href="#">link</a> )	Non-statutory	12 February 2021 (published)
Support for parents and carers to keep children safe online ( <a href="#">link</a> )	Non-statutory	22 February 2021 (updated)
Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) guidance ( <a href="#">link</a> )	Statutory	13 September 2021 (updated)
Safeguarding and remote education ( <a href="#">link</a> )	Non-statutory	24 November 2022 (updated)
Teaching Online Safety in Schools ( <a href="#">link</a> )	Non-statutory	12 January 2023 (updated)
Keeping Children Safe in Education ( <a href="#">link</a> )	Statutory	1 September 2023 (updated)
Teaching about Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)	Non-statutory (forthcoming)	Unpublished (forthcoming)