Minors are Not Accessing Porn at Unprecedented Levels

Fears about children and teens being over exposed to sexual content have increased as social media and online pornography have become more accessible. Many of these fears are grounded in a panic over excessive or compulsive access, but there is a lack of research to suggest this is true. While minors sometimes stumble upon porn accidentally, and other minors do seek out sexual material intentionally, studies have not shown that encountering explicit content led to increased or compulsive access.

Much of the oft-cited research is not peer reviewed and includes biased reporting by religious or advocacy publishers.[1] The valid research that has been conducted has found such a wide range of outcomes, likely due to the high number of biases and overall difficulty in surveying young people about sex and pornography. However, this makes it difficult to draw a clear conclusion.

There has also been a failure to promote and implement effective filters, blockers, and parental control software to minimize access to inappropriate content online. Similar to other porn-related research for adolescents, there is also limited sound research that investigates the impact of specific filters or content blockers with their intended purpose.[2] Increased education and availability of such technologies would increase safety online.

- There is extremely limited sound research on children and adolescents' use of pornography,[3] and almost no consistent data to suggest a drastic increase in young people regularly viewing porn online.

- Accidentally finding pornography online is more common than intentionally seeking it out, but online filters, blockers, and parental control software can mitigate these moments if used effectively.

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[1] Byron, 2021
[2] Stoilova et al., 2023
[3] Przybylski & Nash, 2018

Myth #1: Children are accessing porn sites at high rates

"More and younger children are accessing internet pornography. The average age of first exposure is 11. However, children under 10 now account for 22% of online porn consumption under 18" — Enough is Enough

Are children accessing pornographic content at significantly high rates?

We don't know. While there have been numerous studies that purport to show minors accessing "pornography" at early ages, the figures tend to vary wildly as all of the data comes through self-reporting, and younger minors especially may classify an array of non-explicit content as pornography. Research has failed to consistently show that children are viewing sexual content online at significantly high rates.[4]

A review of research on the topic found a wide range of exposures for young people aged 10 to 17. The lowest prevalence found for teens accidentally coming across porn online was 19% and the study with the highest prevalence found unintentional exposure to have occurred for 84% of teens.[5] A study on EU adolescents conducted between 2017 and 2019 found an average of 33% of adolescents had seen a sexual image in the last year. This same study also found that younger children, aged 9-11, were between 21% and 70% less likely to encounter sexual images than 15-16 year olds.[6] This difference in exposure across age ranges is important to note because statistics about older teens' exposure to pornographic content are often incorrectly applied to young children.

A UK study noted that the majority of teens who viewed sexual content did so accidentally.[7] Numbers for intentional exposure were similarly varied, ranging from less than 7% to 71% percent of teens having purposefully viewed pornographic content in the last year.[8] A 2023 report that just surveyed kids and teens in the United States found that of those who had reported viewing porn, less than half had done so unintentionally.[9]

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[4] Baker, 2015
[5] Peter & Valkenburg, 2016
[6] Smahel et al., 2020
[7] Baker, 2015
[8] Peter & Valkenburg, 2016
[9] Robb & Mann, 2023

None of these studies used a clear, consistent definition of pornography, and some did not define it for the adolescents they were surveying at all. This means that some may consider porn to be only videos of people engaging in sexual acts, while others may include naked or suggestive pictures, love scenes from mainstream movies, or sex ed. This wide range and lack of clarity drastically alters our understanding of the study results, and risks including content that may be used for educational purposes.

Research shows that viewing porn online once did not automatically lead to an increase of engagement in sexual content. In fact, the most common trajectory for both boys and girls, with an average age of 14, was little to no use of sexually explicit material at all. While some encounter adult content and want to view more of it, others do not.[10] In other words, viewing pornographic content once did not automatically lead to increased desire to continue watching it. More so, some of those that did have an increased consumption also reported an absence of porn and media literacy or sex positive sexual education. This suggests other tools and services might be implemented to keep young people from accessing adult content.

As far as motivations, a US study found teens who sought out sexual content did so out of curiosity, arousal, or clarification on sexual health information.[11] While much of the panic-based discourse suggests exposure to sexual content prompts sexual desires that would not otherwise emerge, studies show that teens often seek sexual content out in response to physical arousal and desires that have already naturally occurred.[12] Some kids and teens also report using porn to determine their sexual preference, readiness, and boundaries related to sex.[13]

While adult content is not appropriate for minors, and access should be limited, existing research does not suggest that it is a crisis.

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[10] Doornwaard et al., 2014
[11] Smith, 2012
[12] Atwood et al, 2018
[13] Atwood et al, 2018

Myth #2: Filters are ineffective at protecting children from harmful content

"Age verification is a must to protect children from the dangers of online pornography. Research shows filters are wholly inadequate" - Louisiana Rep. Laurie Schlegel

Do online filters adequately protect children from viewing harmful content?

Yes. Online filters or blockers, when used consistently and correctly, are effective at protecting young people from viewing sexual content.

There are multiple types of filters that can be used to prohibit children from viewing certain content online. Filters for specific browsers, search engine results and network-wide usage can be set up to prohibit certain content from being accessed on specific devices or home networks, while parental control software such as Net Nanny and Kids Watch allow caregivers to block, monitor, and filter inappropriate content on their children's devices.[14] Filters can be keyword-based, content-based, or site-specific, while blocking technology can limit access based on certain apps, platforms, or time length. Other trackers can simply be used to monitor and oversee what young people are doing online.[15] In other words, there are numerous options available for parental and guardian oversight. While anti-porn advocates often push for the removal of any sexual content on social media platforms or online sites frequented by kids, research shows that this has often led to a global over-censoring of LGBTQ and diverse perspectives.[16]

A University of Oxford study often cited by those challenging the effectiveness of filtering looks at the correlation between adults employing filters in the home and the child seeing any nudity, anywhere, at least once over the previous year. The study suggested that filters were ineffective, because even with filters, minors were exposed to sexual content. However, it does not identify whether this content was seen in the home where filters were in place, nor did it examine frequency of access. More so, nudity and sexual content in this study was defined with broad labels that, by the authors' own acknowledgment, can include nonpornographic materials, health information, or sexually suggestive films and music videos.[17] Interestingly, this study did find that caregivers' use of internet filtering was

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[14] Wan Hazimah Wan, 2020
[15] Stoilova et al., 2023
[16] Kelly et al., 2016
[17] Przybylski & Nash, 2018

significantly associated with a lower likelihood of young people having recently encountered online sexual material. However, it also noted that a wider adoption of individual filters is required for this to be relevant enough to have an impact on the majority of households. In other words, filters do work if more people are using them.

A different study that found that the majority of girls and boys to have viewed porn online accidentally also found that the majority of those students' parents did not use filters or even manually monitor their online activity.[18] This begs the question of whether accidental exposure to sexual content could be limited with greater use of parental monitoring or filtering. An older study corroborated this idea, finding that filtering and blocking software diminished both wanted and unwanted adolescent exposure to sexual content.[19] Similarly, a 2018 study found that even behavioral, non technology-based parental monitoring was associated with less engagement in sexually explicit material.[20] This further highlights that availability of sexual content alone is not synonymous with young people accessing it. Rather, filters, blockers, and parental oversight could all play a role in minimizing exposure.

See Also:
- [How to Block Porn and Adult Content on an iPhone](#) (Wikihow)
- [How to Block Porn on Android from Websites and Apps](#) (Wikihow)
- [How to Block Pornography on your child's devices](#) (Common Sense Media)

Policy Suggestion:
- Accessible and affordable filters, blockers, and parental-control software
- Increased free education for parents regarding relevant software, technology, and behavioral moderation skills.
- Sex education that includes pleasure, self-exploration, porn literacy and consent instead of just risk avoidance[21] [22]
- Adequate media literacy education, with age-appropriate emphasis on pornography[23] [24]

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[18] Baker, 2015
[19] Wolak et al., 2007
[20] Tomić et al., 2018
[21] Albury, 2014
[22] Smith, 2012
[23] Byron 2021
[24] Goldstein, 2020

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