



Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

This may be the author's version of a work that was submitted/accepted for publication in the following source:

[McKee, Alan](#)

(2010)

Does pornography harm young people?

Australian Journal of Communication, 37(1), pp. 17-36.

This file was downloaded from: <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/41858/>

© Copyright 2010 Australian Journal of Communication

This work is covered by copyright. Unless the document is being made available under a Creative Commons Licence, you must assume that re-use is limited to personal use and that permission from the copyright owner must be obtained for all other uses. If the document is available under a Creative Commons License (or other specified license) then refer to the Licence for details of permitted re-use. It is a condition of access that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights. If you believe that this work infringes copyright please provide details by email to qut.copyright@qut.edu.au

Notice: *Please note that this document may not be the Version of Record (i.e. published version) of the work. Author manuscript versions (as Submitted for peer review or as Accepted for publication after peer review) can be identified by an absence of publisher branding and/or typeset appearance. If there is any doubt, please refer to the published source.*

<http://www.emsah.uq.edu.au/index.html?page=20187&pid=5220>

Does pornography harm young people?

Alan McKee

Professor, **Queensland University of Technology**

Phone (07) 3138 8235

Fax (07) 3138 8195 ☐

Email a.mckee@qut.edu.au

Postal Queensland University of Technology

Creative Industries Precinct

Z6 – THE HUB, Level 5, Room 532

Musk Avenue, Kelvin Grove

4031

Does pornography harm young people?

Abstract

In recent debates about the regulation of technologies that deliver pornographic content, the greatest concerns have been about the increasing ease with which young people can access such material. Because of the ethical difficulties in researching this topic, little data has been available on the potential harms done to young people by exposure to pornography. This paper gathers a number of sources of data that address this issue indirectly – including the results of our own survey of over 1000 consumers of pornography – to explore this issue. Research shows that healthy sexual development includes natural curiosity about sexuality. Retrospective studies show that accidental exposure to real life scenes of sexuality does not harm children. Our survey shows that age of first exposure to pornography does not correlate with negative attitudes towards women. Studies with non-explicit representations of sexuality show that young people who seek out sexualised representations tend to be those with a pre-existing interest in sexuality. These studies also suggest that current generations of children are no more sexualised than previous generations; that they are not innocent about sexuality; and that a key negative effect of this knowledge is the requirement for them to pretend to be ignorant in order to satisfy adults' expectations of them. Research also suggests important differences between pre- and post-pubescent attitudes towards pornography; and that pornography is not addictive.

Introduction

In ongoing public policy debates about pornography, the possible damage caused to children by exposure to pornography has been one of the key issues. For example, child psychologist Michael Carr-Gregg claims that 'Pornography destroys young people's innocence' (Allen, 2008, p. 32). Professor Freda Briggs, an expert in child abuse, suggests that the increasing reporting of sexual abuse by children can be explained by factors including the fact that: 'some fathers think it's smart to show their children pornography' (Lower, 2008: 8). In Australia in 2008 and 2009, the Labor government is trialling a national censorship system for the Internet via control of ISPs, and this system is justified in terms of protecting children from possible exposure to pornography on the Internet. The Communications Minister Senator Conroy has stated that the intention of the system is to prevent 'child pornography', which includes (in his definition) children seeing adult pornography on the Internet (Seymour, 2008, p. 10).

And yet, for obvious ethical reasons, it is difficult to provide research data on the effects on children of exposure to pornography. In Australia the key document guiding research with humans is the National Health and Medical Research Council's National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. This document notes that: 'Research involving children and young people raises particular ethical concerns', and mentions in particular 'their capacity to understand what the research entails, and

therefore whether their consent to participate is sufficient for their participation'; 'their possible coercion by parents, peers, researchers or others to participate in research'; and 'conflicting values and interests of parents and children' (NHMRC, 2007, p. 55). In research with children there is also the 'key ethical concern', as noted by Bragg and Buckingham, that 'research should not introduce inappropriate sexual material' (Bragg and Buckingham, 2008, p. 115). Given that there is general agreement in Western countries that people under the age of sexual consent should not be shown pornographic materials, this renders research into the possible effects of exposure to such material problematic.

However, it is possible to approach this issue tangentially with data that is relevant to questions of the effect of early exposure to sexually explicit materials, even if it does not directly address the issue. And indeed, the lack of direct data may not be as problematic as previously imagined. Recent research suggests that the forms of data gathering which are excluded for ethical reasons – laboratory experiments – may not in fact be particularly useful anyway when seeking to understand the effects of exposure to sexually explicit materials.

The effects of pornography on adult consumers

Over the past thirty years researchers have investigated a number of possible negative effects from exposure to pornography. The negative effect which has been the subject of most research is the creation of negative attitudes towards women. There is now general agreement among sexual scientists that consumption of non-violent pornography by consenting adults in naturalistic settings does not cause negative attitudes towards women (SSSS, 2007, p. 2). However, in laboratory settings, where unwitting subjects are exposed to pornography without consent, the results can be negative. The Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality has published a document entitled 'What sexual scientists know about pornography'. This survey of the literature summarises the state of research as follows:

- (a) laboratory experiments such as those described herein generally show negative effects of exposure to pornography; (b) naturalistic studies in which naturally occurring pornography consumption and its effects are examined generally show no negative effects; (c) sex criminals show no more frequent use or earlier age of exposure to pornography than do others (SSSS, 2007, p. 2).

We have posited in another piece that the differences between the effects of pornography in laboratory and natural settings may be explained by the many differences between the consumption of pornography in those contexts (McKee, 2007, p. 34). Indeed, our research suggests that the consumption of pornography by consensual adults in natural settings may in fact have positive effects (McKee, 2007b).

The fact that we cannot for ethical reasons conduct laboratory experiments with children may therefore not be as much of a hurdle as it first appears; for in this research area, laboratory studies have not proven to be useful in understanding the consumption of sexually explicit materials in natural settings.

However, this should by no means be taken as suggesting that we can be sanguine about the possible effects on children of exposure to sexually explicit materials. Rather, we must find alternative ways of exploring this issue. Two research approaches stand out. The first is in retrospective studies in which subjects who are now adults recall early exposure to sexually explicit materials. The second is studies which discuss non-explicit representations of sexuality with children.

Healthy Sexual Development

In order to discuss the effect of exposure to sexually explicit materials on healthy sexual development for children it is necessary first to specify what is meant by healthy sexual development. One point immediately becomes apparent, and must be addressed. Some of the public voices who discuss the danger to children of being exposed to sexually explicit materials are those of people who believe that children should be kept ignorant of sex until the age of consent. For these commentators, any knowledge of sex on the part of children is a form of child abuse that must be stopped (Critchley, 2009, p. 22). They believe that any sign of sexual curiosity or experimentation by children is both a sign of, and a further example of, sexual abuse (Lower, 2008).

I assume that no informed sexual researcher would take this position. We know from decades of research that children are naturally curious about sexuality, that ‘the development of sexuality in children is a normal part of their general development’ (Sanderson, 2004, p. 57) and that ‘the preschool years are times of increased curiosity and intense questioning about everything, including sexuality’ (Larsson and Svedin, 2002, p. 248).

Ryan examines ‘numerous studies’ on ‘the masturbatory behaviors of toddlers and preschool children’ (Ryan, 2000, p. 36), including examples from the 1930s onwards (and Levy’s work in 1928 can be added to this list). Rutter’s work in 1971 noted that:

infants soon begin to touch and rub their genitals ... gradually infants learn that genital stimulation may be particularly pleasant and from observations it would seem that genital manipulation then gains a more definitely erotic quality (Rutter, 1971, p. 261)

Newsons (1963) found that 26 per cent of the mothers of 1 year olds reported genital play in their children (Rutter, 1971, p. 261); while:

in a study of middle class American pre-school children, Sears, Maccoby and Levin (1957) found that about half were reported to indulge in sex play or genital handling (Rutter, 1971, p. 262)

We also know that it is normal for children to ask their parents questions about sex. A 1932 study found that by the age of 5, over 50% of children had asked their parents a question about sex (Hattendorf, 1932). A 1933 study found that normal sexual behaviour in children included playing 'sexual exploration' games like 'mothers and fathers' or 'doctors' (Isaacs, 1933). And a 1943 study found that it was typical for children to have sex-play with the opposite sex before reaching puberty (Ramsey, 1943).

Retrospective studies have confirmed that this is normal behaviour. In a 1996 study 59% of adults surveyed said that they 'recalled at least one sexual experience with another child during their childhood' (Haugaard, 1996, p. 86). A 1993 retrospective study of 128 women found that 85% described 'a childhood sexual game experience' (Lamb and Coakley, 1993, p. 515).

Recent research suggests that similar behaviours continue to occur. A 1991 study of 2-6 year old boys in America found that 16% showed their 'sex parts' to other children; 23% masturbated; 11% looked at nude pictures; 26% showed their 'sex parts' to adults; 36% touched their 'sex parts' in public; 34% tried to look at people undressing; 50% undressed in front of other people; and 64% touched their 'sex parts' while at home (Friedrich et al, 1991, p. 458). The researchers concluded that 'a variety of sexual behaviours in children appear to be normal and that their frequency decreases with age, after peaking at the 3-5 year age span' (Friedrich et al, 1991, p. 463). And in a 2002 study in Sweden 64% of girls aged 3-6 looked at other children's genitals occasionally, sometime or often; 20% showed their genitals to children; 8% tried to look at nude pictures; 48% played doctors; 18% masturbated; 21% tried to touch other children's genitals; and 43% touched their genitals at home (Larsson and Svedin, 2002, p.255). Meanwhile, in the same study, 65% of 3-6 year old boys looked at other children's genitals; 50% tried to look at people undressing; 34% showed their genitals to other children; 8% tried to look at nude pictures; 37% played doctors; 28% masturbated; and 71% touched their genitals at home (Larsson and Svedin, 2002, p. 256).

This is normal behaviour, observed independently by multiple researchers over a number of decades – and long before the emergence of communications technologies which are the focus of current concern (such the Internet and mobile phones) became a factor.

It is also worth noting that longitudinal research and retrospective studies have consistently shown that similar-aged, consensual sexual experiences among children have no impact on adult sexual

adjustment, either positive or negative (Greenwald and Leitenberg, 1989; Kilpatrick, 1992; Okami et al, 1997, p. 340). Lamb and Coakley's research with adults who recalled childhood sexual games noted that: 'Statistical analysis showed that these subjects did not differ from those who did not remember any childhood sexual games' (Lamb and Coakley, 1993, p. 520).

More than this, we know that keeping a child ignorant about sexuality actually leads to a greater risk of abuse for that child:

children who know about 'good touching', 'bad touching' and 'questionable touching' are more informed and defensively armed than those who do not know. Similarly, children who know the names of different parts of their genitalia appear to be less desirable to child sex offenders. Such children are less vulnerable to sex offenders (Krafchick and Biringen, 2002, p. 59)

A survey of research into children's sexual development makes it clear that children have a natural curiosity about sexuality, as they do about other aspects of the world. There is a strong consensus on this point across many decades of research.

However, having made this point, a surprising difficulty arises in researching healthy sexual development. Although there is agreement that children's healthy development includes an interest in sexuality, when we try to map what the specific elements of healthy sexual development would be, less information is available. In particular, although much data has been recovered on this topic, as Haugaard noted when he gathered information from professionals working in a number of different disciplines, there is 'considerable disagreement' (Haugaard, 1996, p. 88) between different professional groups about what characterises acceptable sexual development for children. For this reason, I recently lead a multidisciplinary research team to develop a framework for research into healthy sexual development that was acceptable to professionals from a number of fields including psychology, early childhood studies, law, sexual education and media effects research. We identified fifteen key domains involved in healthy sexual development. These were:

- i. Freedom from unwanted activity.
- ii. An understanding of consent, and ethical conduct more generally.
- iii. Education about biological aspects of sexual practice.
- iv. An understanding of safety.
- v. Relationship skills.
- vi. Lifelong learning.
- vii. Open communication.
- viii. Sexual development should not be 'aggressive, coercive or joyless'.
- ix. Agency (children should learn that they are in control of their own sexuality, and in control of who can take sexual pleasure from their bodies).

- x. Self-acceptance (of their sexuality and of their bodies).
- xi. Resilience (to learn and go forward from bad sexual experiences).
- xii. Awareness and acceptance that sex can be pleasurable.
- xiii. Values (children need to know their parents' and wider societal values in order to place their own decisions in a wider social context).
- xiv. Awareness of public/private boundaries.
- xv. Mediation (children need to understand how the media represents sexuality, and the relationship of that to their own experiences) (McKee et al, 2008).

These key domains for healthy sexual development provide us with a framework within which we can discuss the possible impacts of exposure to pornography by children during their sexual development. This is explored in more detail below.

Retrospective Research

With this context in place, we can consider suggestive data about the effect on children of exposure to sexually explicit materials.

Some contextual work can be mentioned. Although we are not aware of any longitudinal studies about the effects of exposure to sexually explicit material, there do exist longitudinal studies on exposure to real-life sexuality, which can be seen to have some relevance to this area. A number of such studies exist; they have established that accidental exposure to scenes of parental nudity or parental sexuality in childhood has no negative developmental effects (Oleinick et al, 1966; Story, 1979; Lewis and Janda, 1988; Okami et al, 1998, p. 361). In the case specifically of sexually explicit representations, we recently conducted a survey of over 1000 consumers of pornography in Australia. One key aspect of this survey was to measure negative attitudes towards women. We also gathered data about age of first exposure to pornography, asking respondents to tell us if they were under 16 (the age of heterosexual consent in most Australian states) at the time. Our data shows that since the 1950s the trend is for each generation to encounter pornography earlier than the generation before:

Current age	Under 16 when?	% who saw porn before 16
66+	1950s or before	36.7%
56-65	1950s, early 1960s	22.8%
46-55	1960s, early 1970s	35.7%
36-45	1970s, early 1980s	58.7%
26-35	1980s, early 1990s	77.4%

18-25	1990s – 2001	79.2%
-------	--------------	-------

Our study also showed that every generation of men has better attitudes towards women than the previous generation (McKee, Albury and Lumby, 2007, p. 80). So as more young people are seeing sexually explicit material before the age of 16, it is also true that more of them have positive attitudes towards women. We are certainly not claiming a causal relationship here. However, it does suggest that there is no causal relationship in the other direction either – that is to say, this data suggests that seeing pornography under the age of 16 is not causing negative attitudes towards women.

Of course, it may be that there are hidden variables that explain this relationship between exposure to pornography and attitudes towards women – for example, it could be that the kinds of pornography that were being viewed in earlier decades were more destructive of attitudes towards women than that which is now available to young people via the Internet. In the absence of such arguments, however, our data makes clear that there is no automatic negative effect from exposure to sexually explicit materials.

It is worth noting that in our research, a number of variables *did* emerge as directly correlated with negative attitudes towards women. These included voting for a right wing political party; being religious; completing a lower level of formal education; being older; and living away from a major urban centre.

We also gathered some qualitative evidence from detailed semi-structured interviews with forty six consumers of pornography (for full cohort and methodological information see McKee, 2007c). Although all of those interviewed were adults, several had first encountered pornography while under the age of 16. None of the interviewees had been given pornography by an adult; all had discovered it for themselves. When asked to think about the effects of early exposure to pornography, the interviewees uniformly recalled other elements of their lives as having a more negative effect on their attitudes to sexuality, including: the media, social attitudes towards women, ‘peer pressure about boyfriends’ and religion (McKee, 2007c, p. 119). Several of the interviewees made clear that they thought that pornography gave an ‘unrealistic’ view of sex – but this was not seen as negative. Indeed, some respondents, who had encountered pornography in their early teens, described the effects as positive. One woman, for example, called it ‘a very, very positive thing’ as she already had: ‘a very positive attitude towards stuff, like humans *do* have sex for pleasure’ (McKee, 2007c, p. 119).

Although public debate about the exposure of young people to sexually explicit material tends to use the word ‘effects’, in interviews with people who had been exposed to such materials the word they tended to use was ‘education’ (McKee, 2007c, p. 119). The interviewees made three points about this. Firstly they suggested that pornography can inform viewers about simple biological facts. Secondly,

they said that a key educational element of pornography was to tell young viewers that it is OK to be interested in sex. A third theme was that pornography can educate viewers about the techniques for good sex (McKee, 2007c).

The suggestion that pornography might work as part of sex education for young people raises several contentious issues. This will be discussed further below, when I return to the framework for healthy sexual development which informs this paper.

Discussions of non-explicit representations of sexuality

A second tradition of research which can inform discussions of the impact of sexually explicit materials on children's development is that which examines whether there are correlations between children's consumption of non-explicit sexualised representations and their own sexual practice.

We must of course be wary of extrapolating from non-explicit to explicit representations. They are clearly not the same thing. Non-explicit representations are those which we decide, as a society, are appropriate for children to be exposed to. Explicit representations are those which we have decided are not appropriate. Given this distinction this research tradition is primarily useful for the insights it offers into the knowledges and behaviours of children about sexuality and the media.

We can say with some certainty that research has demonstrated that:

greater exposure to sexual content in media is associated with more permissive attitudes toward sexual activity, higher estimates of the sexual experience and activity of peers and more and earlier sexual behaviour among adolescents (Rich, 2005, p. 329)

However the research has not demonstrated the direction in which causality lies in this relationship (Hawk et al, 2006). Given our general knowledge about the relationship between audiences and media, it seems more likely that 'young people who have initiated sex lives may be attracted to sexual content in the media because it resonates with their experience' (Rich, 2005, p. 330) than that the media representations are causing them to become sexually active. This 'selection-based perspective', seeking 'the sexual characteristics of adolescents that may predict contact with sexual media' is emerging as the most convincing approach to this question (Hawk et al, 2006). The most relevant insight from this work for the current discussion is that the young people who have an active interest in sexuality are the ones who are most likely to seek out sexually explicit material.

David Buckingham and Sara Bragg have recently conducted an extensive survey of children, the media and sexuality in order to investigate the possible effects of exposure to sexual representations in the media. They worked with children aged 9-17 to discuss 'Children, Media and Personal Relationships'. The project: 'aimed to explore young people's responses to the portrayal of love, sex and relationships in the media' (Bragg and Buckingham, 2008, p. 114). Using only materials that had already been

classified by authorities as suitable for children, they asked their informants for their thoughts about them - being careful to let the children set the terms for what they wanted to talk about, and how they wanted to talk about it, and to avoid leading language. Their findings are useful for discussions about the effects of sexually explicit material on children in two ways.

Firstly, they say that: 'it would be hard to claim that these children represented a generation obviously more corrupted or more knowledgeable about sex than previous ones' (Buckingham and Bragg, 2005, p. 63).

Secondly, they note that this does not mean that children are ignorant. What emerged as a key theme in their research is not so much that children are less ignorant about sexuality than their parents would like; but that the problem here was more the parents' expectations than the children's knowledge. In fact, they found that for children, their parents' expectations caused more problems for them than the information they encountered about sex. Children are quite aware that parents want them to be ignorant about sex; and they consciously perform this ignorance for them. Buckingham and Bragg note that: 'children are aware about the public debate about their relationship to sexual media ... [and] this inevitably shapes the stories and presentations of self they offer in interviews' (Buckingham and Bragg, 2005, p. 61). More than this, the need to pretend to be innocent for their parents was one of the most distressing things about their experience with sexuality in the media: 'for some, much of the embarrassment ... seemed to derive from having to pretend that they did *not* know about such things, in order to keep their parents happy' (Buckingham and Bragg, 2005, p. 62).

Buckingham and Bragg's study represents the most extensive project to date that has sought feedback from children about their thoughts on sexualised representations. Its implications are clear for the area here under discussion: that children are well aware of the debates taking place around them, and have to perform the role that they know is expected of them by their parents and by wider society – that of ignorance about sexuality.

The difference between pre-pubescent and post-pubescent exposure to pornography

In public debates about the effects on children of exposure to pornography it is common to find authors refusing to make a distinction between children of different ages. In particular, pre-pubescent children and post-pubescent children (and even young adults of legal age for sexual intercourse – see Bolt, 2001) are discussed as though the effects of exposure to pornography will be the same.

Developmental literature, and our own retrospective work in the 'Understanding Pornography in Australia' research project, suggest that this is not in fact the case. There appear to be clear differences in response to pornography between pre- and post-pubescent children. In previous research on the impact of accidental exposure to scenes of parental sexuality, for example, researchers found that responses from children who accidentally see parents having sex include 'amusement, giggling' (Okami et al, 1998, p. 364). Similarly, in our interviews with people who had first encountered pornography before puberty, they tended to describe it as meaningless or funny (McKee, 2007c, p. 119). Such responses suggest that this is an area with which they are uncomfortable, and with which

they aren't ready to deal. However, there is no evidence of long term harm from this exposure. We consider below in more detail how such exposure should be dealt with in terms of healthy sexual development.

However, those interviewees who first encountered pornography in their early teens - when they were post-pubescent - were more commonly interested in its content. Several described the use of pornography at that age as a rite of passage, often consumed as a group, with an element of competition about who had the most material (McKee, 2007c, p. 119).

Addiction

One final concern which should be addressed is the issue of whether exposure to pornography before the age of 16 leads to long term problems with addiction.

The language of addiction to pornography is common in public debates about the issue, and is often backed up by comments from clinical psychologists stating that they are seeing more cases of pornography addiction than has previously been the case (see for example Cheetham, 2005; Horin 2007; Nixon, 2007). However, while it is clearly possible in individual cases for people to become addicted to pornography - as it is to work, exercise, sex or reading, for example - it is clear that the object itself is not biologically addictive as are nicotine or heroin. In our survey of consumers of pornography, 0.5% felt they were addicted to pornography (McKee, Albury and Lumby, 2007, p. 86). This is clearly very different from the figures that would be produced were cigarette smokers, for example, to be asked the same question. Indeed, there is a tendency in public debates for commentators to insist that the figures for pornography addiction must be high - but to be unable to produce any data to back this up. In place of research, a journalistic approach is used where individual case studies are employed, with unproven claims that they are representative. This is particularly the case with the insights of clinical psychologists - who, of course, are only reporting on their interactions with people who clearly do have a problem. It is not surprising that the number of people with pornography addiction is increasing, as this has only recently been nominated disease (and indeed is not recognised as an addiction by the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders).

My suspicion is that in public debates we have seen a general broadening of the term 'addiction' to mean any behaviour of which a critic disapproves, and in which people continue to engage in for pleasure. Such a linguistic move is problematic as it collapses together genuine cases of addiction with any interest in pornography. In particular, I would propose that for a young teenager going through puberty, a strong interest in sexuality is normal rather than pathological. As one of our interviewees put this: 'Saying you've been at dad's porn book is part of growing up' (McKee, 2007).

Do current social changes demand an explanation of the sexualisation of children?

All of the data that has been gathered suggests that accidental exposure to pornography by pre-pubescent children, or deliberate seeking out of such material by adolescents, does not in itself cause negative effects (although see the discussion below on other factors that must be taken into consideration). Given that this is the case, it is worth asking the question – do current social changes demand an explanation of the sexualisation of children? Is there evidence of changes in the behaviour of children which need some form of explanation – whether that explanation turns out to be exposure to pornography, or some other factor?

As noted above, our retrospective research suggests that more people are now seeing pornography under the age of 16 than at any other time. However, it also suggests that young men have better attitudes towards women than at any other time. However, other commentators see other changes that demand explanation. ‘Adolescent psychologist’ Michael Carr-Gregg states that ‘sexual behaviour was starting younger and the type of sexual behaviour had changed. “Oral and anal sex have become almost normalised among 13-year-olds,” he said’ (Allen, 2008, p. 32). Professor Freda Briggs, an expert in child abuse, states that: ‘the number of reports of sexual behaviour among children was rising across the country’ (Lower, 2008, p. 8). Both experts turn to increasing exposure to pornography to explain what they see as social problems.

However such accounts are journalistic rather than based on research. There is little evidence that there is a substantive change in behaviours. Rather what appears to be happening is the pathologisation of childhood sexuality play that has been previously been regarded as normal. Professor Briggs is reacting to a story about a five year old boy showing his penis to another five year old boy in the school toilets (Lower, 2008, p. 8). As noted above, this has been regarded by researchers as normal and healthy sexual play for children for at least eighty years. In public debates it is now regarded as sexual abuse, and demands explanation. I suspect that in recent discussions the call for childhood ‘innocence’ has been confused with by the idea that innocence means ‘ignorance’. This has never been the case – children have never been ignorant about, or uninterested in, human sexuality. But it seems that in public debates about children’s sexual development, such ignorance is now being proposed as an ideal – sometimes up to and beyond the age of consent for sexual engagement.

The place of pornography in healthy sexual development

In ongoing public policy debates about pornography, the possible damage caused to children by exposure to pornography has been one of the key issues. We cannot test such a proposition directly. However, extensive relevant data can be gathered. It points towards the possibility that accidental exposure to sexually explicit materials in pre-pubescent children; and deliberate seeking out of sexually explicit materials by adolescents are not damaging. Returning to the domains of healthy sexual development laid out above, we can explore these specifically in relation to exposure to pornography, drawing on the data that has been surveyed in this article.

In doing so it seems necessary, based on the research, to draw a clear distinction between on the one hand, pre-pubescent children; and on the other, adolescents who are developing their own sexual identities.

For both groups, 'Freedom from unwanted activity' is paramount. Sexual abuse of children is destructive. It is important that we distinguish between normal childhood sexual play and sexual abuse, and not simply collapse the two of them together (Lamb and Coakley, 1993). As noted above, an extensive tradition of research over many decades has established that sexual play – including looking at naked bodies, or pictures of naked bodies – can be a normal, healthy part of children's development. But any form of coerced sexual practice – including being forced to look at pornography – can be destructive. 'Freedom from unwanted activity' would include a freedom from being forcibly exposed to pornography. Spamming with sexually explicit material falls under this definition. This is a form of sexual abuse.

Also vital throughout both childhood and adolescence is supportive education about agency: children should learn that they are in control of their own sexuality, and in control of who can take sexual pleasure from their bodies. For pre-pubescent children this is vital to prevent sexual abuse. For adolescents who are developing their own sexual identities it is no less vital that they understand that they don't have to be pressured into doing anything they don't want to – either by a partner or by peer pressure.

In relation to other aspects of healthy sexual development, there are distinct differences between pre-pubescent children and adolescents developing their own sexual identities. Pre-pubescent children are unlikely to seek out pornography. If they are exposed to it – either by accidentally discovering magazines or DVDs, or by finding something on the Internet – their response is likely to be uncomfortable laughter. The key element of healthy sexual development in such a scenario is 'Open communication'. Parents need to establish relationships with children where they are not embarrassed to talk about sexual issues. We know that it has been regarded as normal and healthy for many decades for even very young children to ask questions about sex. Having been accidentally exposed to sexually explicit information, it is important that children feel safe to talk to responsible adults in their life about this without being punished for it. As Buckingham and Bragg noted above, 'for some [children], much of the embarrassment ... seemed to derive from having to pretend that they did *not* know about such things, in order to keep their parents happy' (Buckingham and Bragg, 2005, p. 62). A sense that parents or caregivers will be angry at them for their accidental discovery of this material has the potential to be destructive.

For these children it is also important that they learn about 'public/private boundaries'. As noted above, decades of research have shown that even the very youngest children will touch their genitalia, or display them to adults. Learning when this is appropriate, and when it is not appropriate – the line between private and public behaviours – is a key element of healthy sexual development.

For adolescents who are establishing their own sexual identity, the situation is more complex. It is likely that they will be seeking out pornography – this is not new – and so another set of issues are raised.

Considering the impact of pornography on healthy sexual development of adolescents who are establishing their own sexual identities, a set of domains coalesces around information. There are some elements of information which pornography teaches extremely well; others in which it is clearly deficient. The correct response to this is to lobby for well-rounded sexuality education which ensures that all children understand key aspects of sexual relationships. Pornography is strong on teaching an 'Awareness and acceptance that sex can be pleasurable'. Surprisingly, it is also one of the areas of culture – moreso than mainstream television, magazines, fashion or movies – which teaches 'Self-acceptance (of their sexuality and of their bodies)'. This might seem counterintuitive – in public debates we hear concerns that pornography promotes stereotypes of female beauty. But this is untrue in two ways. Firstly, pornography is non-judgemental about sexual identities and preferences. When we asked consumers of pornography to nominate the 'effect' that pornography had had on their attitudes towards sexuality, the top effect was making them more relaxed and comfortable about sex; and number eight was offering reassurance that their sexual identity (eg, for gay men) was acceptable (McKee, Albury and Lumby, 2007, p. 85). Secondly, in our content analysis we found that hardcore pornography in particular (moreso than 'mainstream' magazines like *Playboy*) displays a wide range of body types as being attractive (see McKee, Albury and Lumby, 2007, p. 61).

Pornography also contributes positively to 'lifelong learning', making clear that sex can be an area for continued experimentation.

In terms of 'Education about biological aspects of sexual practice', pornography has some strong points and some weak points. It is a strong teacher about the physical aspects of male sexual pleasure; a mediocre teacher about female sexual pleasure; and fails to teach about the reproductive aspects of sex. Pornography is also an extremely poor teacher about 'Relationship skills' and 'An understanding of safety'. In almost all pornography, sex is shown outside of the context of a relationship. It is important to note that this is not, in itself, problematic. Casual sex is as normal and healthy as sex within a relationship. But pornography clearly teaches only about a limited range of sexual relationships. And the lack of safe sex practice in heterosexual pornography (note that gay pornography now almost exclusively uses condoms) is one of the key ethical problems with the genre (McKee, Albury and Lumby, 2007, p. 175).

A key issue arises around 'An understanding of consent, and ethical conduct more generally'. Pornography is not a good teacher of ethical negotiations around sexuality. This is not because the sex in pornography is non-consensual or unethical. Despite what has been reported in the media (see, for example, Doidge, 2008), the vast mainstream of pornography – even on the Internet - is clearly ethical and consensual (see McKee, Albury and Lumby, 2007, p. 68-72), and this is what consumers look for in pornography (McKee, 2006, p. 527). Rather, pornography is not a good teacher of ethical negotiations because these are not *shown* in the genre. The negotiations involved in preparing each sexual scene in pornography take place off-camera, during preproduction. In short, pornography makes sex look easy. It excludes the extensive conversation that is a part of establishing sexual boundaries and interests. This is not a bad thing about pornography. It is simply a characteristic of the genre which must be taken into account when thinking about what sexuality education must provide that

pornography does not. Having made this point, it should then be apparent that most pornography, as enjoyed by the majority of consumers, teaches that: ‘Sexual development should not be “aggressive, coercive or joyless”’. Despite the concerns of journalists, mainstream pornography is not coercive or joyless. Importantly, it is aggressive only in consensual, sadomasochistic ways. And it is important to insist – as part of ‘Self-acceptance (of their sexuality and of their bodies)’ – that sadomasochism is an acceptable part of the variety of human sexuality. Although it is a minority practice, is not abnormal.

There are certain kinds of information, then, which pornography is well-placed to provide. However, there are clearly others which it is not suitable for teaching. In learning about biological aspects of sexual practice, safe sex, relationship skills and negotiation skills, sexuality education from other sources must be comprehensive to ensure that pornography is not the only source of information for adolescents.

A final group of key domains in healthy sexual development for adolescents concerns supportive structures that need to be in place. Adolescents need to learn about their parents’, and wider societies’, values – to enable them to make informed decisions about their own sexual behaviours. And they need to learn about mediation - how the media represents sexuality, and the relationship of that to their own experiences (including mainstream media such as television and films as well as explicit pornography). These information sets are likely to be provided by parents and by formal schooling.

Finally, a key skill for adolescents – not just in their encounters with pornography but with all their sexual development – is resilience. A combination of open communication and an understanding of lifelong learning is necessary to make it possible for young people to learn and go forward from bad sexual experiences – including exposure to pornography that they may find distasteful or upsetting.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in thinking about the impact of pornography on healthy sexual development, we must think more widely about healthy sexual development. Having established the key domains which must be addressed in order for children to develop a healthy sexuality, we can then look at the part that pornography plays in this. Research from retrospective studies, and research into non-explicit representations of sexuality, suggest that children are not damaged from accidental exposure to pornography before puberty; or from consensual seeking out of such material after puberty. However, it is also clear that pornography must not be the only source of information about sexuality for young people. It is vital that fully rounded, age appropriate sexuality education is provided in order to give them the necessary information – about safety, relationships and sexuality’s place in society – that is missing from the genre.

Acknowledgements

The research in this paper was funded by Australian Research Council Discovery Grant DP0209258; and a grant from the Institute for Creative Industries and Innovation at Queensland University of Technology.

References

- ALL MISSING REFS IN 'HEALTHY SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH' FOLDER.
- Allen, Elizabeth (2008) 'Child experts endorse porn filters - 'Urgent' need to stop the sexualisation of children', the Brisbane *Courier-Mail*, 1 November 2008, p. 32.
- Bolt, Andrew (2001) 'If any adult is going to talk to your child about the joys of sex, it should be you', the *Melbourne Herald-Sun*, 12 March 2001, p20.
- Bragg, S. and Buckingham, D. (2008). 'Scrapbooks' as a resource in media research with young people. In P. Thomson (Ed.) *Doing Visual Research with Children and Young People* (pp. 114-131). London and New York: Routledge.
- Buckingham, David and Sara Bragg (2005) 'Opting in to (and out of) childhood: young people, sex and the media', in Jens Qvortrup (ed) *Studies in Modern Childhood: Society, Agency, Culture*, Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hamp.: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 59-77.

- Cheetham, Jock (2005) 'The perils of porn', the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 February 2005, p. 14.
- Critchley, Cheryl (2009) "'Tween" magazine directed girls to sex talk', the *Adelaide Advertiser*, 14 April 2009, p 22.
- Doidge, Norman (2008) 'Trapped in the cyber-porn net', the *Melbourne Age*, 12 April 2008, p 7.
- Friedrich, William N, Patricia Gramsbsch, Daniel Broughton, James Kuiper and Robert L Beilke (1991) 'Normative sexual behaviour in children', *Pediatrics* 88(3), pp456-464.
- Greenwald, E and H Leitenberg (1989) 'Long-term effects of sexual experiences with siblings and non-siblings during childhood', *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 18, pp389-399.
- Hattendorf, K. W. (1932). A study of the questions of young children concerning sex: a phase of an experimental approach to parent education. *Journal of Social Psychology* 3, pp. 37-65.
- Haugaard, J. J. (1996). Sexual behaviors between children: Professionals' opinions and undergraduates' recollections. *Families in Society*. 77(2), pp. 81-89.
- Haugaard, Jeffrey J (1996). 'Sexual behaviors between children: Professionals' opinions and undergraduates' recollections', *Families in Society*, 77(2), pp81-89
- Hawk, Skyler T, Ine Vanwesenbeeck, Hanneke de Graaf and Floor Bakker (2006) 'Adolescents' contact with sexuality in mainstream media: a selection-based perspective', *The Journal of Sex Research* 43(4), pp 352-363.
- Horin, Adele (2007) 'How cyber porn is wrecking relationships', the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 May 2007, p 25.
- Kilpatrick, Allie C (1992) *Long-Range Effects of Child and Adolescent Sexual Experiences: myths, mores and menaces*, Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Krafchick, Jennifer and Zeynep Biringen (2002) 'Parents as sexuality educators: the role of family therapists in coaching parents', *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 14(3/4), pp57-72.
- Lagerberg, D. (2001). Parents' observations of sexual behaviour in pre-school children. *Acta Paediatr.* 90, pp. 367-369.
- Lamb, Sharon and Mary Coakley (1993) "'Normal" childhood sexual play and games: differentiating play from abuse', *Child Abuse and Neglect* 17, pp515-526.
- Larsson, IngBeth and Carl-Göran Svedin (2002) 'Teachers' and parents' reports on 3- to 6-year old children's sexual behaviour – a comparison', *Child Abuse and Neglect* 26 (2002), pp247-266.
- Larsson, IngBeth and Carl-Göran Svedin (2002b) 'Sexual experience in childhood: young adults' recollections', *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* 31(3), pp263-273.
- Levy, D. (1928). Fingersucking and accessory movements in early infancy: an etiologic study. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 84(6), pp. 881-918.

- Lewis, R J and L H Janda (1988) 'The relationship between adult sexual adjustment and childhood experiences regarding exposure to nudity, sleeping in the parental bed and parental attitudes toward sexuality', *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, 17, pp349-362.
- Lower, Gavin (2008) 'Mothers urge action on child-against-child sex abuse', the *Australian*, 18 October 2008, p8.
- McKee, Alan (2006) 'The aesthetics of pornography: the insights of consumers' *Continuum* 20(4), pp523-539.
- McKee, Alan (2007) 'The relationship between attitudes towards women, consumption of pornography and other demographic variables in a survey of 1,023 consumers of pornography', *International Journal of Sexual Health*, 19(1), pp31-45).
- McKee, Alan (2007b) 'Positive and negative effects of pornography as attributed by consumers', *Australian Journal of Communication*, 34(1), pp87-104.
- McKee, Alan (2007c) 'Saying you've been at dad's porn book is part of growing up': youth, pornography and education, *Metro* December 2007, no 155, pp118-122.
- McKee, Alan, Kath Albury and Catharine Lumby (2007) *The Porn Report*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- McKee, Alan, Kath Albury, Michael Dunne, Sue Grieshaber, John Hartley, Catharine Lumby and Ben Mathews (2008) 'Healthy sexual development: a multidisciplinary framework for research', under review.
- NHMRC (2007) *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*, National Health and Medical Research Council, the Australian Research Council and the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/synopses/files/e72.pdf>, accessed 5 May 2009.
- Nixon, Karen (2007) 'Close up', the *Courier-Mail*, 2 April 2007, p 34.
- Okami, Paul, Richard Olmstead and Paul R Abramson (1997) 'Sexual experiences in early childhood: 18 year longitudinal data from the UCLA Family Lifestyles project', *The Journal of Sex Research*, 34(4), pp339-347.
- Okami, Paul, Richard Olmstead, Paul R Abramson and Laura Pendelton (1998) 'Early childhood exposure to parental nudity and scenes of parental sexuality ("primal scenes"): an 18 year longitudinal study of outcome', *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, 27(4), pp361-384.
- Oleinick, M S, A K Bahn, L Eisenberg and A M Lilienfield (1966) 'Early socialization experiences and intra-familial environment', *Archives of General Psychiatry* 15, pp344-355.
- Ramsey, G. V. (1943). The sexual development of boys. *American Journal of Psychology*, 56(2), pp. 217-233.

- Rich, Michael (2005) 'Sex screen: the dilemma of media exposure and sexual behavior', *Pediatrics: Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics*, vol 116, pp 329-331.
- Ryan, Gail (2000) 'Childhood sexuality: a decade of study. Part 1 – Research and curriculum development', *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 24(1), pp33-48.
- Sanderson, Christiane (2004) *The Seduction of Children: empowering parents and teachers to protect children from child sexual abuse*, London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers
- Sears, R. R., Maccoby, E. E. & Levin, H. (1957). *Patterns of Child Rearing*. New York: Harper and Rowe.
- Seymour, Jon (2008) 'Wrong way, go back: Conroy takes poor approach to filtering porn', the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 January 2008, p 10.
- SSSS (2007) *What sexual scientists know about pornography*, The Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, http://www.sexscience.org/uploads/media/071079_SSSS_D_rev2_lo.pdf, accessed 5 May 2009.
- Story, M D (1979) 'Factors associated with more positive body self-concepts in preschool children', *Journal of Social Psychology*, no. 108, pp49-56.