

# Accidental, unsolicited and in your face.

Young people's encounters with online  
pornography: a matter of platform  
responsibility, education and choice



September 2023

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## Young people's encounters with online pornography: a matter of platform responsibility, education and choice

### The eSafety research program

The purpose of the eSafety Commissioner (eSafety) is to help Australians have safer and more positive experiences online.

The eSafety research program supports, encourages, conducts and evaluates research about online safety for Australians. We do this so that:

- our programs, and policy and regulatory functions, are evidence-informed
- robust, citizen-centred evidence on the prevalence and impact of online harms is available to stakeholders
- the evidence base on what works to prevent and remediate online harms continues to grow.

eSafety research is available at: [eSafety.gov.au/research](https://esafety.gov.au/research)

For enquiries about the eSafety research program, please contact: [research@esafety.gov.au](mailto:research@esafety.gov.au)

### Content warning

The following report contains discussions about sexuality relating to young people. It also contains mentions of unhealthy ideas about consent, gender and sexual practices. Please consider if reading this report is right for you at this time.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the young people who participated in this research and gave their time to contribute to a greater understanding of young people's encounters with, perspectives on and attitudes towards online pornography.

### Suggested citation

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eSafety acknowledges all First Nations people for their continuing care of everything Country encompasses — land, waters and community. We pay our respects to First Nations people, and to Elders past, present and future.



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# About this report

In September 2022, eSafety carried out mixed methods research into young people's attitudes towards online pornography and age assurance. A key aim of the project was to explore young people's lived experiences with online pornography. The research was conducted from 19 to 21 September 2022 by means of a survey of 1,004 young people aged 16–18 and six focus groups with a total of 32 young people aged 16–18. It is part of a larger project in response to the Australian Government's request to eSafety to develop a proposed mandatory age verification regime for online pornography (the Age Verification Roadmap).

This is the first of two reports in eSafety's **Young People and Pornography** research series. It starts by examining young people's encounters with online pornography. It then explores young people's perspectives on and attitudes towards online pornography, including what they consider helpful for reducing its negative impacts. This report contributes to a growing body of research into the prevalence of young people's encounters with pornography, their perspectives on it and their support needs around it. Our second report, examining findings about young people's attitudes towards age assurance, is available [here](#).

Overall, the data indicates that online pornography is prevalent in the online lives of young people, with Australian young people encountering online pornography at high rates from a young age. We found that many young people's first encounters with online pornography are unintentional. However, throughout adolescence, they are seeing online pornography both unintentionally and intentionally via pornography websites, other unrelated websites, social media and communication from friends.

Our findings suggest that while young people who intentionally seek out online pornography may find it pleasurable and interesting, young people generally don't like encountering it unintentionally. Yet, due to the pervasiveness of pornography in the online worlds of young people, such encounters appear to be becoming normalised, and young people are more likely to ignore content than to report it or to seek support and help.

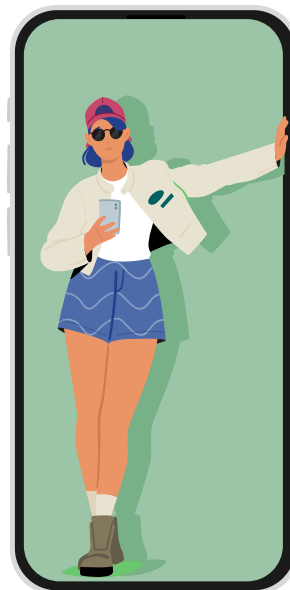
Young people in our study acknowledged positive aspects of online pornography that could be valuable to them, particularly in regard to learning about sex and exploring their sexuality. However, they also recognised the negative impacts that online pornography can have, especially in relation to young people's understanding and expectations of relationships and sex. Education was perceived as the best way to reduce the negative impacts of online pornography, and young people in our study voiced that they want support to make informed decisions and to have realistic expectations of sex. These skills, they believed, would help them to navigate encounters with online pornography.



# Key findings

## Young people's encounters with pornography

- **Online pornography is prevalent in the online lives of young people, with 13 being the average age when they first encountered it.** Three in four (75%) of the young people surveyed had encountered online pornography. Seven in eight (86%) young people who had seen online pornography first encountered it by the age of 16, three in four (73%) by the age of 15, and two in five (39%) by the age of 13. Non-heterosexual young people (54%), young people with disability (53%) and/or young people who speak a language other than English at home (47%) were significantly more likely than other young people to first encounter online pornography before the age of 13. Most (63%) young people who had seen online pornography first encountered content privately. Others were first introduced to online pornography while with (28%) and/or by (20%) their friends.
- **Many young people unintentionally encounter online pornography, often before the age of 13. Young people described unintentional encounters with online pornography as frequent, unavoidable and unwelcome.** Of the young people who had encountered online pornography, 58% reported they had unintentionally encountered content at least once. One in three (30%) young people who had seen online pornography first encountered content unintentionally before the age of 13. Young people reported that the experience of unintentionally coming across porn felt intrusive and disempowering and made them feel uncomfortable. Some participants suggested that such encounters were so pervasive that young people have become desensitised to the content. Seven in 10 (71%) young people who unintentionally encountered online pornography ignored it.



- **Young people are more likely to actively seek out online pornography as they progress through their teenage years.** Of young people who had encountered online pornography, 59% said they had done so intentionally at least once. Young people said that seeing online pornography intentionally can be pleasurable and interesting and can provide a sense of control. Most (84%) young people who intentionally encountered pornography watched it.
- **Online pornography is highly present in young people's online worlds.** Pornography sites (70%) and social media (60%) were the most common places where young people encountered online pornography. Focus group participants described seeing online pornography on platforms including Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter and TikTok.
- **Many young people encounter pornography regularly, and those that encounter it frequently tended to encounter it for the first time at a young age.** Three in five (63%) young people who had seen online pornography encountered it at least once a month. Young people who encountered porn frequently (e.g. daily) were more likely to first encounter it before the age of 13.
- **Young men encounter more online pornography than young women, and are more likely to search for online pornography, to encounter it more frequently and to see it on pornography sites.** Young men who encountered online pornography were more likely than young women to see it intentionally (62% vs. 49%), to encounter it on pornography sites (76% vs. 65%) and to see it daily (21% vs. 4%).
- **Young women also encounter online pornography but are more likely to have unintentional encounters and to see content via social media.** Young women who had seen online pornography were more likely than young men to have encountered it unintentionally (73% vs. 56%) and via social media (66% vs. 49%).

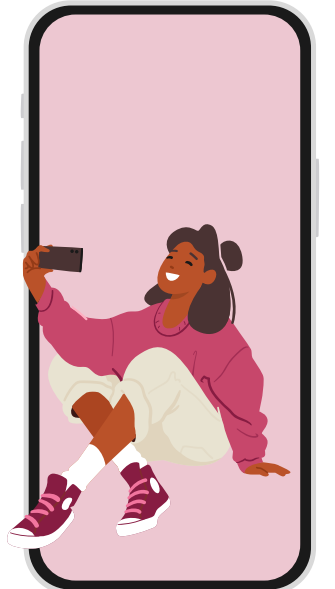


## Young people's perspectives on pornography

- **Young people expressed their right to safe, autonomous sexual development and exploration.** Focus group participants emphasised their belief that young people deserve agency over their interactions with online pornography. For some, this meant being able not to see pornography at all. For others, agency meant being able to choose when and where they viewed pornography.
- **Young people recognised negative impacts that online pornography can have on them, particularly in relation to their understanding and expectations of relationships and sex.** Most young people surveyed thought there were negative impacts on young people's understanding of consent (74%), ideas about intimate relationships (76%), expectations of sex (76%) and views on gender stereotypes (64%).
- **Young people acknowledged positive aspects of online pornography that could be valuable to them.** In particular, one in two (51%) young people thought that online pornography had some positive aspects, including helping people their age to learn about sex and explore their sexuality. These facets were also endorsed in focus group discussions. LGB+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual and more) young people were more likely than their heterosexual peers to think there were some positive effects for young people of learning about sex and exploring their sexuality via online pornography (60% vs. 48%). Focus group participants also thought that online pornography can be a source of pleasure, entertainment and self-gratification.
- **Embarrassment and shame are key barriers to information and help-seeking for online pornography.** Eighty per cent of survey participants identified embarrassment, and 77% identified shame and guilt, as factors that might prevent young people from seeking help in relation to the potential negative impacts of online pornography. Focus group participants were also conscious of the shame surrounding the subject of pornography.



- **Education was seen by young people as the most helpful tool for mitigating the harmful impacts that could arise from encounters with online pornography.** In particular, young people spoke about the benefits of pornography-specific education, relationships education and sex education in reducing the harmful impacts of online pornography.
- **Young people favoured online sources (e.g. social media and websites) and their peers when seeking information and advice about online pornography.** Young people also thought that enabling open dialogues and discussion around online pornography could help to mitigate the potential harms young people may experience from encounters with online pornography.





# Methodology

**This project was submitted as part of the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) approval process. Ethics approval for the project was received from Bellberry Ethics Committee on 26 August 2022, ID 22CeSC117. eSafety collaborated with Professor Bronwyn Carlson and Madi Day of Macquarie University's Department of Indigenous Studies to review the methodology and instruments for cultural safety and to ensure that questions were worded in a culturally sensitive manner.**

The study was comprised of two phases: an online survey, followed by online focus groups.

Informed consent to participate in the survey and/or focus groups was sought directly from the participants.

## Online survey

We conducted a 15-minute online survey with young Australians aged 16–18 years. Participants were asked about their encounters with online pornography, their perceptions of it, and their attitudes towards age verification and age restriction.

A total of 1,004 young people participated in the survey. This sample included young people with disability (n=228), those who speak a language other than English (LOE) at home (n=247), those who are LGB+ young people (n=219), trans and gender-diverse young people (n=31), and First Nations young people (n=31). The numbers of First Nations youth and trans and gender-diverse young people are too small to provide for separate analysis and were not separated out of the main data collected. For more on the limitations of this research, see our methodology at [esafety.gov.au/research](https://esafety.gov.au/research).

## Online focus groups

The qualitative phase of the research comprised six one-hour online text-based focus groups of Australian young people aged 16–18, with a total of 32 participants. Questions asked in the focus groups aimed to complement the survey findings, adding depth and nuance and drawing out young people's opinions on and experiences of online pornography in their own words.

The focus groups were made up of 12 sixteen-year-olds, 11 seventeen-year-olds and 10 eighteen-year-olds. There were 15 women, 11 men, 4 non-binary young people, 1 trans man and 1 demiboy in the focus groups. Nineteen focus group participants identified as straight, one as gay, three as queer, five as bisexual, and one each as pansexual, asexual, demisexual panromantic and questioning.<sup>1</sup>

The full methodology report is available on the eSafety website at [eSafety.gov.au/research](https://esafety.gov.au/research).

## A note on key terms used in this report

Throughout this report, we use the acronym 'LGB+' to refer to our findings relating to sexually diverse young people. We use the acronym 'LGBTIQ+' (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer and more) to refer to broader research relating to gender- and sexually diverse young people.

We use the term 'young people' to refer to our sample of 16- to 18-year-olds.



<sup>1</sup>All research participants were asked to select or write in the gender and sexuality terms that they identify with. Many of these terms are used in complex and contested ways by gender- and sexually diverse people, and we did not ask any participant to expand on what their chosen gender or sexuality identity term means to them. In line with best practice, we have used the terms provided by participants in reporting our findings.

# Young people's first encounters with online pornography

Findings from our survey and focus groups indicate that most young people have encountered online pornography, and that most first encounters occur well before young people turn 18.

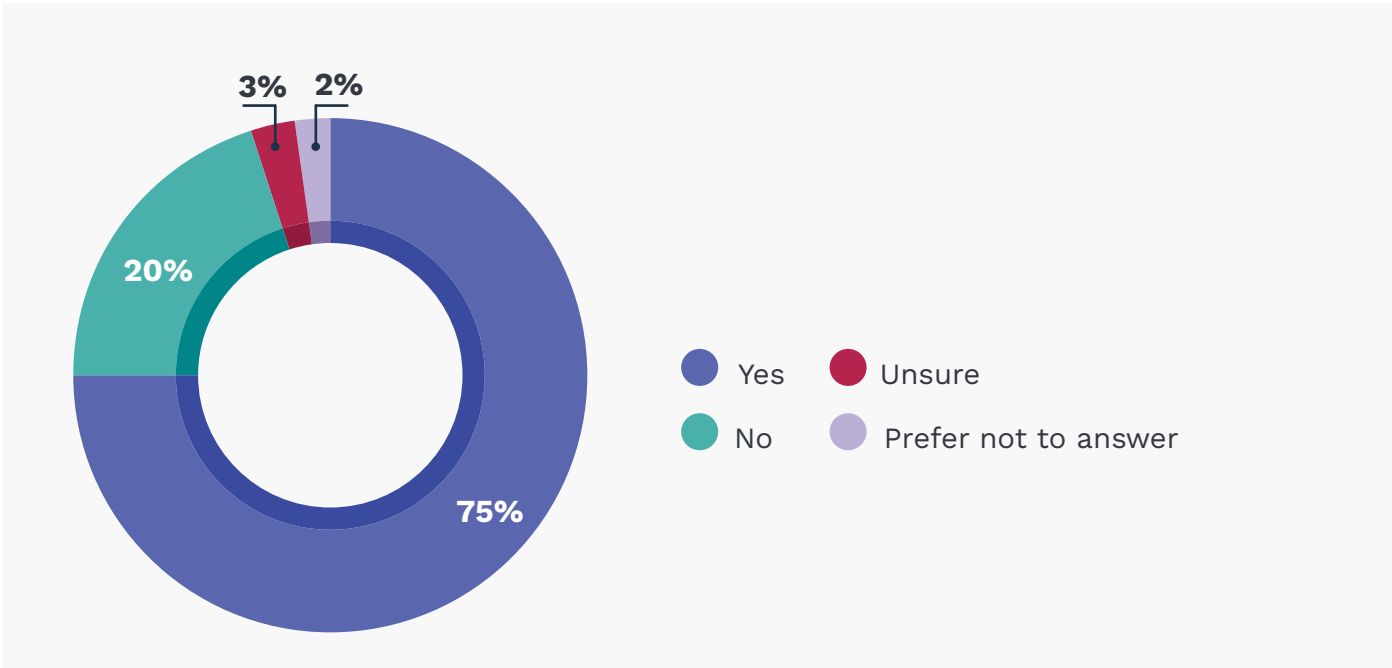
## When do young people first encounter online pornography?

### Most young people have encountered online pornography

Most (75%) of the young people in our survey had encountered online pornography at least once (Figure 1).

There was no significant difference between the proportion of young men (79%) and young women (72%) in our sample who had encountered online pornography.

Figure 1. Have you ever seen online pornography?



(Total sample, unweighted, base n=1,004)

As shown in Figure 2, the proportion of young people who report having seen pornography on at least one occasion increases significantly with age.

- Seven in 10 (69%) 16-year-olds had encountered online pornography.
- Four in five (81%) 18-year-olds had encountered online pornography.

Figure 2. Have you ever seen online pornography (by current age)?



(Total sample, unweighted, base n=1,004) Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference.



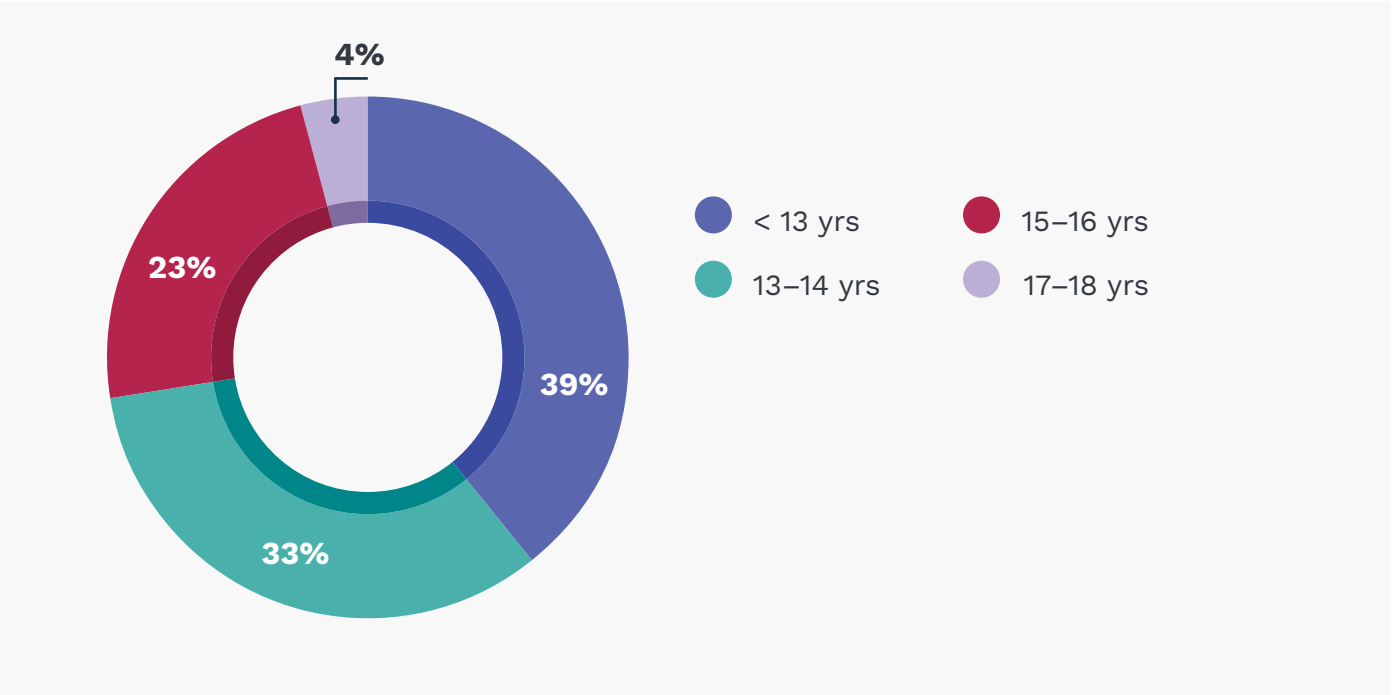


Most young people have seen online pornography well before they turn 18

Most of the young people in the study first encountered online pornography well before the age of 18 (Figure 3), with 13 being the average age of their first encounter.<sup>2</sup> Of young people who had encountered online pornography:

- more than eight out of ten (86%) first encountered it before the age of 16
- almost three in four (73%) first encountered it before the age of 15
- two in five (39%) first encountered it before the age of 13
  - 22% first encountered it at age 11–12
  - 13% first encountered it at age 9–10
  - 4% first encountered it prior to age 9.

Figure 3. How old were you when you saw online pornography for the first time?



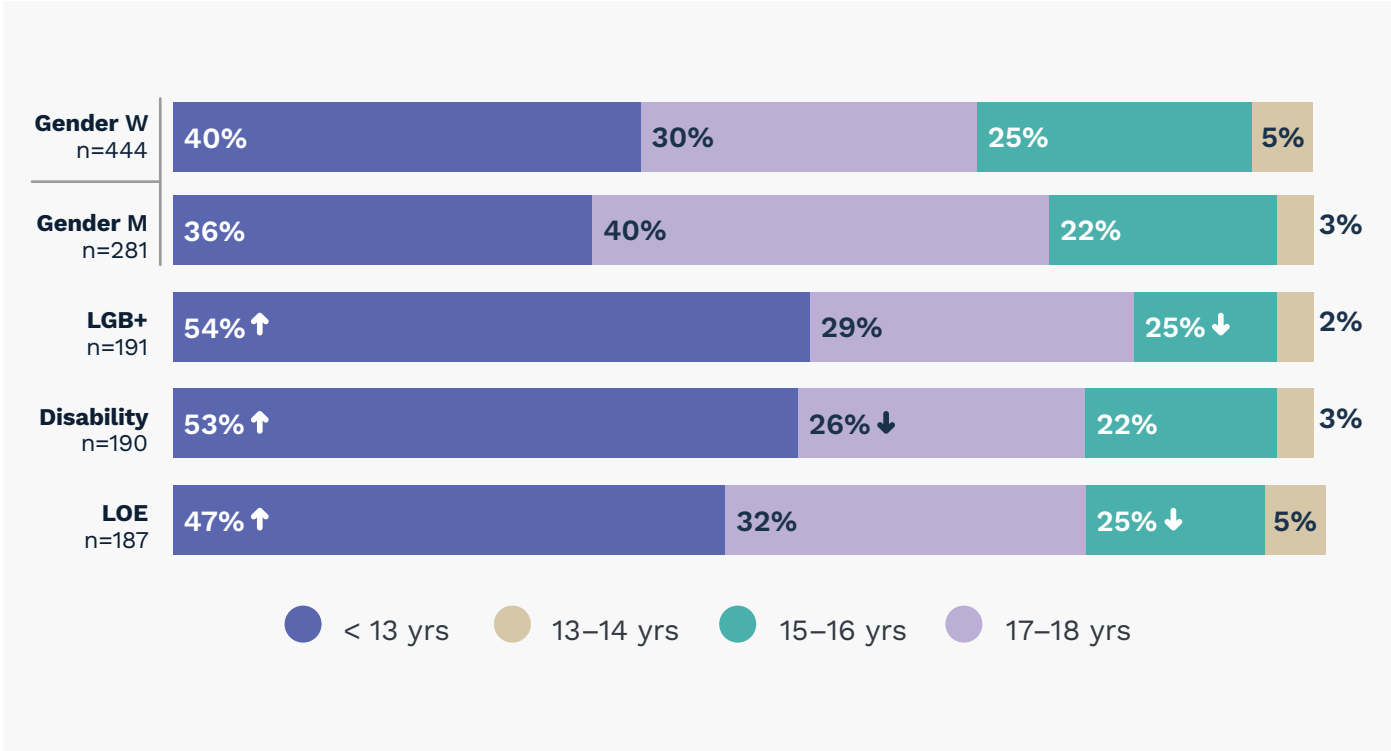
(Survey sample, unweighted, young people who have seen online pornography n=751)

We found that several demographic factors, including non-heterosexual identity, impacted on the age when the young people surveyed first encountered online pornography (Figure 4).

- LGB+ young people (54%), young people with disability (53%) and/or young people who speak a language other than English at home (LOE; 47%) were significantly more likely to first encounter online pornography before the age of 13 compared to the general sample (39%).

<sup>2</sup> The mean age excludes young people who first saw online pornography at under 8 years of age (n=14). Note that the ‘under 8 years’ category would only marginally impact the average age. For example, if all young people in the ‘under 8 years’ category were aged 4 years, the average age would be 12.9 years vs. 13.1 years.

Figure 4. How old were you when you saw online pornography for the first time (by gender, sexuality, disability and LOE)?



(Survey sample, unweighted, young people who have seen online pornography n=751) Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference.



## How do young people first encounter online pornography?

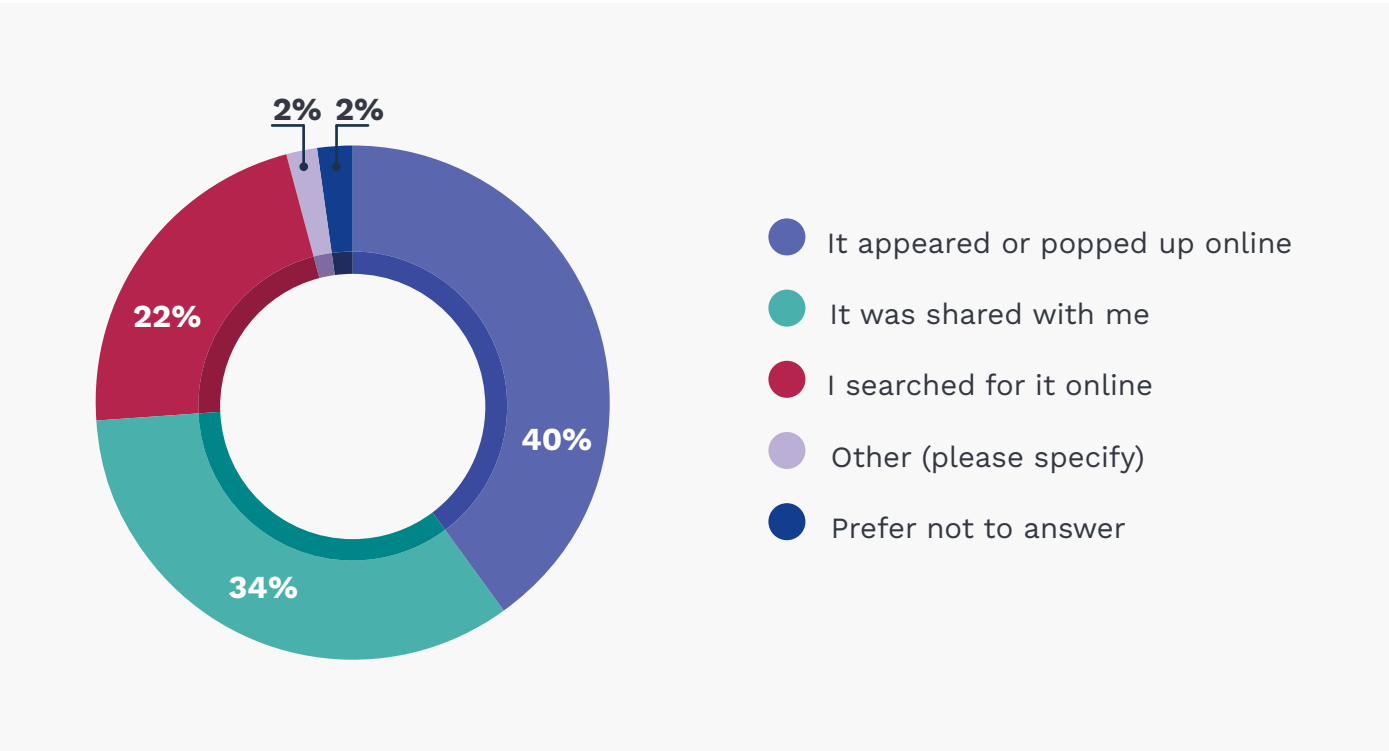
### Most young people first encounter online pornography unintentionally

Unintentional encounters with online pornography occur when young people come across it inadvertently. This may occur in a variety of ways, including (but not limited to) via pop-ups of pornographic images on unrelated websites and social media platforms, by entering an incorrect web address, via an internet search engine, and/or through the receipt of unsolicited messages (Svedin et al. 2022).

We found that most young people first encountered online pornography unintentionally, either by accident or when shown it by another person (Figure 5). Young people in our survey encountered online pornography unintentionally via two key pathways:

1. Two in five (40%) young people first encountered online pornography when it appeared online (e.g. it popped up in ads) while they were searching for something else or visiting a gaming site or checking their social media feed.
2. One in three (34%) young people first encountered online pornography when it was shared with them by their peers and/or in social networks (e.g. when someone sent it to them, or showed them or it appeared in a group chat).<sup>3</sup>

Figure 5. How did you see online pornography for the first time?



(Survey sample, unweighted, young people who have seen online pornography n=751)


<sup>3</sup> This may also include a proportion of young people who requested that their peers (or ‘someone’) show them or send them the content.

Almost one in three (30%) young people in our survey first encountered online pornography unintentionally (when it appeared online or when it was shared with them) before the age of 13. In addition, of young people who had encountered online pornography:

- 16% first encountered it unintentionally at age 11-12
- 11% first encountered it unintentionally at age 9-10
- 3% first encountered it unintentionally prior to age 9

The data indicated an inverse relationship with age, with unintentional first encounters with online pornography becoming less likely with increasing age. For example, 25% of those who first encountered content unintentionally were aged 13–14, 17% were aged 15–16, and 3% were aged 17–18. This also reflects the evidence that most young people had already encountered pornography before 17-years.

Some focus group participants noted that it was common among young people to see pornography for the first time without deliberately searching for it.

 **I would have thought nearly all young people first saw porn as an ad?**  
(Straight man, 17)<sup>4</sup>

**While there's no shame on those who are actively seeking out pornographic content for their own needs, I have had discussions with my friend group and none of us found porn for the first time on our own. We were all exposed to it [in] one way or another.**  
(Queer non-binary young person, 18)

Intentional encounters with online pornography are those that involve exploration and are voluntary and/or purposeful (Svedin et al. 2022). One in five (22%) young people in our survey said they first encountered online pornography intentionally by searching for it online.

Our survey data also demonstrated the following:

- Young women (45%) were more likely than young men (30%) to have first encountered online pornography unintentionally when it appeared online (i.e. via ads on social media or a gaming site and/or via pop-ups while they were searching for something else or in their social media feed).
- Young men (30%) were significantly more likely than young women (17%) to have first encountered online pornography intentionally, by searching for it online.
- There was no significant difference in the proportion of young men (37%) and young women (34%) who first encountered online pornography unintentionally when someone shared it with them via their peers and/or social networks (i.e. when someone sent it to them, or showed it to them or it appeared in a group chat).

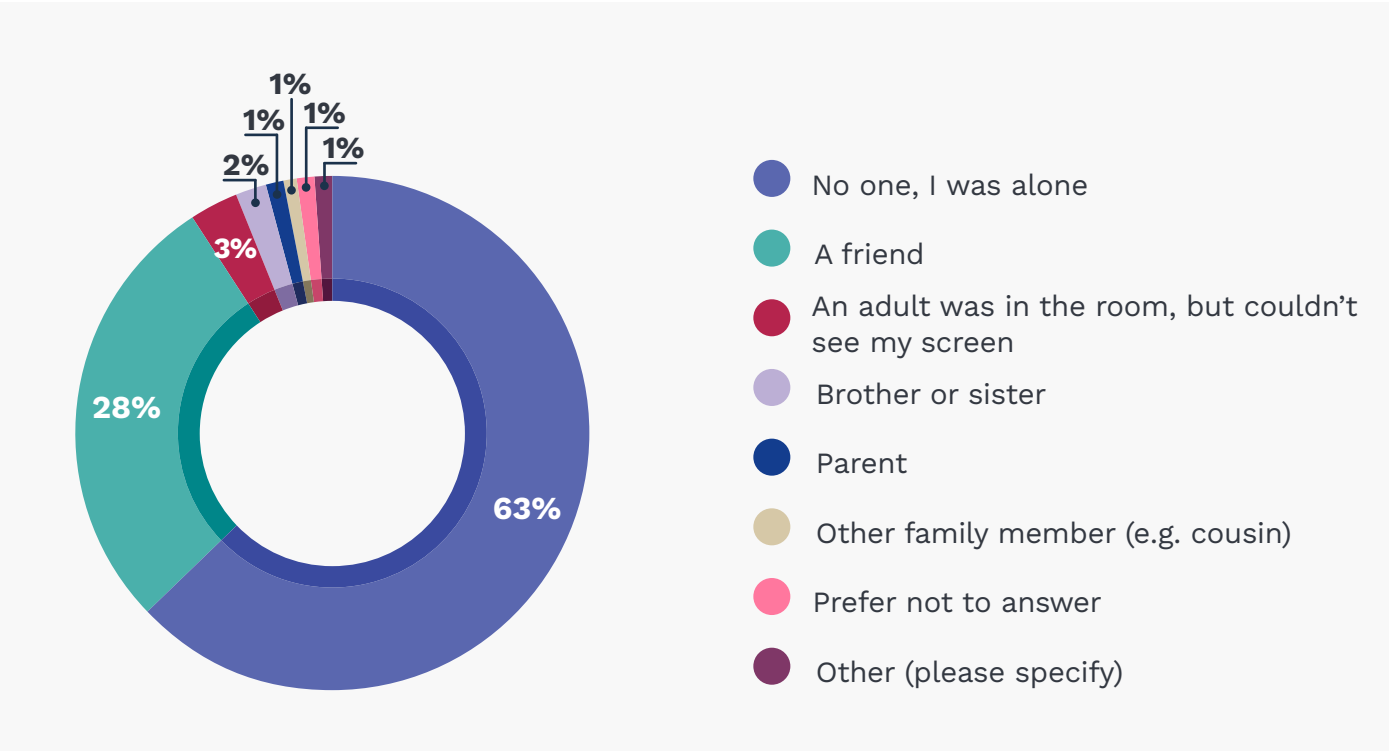
<sup>4</sup> All quotes have been edited for spelling and grammar.

Most young people first encounter online pornography when they are by themselves

Our survey asked participants where they were, and who was with them, when they first encountered online pornography. For most young people, their first encounter with online pornography was a private experience.

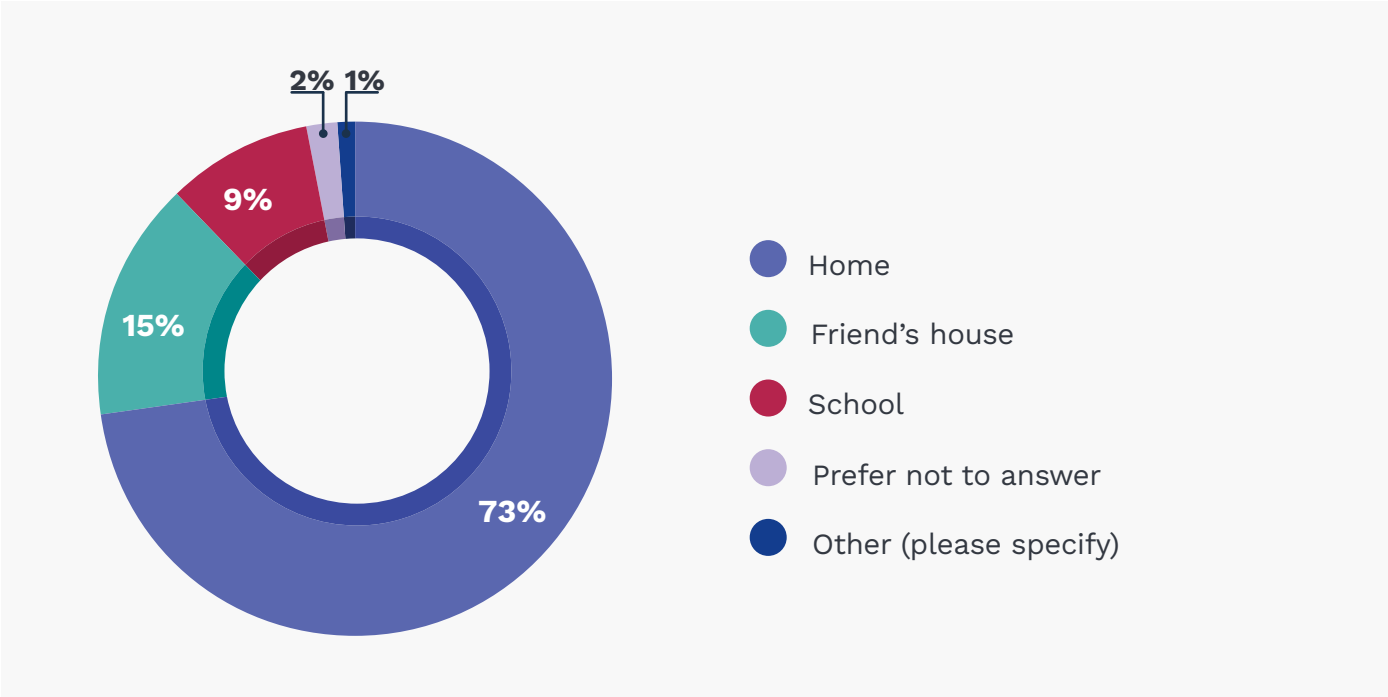
- Around three in five (63%) young people were alone when they first encountered online pornography (see Figure 6).
- Almost three in four (73%) young people surveyed were at home when they first encountered online pornography (Figure 7).
- Almost all (95%) young people were alone at home when they encountered it for the first time.

Figure 6. Who was with you the first time you saw online pornography?



(Survey sample, unweighted, young people who have seen online pornography n=751)

Figure 7. Where were you the first time you saw online pornography?



(Survey sample, unweighted, young people who have seen online pornography n=751)

Some young people are first introduced to online pornography with and/or by their friends


While most young people surveyed first encountered online pornography while they were alone, some were first introduced to it with their friend(s).

- Two in seven (28%) young people surveyed indicated they were with a friend when they first saw online pornography (refer to Figure 6).
- Of those who were with a friend, one in two (50%) were at a friend's house, one in four (24%) were at home, and one in four (24%) were at school.

The survey data also indicated that it is not uncommon for young people to be introduced to online pornography by their friends.


- Almost one in four (23%) young people were shown online pornography on someone else's device when they first encountered it.
- One in five (20%) young people were shown online pornography on someone else's device and were with a friend when they first encountered it.

Some young people in the focus groups thought that it was common to see porn with friends. It was also suggested that some young people are first introduced to pornography by their friends.

 **At my school, people would share it around for the fun of it – to be cool.**  
(Straight man, 18)


**Ha, yeah, definitely. I think I've watched porn about four times in my whole life.**  
**Three of [those times] were with a group of people joking around. Haha.**  
(Queer non-binary young person, 18)

Others observed that viewing pornography is often regarded by young people as a private or personal experience and that it wasn't common to view it with friends.

 **Pornography is often very personal, and sharing that experience is odd.**  
(Queer non-binary young person, 17)

**It seems like something people would try to access in private.**  
(Straight man, 16)


Focus group participants discussed some of the key reasons why they thought young people may watch online pornography with their friends, which were centred around peer group acceptance. First, a number of participants thought that young people would be motivated to watch online pornography with friends due to peer pressure.

 **I personally would never do it, but perhaps if you are peer pressured you would feel like you belong more in that group?**  
(Questioning man, 18)

**People our age may get used to it and start to demand it off others. Peer pressure.**  
(Straight woman, 16)


**Peer pressure? Some people might think it's cool.**  
(Straight woman, 17)

Second, several focus group participants suggested that young people would watch pornography with friends as a way to seek their approval (i.e. it would make them seem 'cool') or because they want to share an experience of something they think is funny.


 **Yeah, I think it's quite normalised in children when they aren't educated properly to show their friends pornographic content because they think it's funny or makes them cooler or more mature.**  
(Bisexual woman, 17)

**It is funny to younger kids.**  
(Straight woman, 16)


Participants also discussed what they thought the impacts of watching pornography with friends could be. One young person reflected that for some young people, the influence of friends could impact upon the young age at which they first see online pornography.

 **I think sometimes it almost forces people to be exposed to porn earlier because they want to please their friends and not be seen as the innocent one with no experience.**  
(Bisexual woman, 17)

A few gender- and sexually diverse young people reflected that seeing pornography with friends could be beneficial.

 **I think there are two sides to it. Sometimes it can be really sex-positive. I know my friend group is a really sex-positive group (we are all adults) and it's helped with shame and stigma. But on the other side of it, if this is happening when people are young, it can make some [of them feel] uncomfortable.**  
(Queer non-binary young person, 18)

For gender- and sexually diverse young people with friends who are age-appropriate and who watch pornography with a positive mindset, it can be a positive experience. Their discussion suggested that the impact of watching pornography with friends depends on the context.

 **I think a positive [aspect] might be that it's less harmful as long as your friends aren't normalising harmful nsfw [not safe for work] content. But at the same time, treating porn like a joke doesn't exactly seem like a healthy mindset.**  
(Asexual non-binary young person, 18)

**I think it really depends on your friends whether it's positive or not, especially how sex-positive they are.**  
(Bisexual woman, 17)

## Discussion: What we have learnt about how young people first encounter pornography

### Most young people first encounter online pornography unintentionally.

Data on young people's encounters with online pornography varies broadly across studies, due to the location of the particular study, the age range of participants, the definitions used, the research design, and the rapidly changing ways in which young people are accessing and engaging with technology. However, our research confirms that encounters with online pornography during adolescence are highly likely (Böthe et al. 2020; British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) 2020; Harsey et al. 2021; Henry and Talbot 2019; Lim et al. 2017; Noll et al. 2022; Thurman and Obster 2021; Walker et al. 2015). As might be expected, as age increased, so did the likelihood that a young person had encountered online pornography.

We know that there is a connection between younger age at first viewing pornography and non-heterosexual identity (Böthe et al. 2019; Lim et al. 2017). For some LGBTIQ+ young people, pornography is an important source of information about sex (Böthe et al. 2019; British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) 2020). Our survey data indicated that some young people (including those who are LGB+) are more likely to encounter pornography at a younger age compared to other young people. This finding may in part reflect a lack of representation in mainstream culture and education of LGB+ sexuality, which may lead young people to seek this out via pornography.

Our study reinforces that most young people first encounter online pornography unintentionally (Healy-Cullen et al. 2022; Henry and Talbot 2019; Martellozzo et al. 2016; Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) 2018) and that young women are more likely than young men to first encounter pornography unintentionally (Camilleri et al. 2021; Henry and Talbot 2019). However, our study confirms that not all first encounters that young people have with online pornography are unintentional (Henry and Talbot 2019; Martellozzo et al. 2016; Martellozzo et al. 2020; Our Watch 2020). Aligning with previous research, we found that young men are more likely than young women to first encounter online pornography intentionally (Camilleri et al. 2021; Henry and Talbot 2019; Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) 2018).

Consistent with other studies, for most young people encounters with online pornography have been found to be a private experience (Martellozzo et al. 2016; Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) 2018), particularly when seeing it intentionally (Warren and Swami 2018). However, the first encounters with pornography of some of the young people in our study were with friends. Peer group influences such as sexual norms, perception of peer approval and peer pressure may contribute to encounters with online pornography (Alexandraki et al. 2018; Farré et al. 2020).





# Young people's encounters with online pornography throughout adolescence

The findings from this research suggest that throughout their teen years, many young people encounter online pornography accidentally, without looking for it; however, they are just as likely to see online pornography by searching for it specifically.

## How do young people encounter online pornography throughout adolescence?

### Unintentional encounters with online pornography are common throughout adolescence

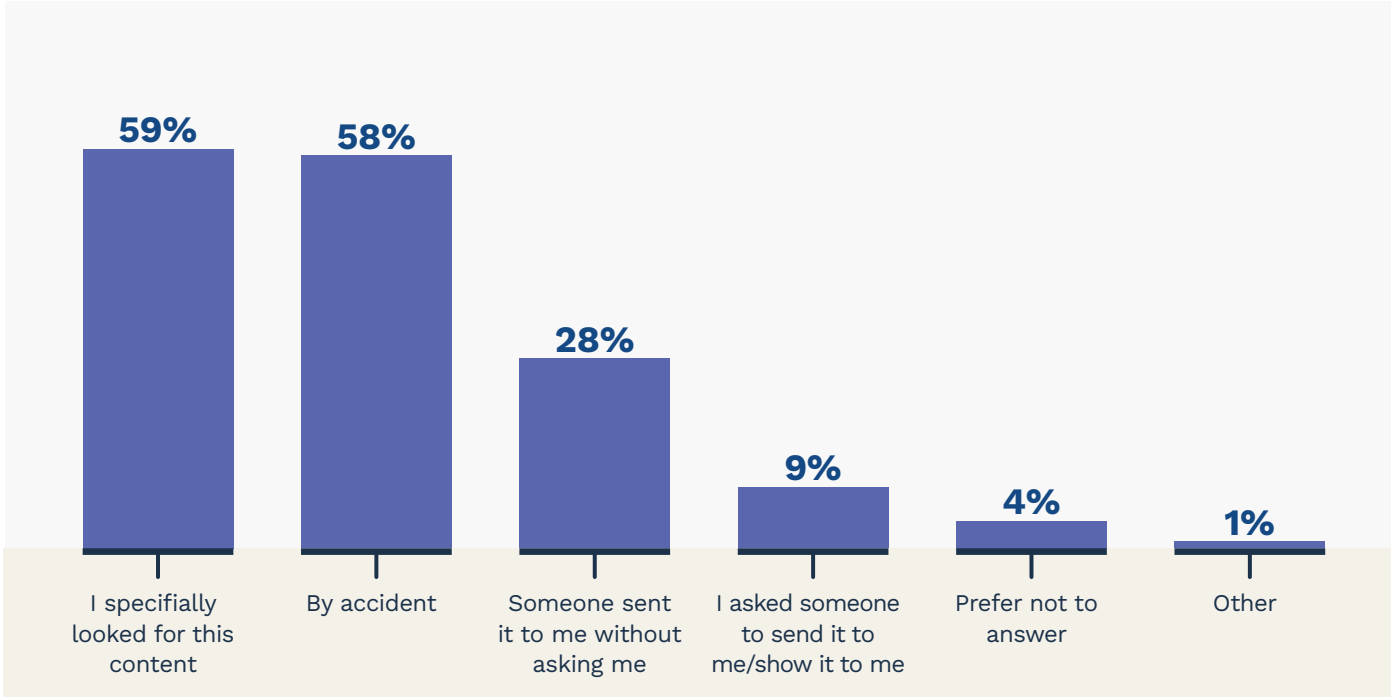
Our research highlighted that it is common for young people to encounter online pornography unintentionally throughout adolescence. The study identified two categories of young people's unintentional encounters with online pornography during adolescence: (1) an accidental encounter; and (2) an encounter when someone sent the content to them without asking them for permission.



When asked how they had seen online pornography in general:

- 58% of young people who had seen online pornography had encountered it by accident (Figure 8)
- 28% of young people who had seen online pornography had been sent it by someone without having been asked for permission.

Figure 8. How have you seen online pornography in general?



(Survey sample, unweighted, young people who have seen online pornography n=751)



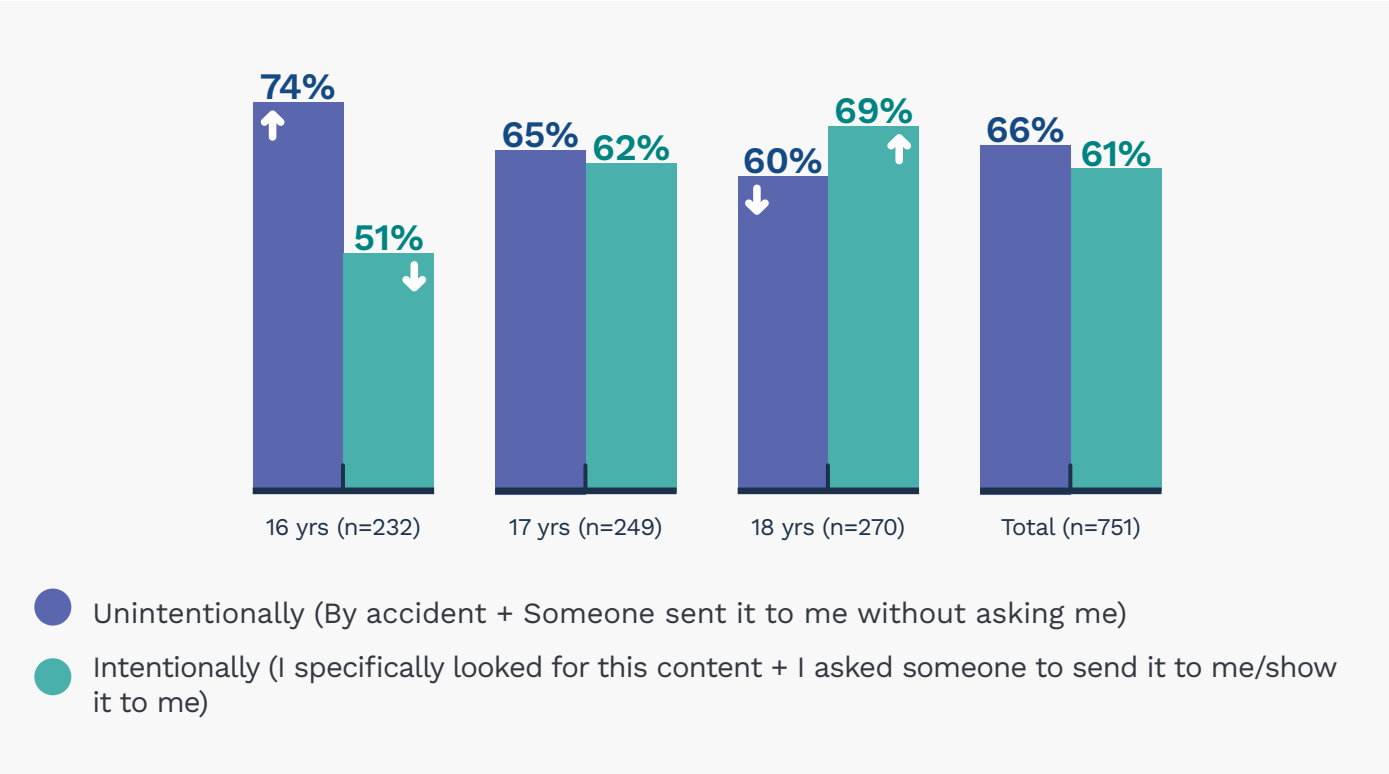
Although a few focus group participants noted that they had things like strong firewalls at home and/or adblockers, which meant they didn't personally encounter porn unintentionally, most of the participants agreed that seeing pornography unintentionally is a common experience for young people. They described this as occurring through pop-ups, ads on social media or via friends.

**I was pretty sheltered as a kid in terms of internet usage but still experienced pop-ups and whatnot.**  
(Queer non-binary young person, 18)

**This is true, especially for me as I accidentally encountered pornography when I was on another unrelated website.**  
(Straight woman, 16)

Figure 9 indicates that 16-year-olds in our survey were more likely to report that they had unintentional encounters with online pornography compared to 18-year-olds (74% vs. 60%).

**Figure 9.** How have you seen online pornography in general (by current age)?

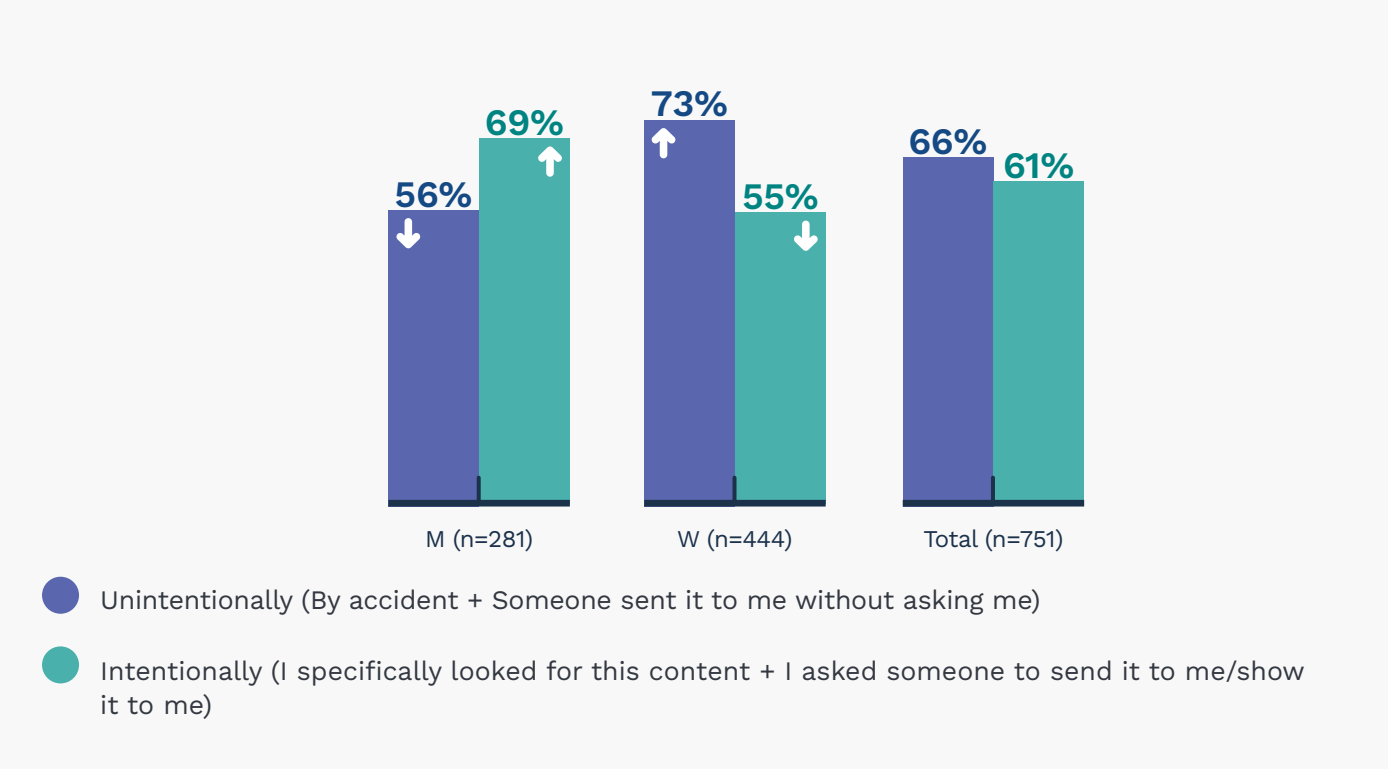


(Survey sample, unweighted, young people who have seen online pornography n=751) Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference.

**Unintentional encounters with online pornography are particularly common among young women, especially 16-year-olds**

As Figure 10 shows, young women in our survey who had encountered online pornography were more likely than young men to have had unintentional encounters with online pornography in general (i.e. seeing it by accident and/or someone sending it to them without having asked permission) (73% vs. 56%).

**Figure 10.** How have you seen online pornography in general (by gender)?

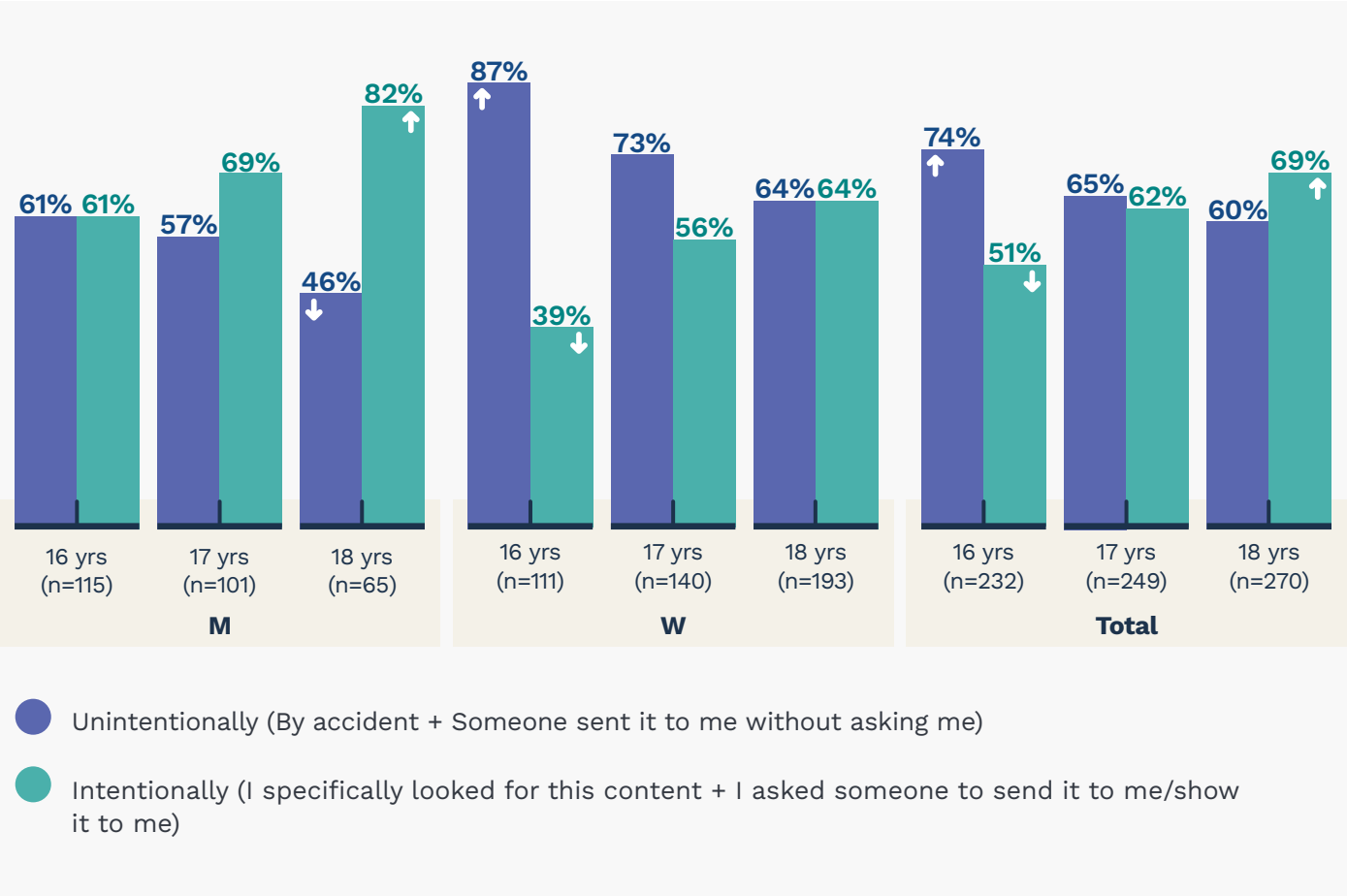


(Survey sample, unweighted, young people who have seen online pornography n=751) Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference.



When examining encounters with online pornography by current age, our findings indicated that 16-year-old women may be particularly vulnerable to unintentional (i.e. by accident and/or because someone sent it to them without asking) encounters with online pornography (Figure 11). More than four in five (87%) 16-year-old women in our survey who had encountered online pornography had encountered content unintentionally, compared to 66% of young people aged 16–18.

**Figure 11.** How have you seen online pornography in general (by current age and gender)?



(Survey sample, unweighted, young people who have seen online pornography n=751) Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference.

**It’s common for young people who encounter online pornography to search for content**

Survey responses and insights from focus group participants suggested that after their first encounter with online pornography, many young people will encounter pornography intentionally by: (1) specifically looking for it; and/or (2) asking others to send or show it to them. Around three in five (61%) young people who had seen online pornography said they had intentionally encountered it (see Figure 8) by specifically looking for content online (59%) and/or by asking someone to send it or show it to them (9%).

Some focus group participants suggested that seeing online pornography for the first time may generate a curiosity among young people to see more.

**Young people before exposure don’t really search for it, but once introduced, people are curious.**  
(Straight woman, 16)

**A lot of people show their friends this kind of stuff, even if it’s as a joke at first, but quite often people get curious and start searching themselves.**  
(Straight man, 16)

**Young people are more likely to search for online pornography as they get older**

Survey findings indicated that young people may be more likely to intentionally encounter pornography (i.e. by specifically looking for content and/or asking someone to send them content) as they progress through their teenage years, which is a statistically significant age effect. As shown in Figure 9, 18-year-olds who had encountered online pornography were significantly more likely than 16-year-olds to say they had intentionally encountered content (69% vs. 45%).

**Searching for online pornography is particularly common in young men, especially as they get older**

Survey findings suggest that young men are more likely to intentionally encounter online pornography (i.e. by specifically looking for and/or asking for it). This was particularly evident among 18-year-olds.

- Young men who had seen online pornography were significantly more likely than young women to say they had intentionally encountered content (Figure 10) (69% vs. 55%).
- 18-year-old men were significantly more likely than other survey participants aged 16–18 to have intentionally encountered online pornography (82% vs. 61%).

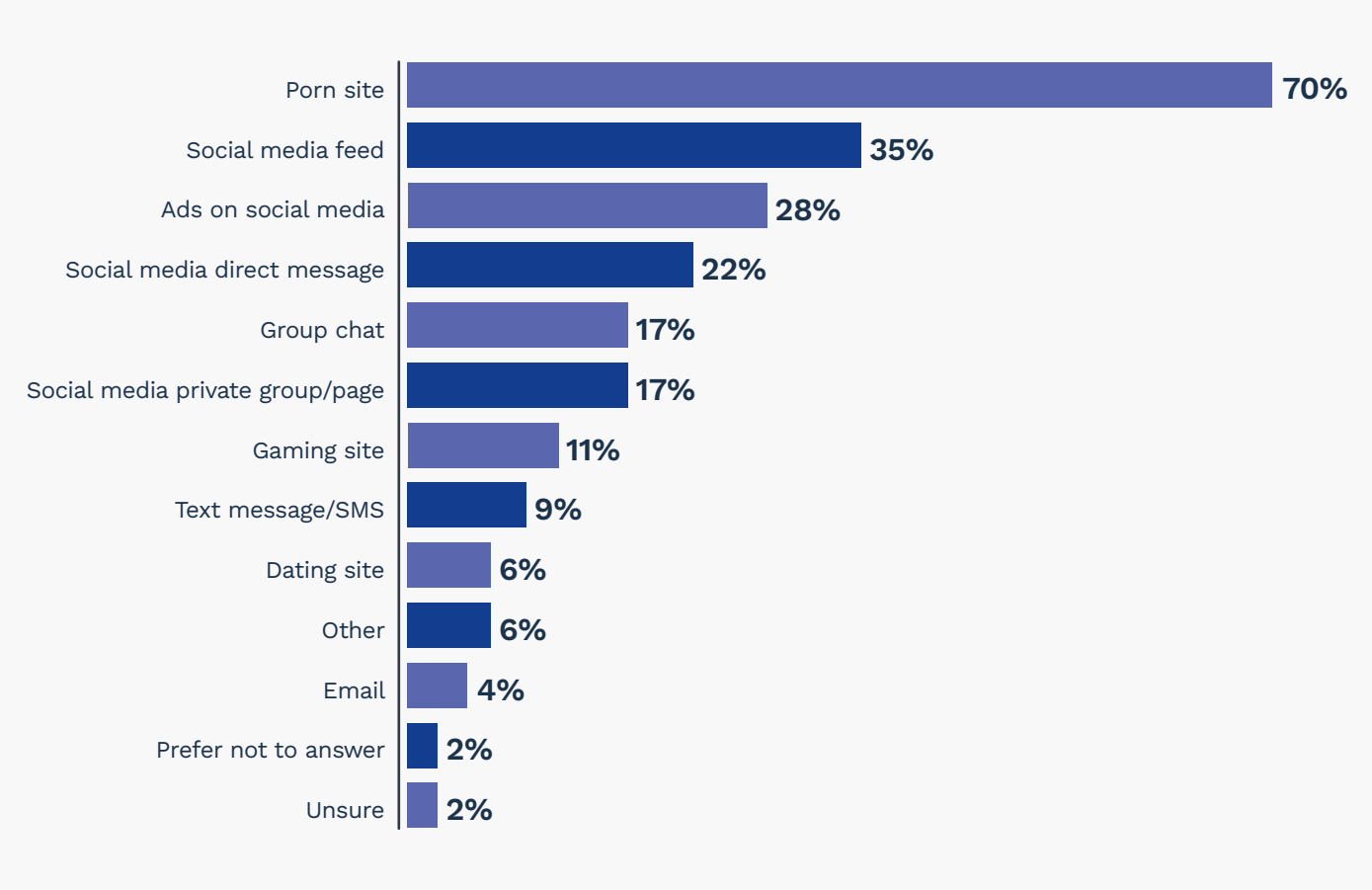
**Where do young people encounter online pornography?**

**Young people most commonly encounter online pornography on pornography sites or on social media**

Most (70%) of the young people surveyed who had encountered online pornography had seen it on pornography sites (Figure 12).

- It was more common among 17-year-olds (71%) and 18-year-olds (77%) than among 16-year-olds (59%) to encounter online pornography on pornography sites.
- Young men were more likely than young women to have encountered content on a pornography site (76% vs. 65%).
- Young people were more likely to have intentionally (specifically looking for and/or asking for it) encountered pornography on a pornography site (92%), than they were to have unintentionally (by accident and/or because someone sent it to them without asking) encountered it on a pornography site (60%).

**Figure 12.** Where have you seen online pornography in general?




(Survey sample, unweighted, young people who have seen online pornography n=751)


Survey findings demonstrated that many young people also encounter online pornography via social media platforms.

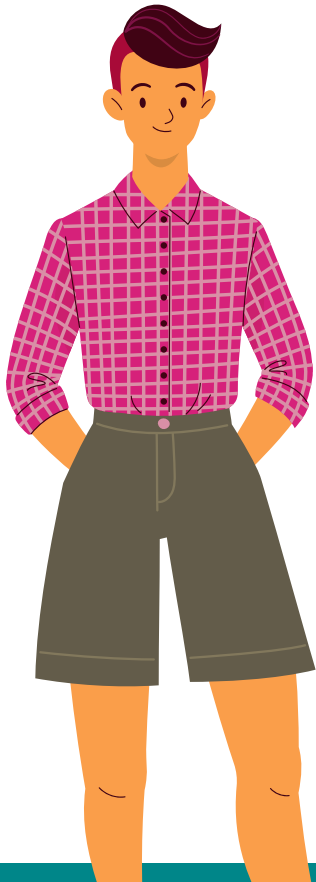
- Three in five (60%) young people who had encountered online pornography had done so via social media:
  - 35% encountered content on social media feeds
  - 28% encountered content via ads on social media
  - 22% encountered content via social media messages
  - 17% encountered content via social media private group/pages.
- Young women were more likely than young men to have encountered online pornography via social media (66% vs. 49%).
- Young people were more likely to have had unintentional (by accident and/or because someone sent it to them without asking) encounters with pornography via social media (74%) than intentional (specifically looking for and/or asking for it) encounters via social media (57%).

Focus group participants provided further insight into the accessibility of online pornography on social media, including specific social media platforms and websites that young people use such as Instagram, Reddit, Snapchat, TikTok and Twitter.

-  **Could we say social media? I think it's pretty accessible across most platforms, including Reddit, Instagram, etc.**  
(Straight man, 17)
- There's also accounts on Reddit and Instagram sometimes that just spam with links to their nsfw [not safe for work] page.**  
(Asexual non-binary young person, 18)
- Yeah, Snapchat is full of those sorts of things, especially now with fake accounts being made for the purpose of trying to get teens to access porn, which is sometimes paid content, too.**  
(Straight man, 16)

Some young people in the focus groups commented that, in their experience, pornography in the form of ads and pop-ups often appeared in what they perceived to be inappropriate contexts, including websites aimed at children.

-  **It's even on 'children's' websites as well. Like, websites that young kids access are just spammed with ads.**  
(Straight man, 16)
- There are some sites where one minute you're looking at some nice art and the next, it's porn, which is really bad if you previously thought the place was somewhere a kid could go without having to worry about unexpected surprises.**  
(Demisexual panromantic demiboy, 18)



How often do young people encounter online pornography?

Online pornography is highly prevalent in the online world of young people

Observations that emerged from focus groups indicated the almost omnipresent nature of pornography in young people’s online worlds. In particular, the prevalence of online pornography meant that young people view unintentional encounters as ‘frequent’ and ‘unavoidable’.

Kind of like there’s no escaping it, in a way – like you’re always surrounded by it.  
(Straight woman, 18)

A lot of social media platforms have terrible moderation, so this stuff can slip through the filters and get recommended to you.  
(Straight man, 16)

Yes, often you will just be trying to do something on a different website, like watch normal videos or find information, and there will be a pop-up of ‘hot MILFs [mothers I’d like to f\*\*\*] in your area’.  
(Pansexual woman, 17)

Many young people regularly encounter online pornography

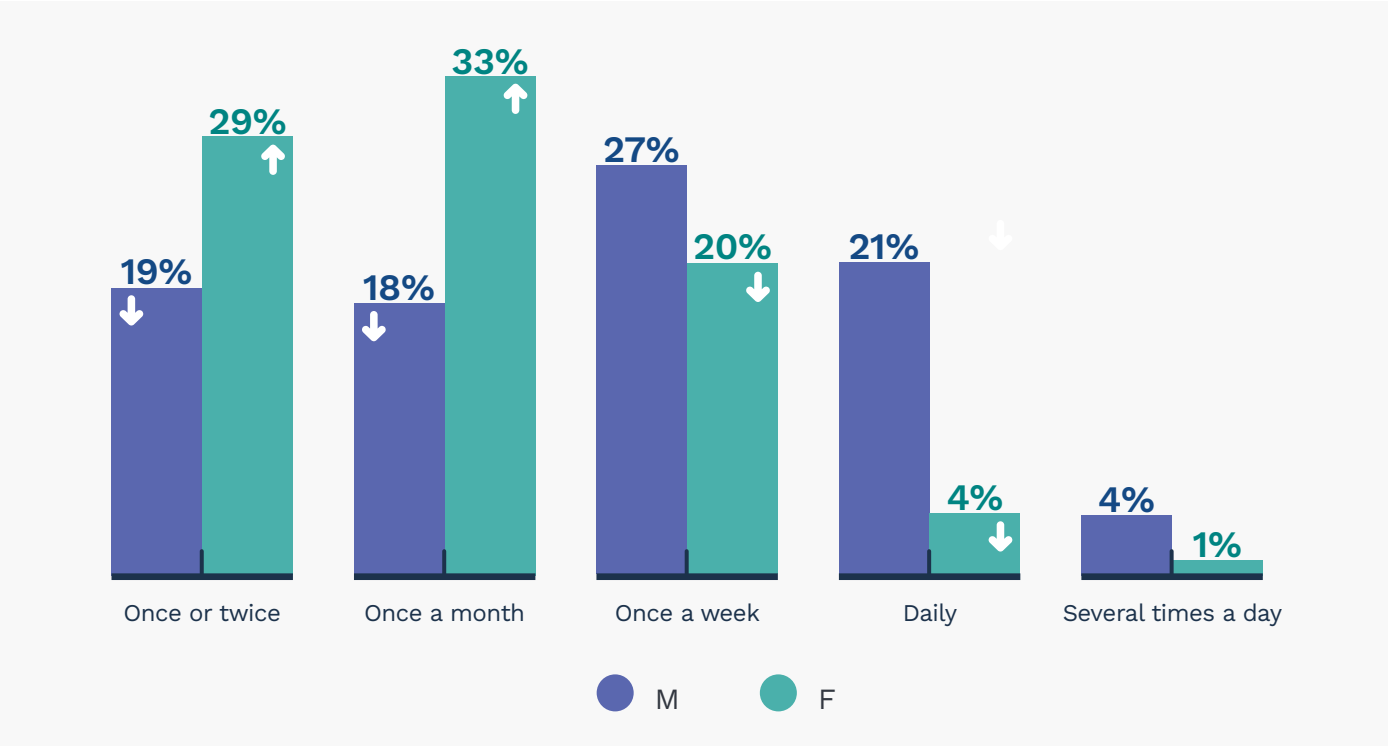
Most survey respondents who had seen online pornography encountered it regularly.

- Only one in four (25%) had encountered online pornography only once or twice.
- Most (63%) had seen it at least once a month:
  - 27% encountered it once a month
  - 23% encountered it once a week
  - 11% encountered it daily
  - 2% encountered it several times a day.

Young men in our survey had encountered pornography more frequently than young women (Figure 13).

- Young men who had seen online pornography were significantly more likely than young women to indicate that they had seen online pornography daily (21% vs. 4%).
- Young women were significantly more likely than young men to indicate that they had seen online pornography once a month (33% vs. 18%).

Figure 13. How often have you seen online pornography in general (by gender)?



(Survey sample, unweighted, young people who have seen online pornography n=751) Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference.

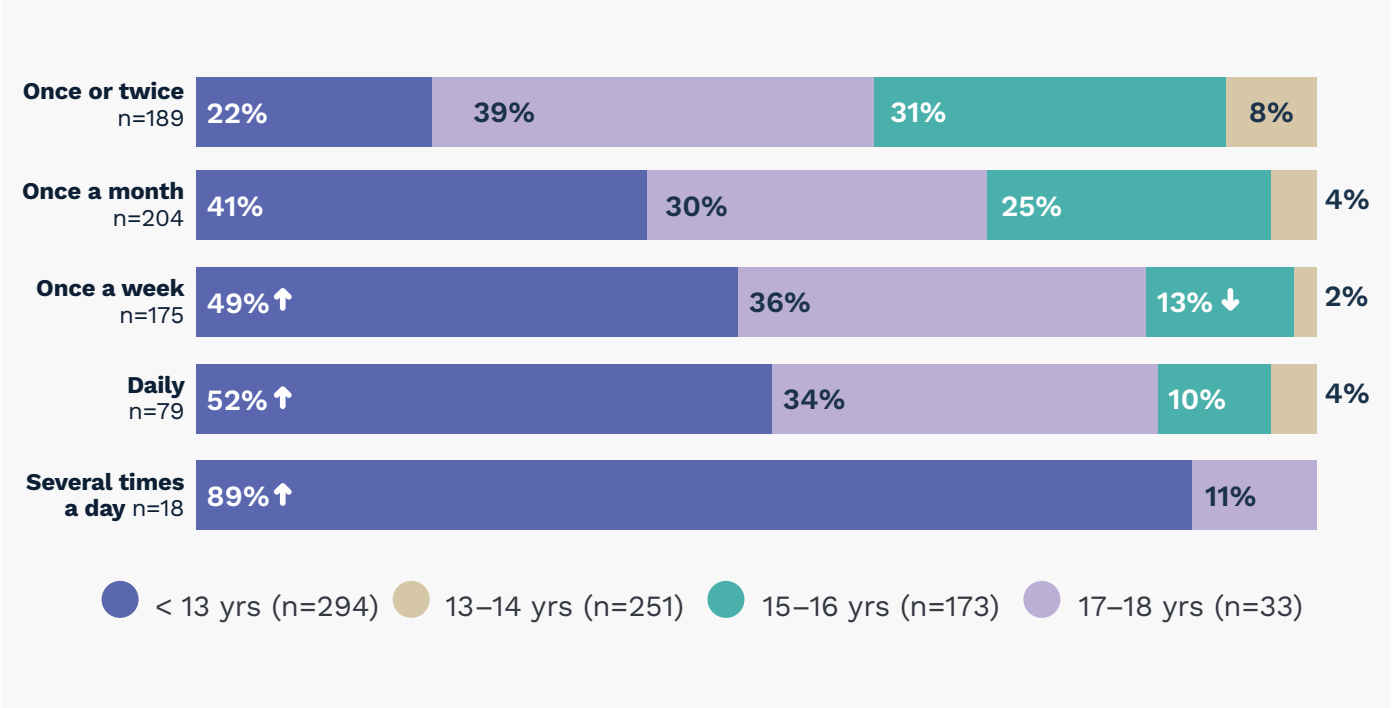
Young people who encounter porn frequently often first encountered it when young

Young people who encountered online pornography frequently were more likely to have first encountered it at a younger age (Figure 14).

- Nearly nine in ten (89%) young people who encountered online pornography several times a day had first encountered it before age 13.
- One in two (52%) young people who encountered online pornography daily had first encountered it before age 13.
- Only one in five (22%) young people who encountered online pornography once or twice had first encountered it before age 13.



**Figure 14.** How often have you seen online pornography in general (by age of first encounter)?



(Survey sample, unweighted, young people who have seen online pornography n=751) Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference.

## Discussion: What we have learnt about young people’s encounters with pornography throughout adolescence

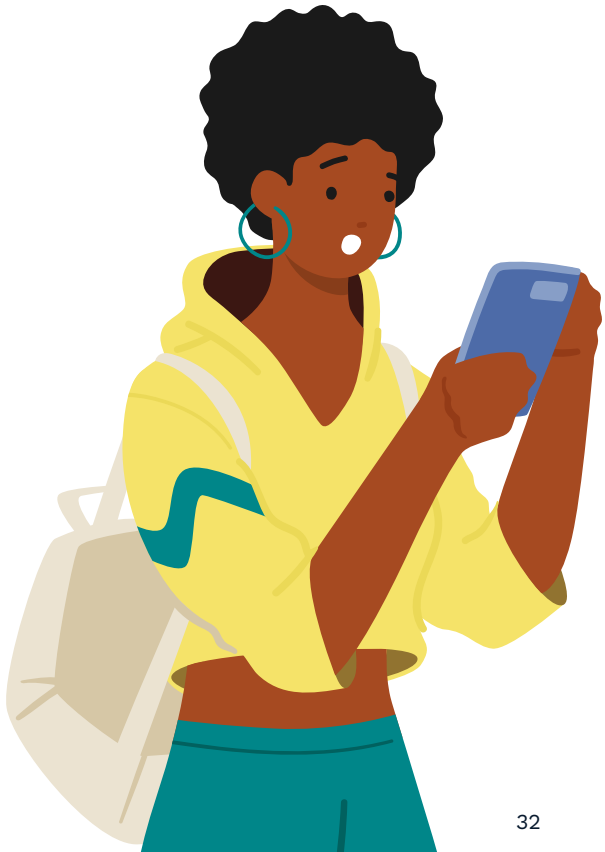
**Pornography is almost omnipresent in young people’s online worlds.**

Our research indicates that online pornography is highly visible and present in the online lives of young people. This isn’t surprising, given the proliferation of unmonitored, internet-enabled technology such as smartphones and other portable devices, as well as the rapid and evolving development of social media and the increased online social engagement of young people (Lim et al. 2017; McKee 2010; Martellozzo et al. 2020). This is reflected in the main places where young people in our research and in other studies encounter online pornography, which are social media platforms (Henry and Talbot 2019; Thurman and Obster 2021) and pornography-specific websites (Henry and Talbot 2019; Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) 2018; Rothman et al. 2021; Thurman and Obster 2021). Focus group participants highlighted the difficulties that young people face in avoiding encounters with online pornography. We know that through their engagement with online social networking and frequent use of the internet, young people experience pervasive unintentional encounters with online pornography, occurring through pop-up ads, via social media or in the form of content sent by friends (Walker et al. 2015).

Our research findings confirm that although more young people first encounter online pornography unintentionally than intentionally (Harsey et al. 2021; Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) 2018; Peter and Valkenburg 2016), intentional encounters with online pornography are also common in adolescence (Noll et al. 2022) and they become increasingly common with age (British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) 2020). In addition, there are gendered differences in how young people encounter pornography, with our research confirming that young men are more likely to actively search for online pornography (Lim et al. 2017; Martellozzo et al. 2016; Our Watch 2020; Robb and Mann 2023; Walker et al. 2015; Warren and Swami 2018), and young women are more likely to have unintentional encounters with online pornography.

Further, most young people who encountered pornography did so at least monthly. However, consistent with what has been observed in prior studies, young men encountered pornography more frequently than young women (Böthe et al. 2020; Lim et al. 2017; Our Watch 2020; Peter and Valkenburg 2016; Warren and Swami 2018). The differences in frequency of encounters were observed mainly at the most frequent end of the spectrum, where young men had more daily encounters with online pornography. Both a majority of young men and young women tended to encounter online pornography at least once a month.

There is also some evidence to suggest that regular viewers of pornography may first encounter pornography at a younger age (Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) 2018). Once a young person has encountered pornography, the likelihood of their encountering it again, even unintentionally, may increase. This might be for a variety of reasons, which further research could help to illuminate. For example, reasons might include increased curiosity and the ways in which search or social media algorithms often rank content, where content similar to that which the user had viewed or engaged with in the past is ranked higher than other content.





# Young people's perspectives on online pornography

We found that young people in our study typically had very negative feelings about unintentional encounters with online pornography. However, the frequency with which some young people see pornography online without intending to means they may become desensitised to this content. Our research also finds that young people can see the harmful impacts that online pornography can have on their views and expectations of gender, relationships and sex, as well as the positive impacts it can have on their explorations of sexuality and pleasure.

## What are young people's perspectives on online pornography?

### Young people believe in their right to safe, autonomous sexual development and exploration

Our qualitative research found that for most young people, choice is key when it comes to online pornography. We asked focus group participants how, in an ideal world, young people would feel when they see pornography online. Their responses emphasised young people's ability, and entitlement, to make decisions about what is best for them.

 **That they shouldn't feel judged to explore their bodies and it is the individual's decision to decide their perspective on porn.**

(Straight man, 18)

**To feel comfortable enough in themselves to make the right informed decision – whether that is to show a trusted adult, report it, or know what it is and move on with their day without too much discomfort but also [without] being desensitised.**

(Queer non-binary young person, 18)

Young people's emphasis on their own agency when it comes to viewing online pornography included choosing not to see it, as indicated by some focus group participants' strong desire for the regulation of this content in locations outside of pornography-specific sites.

 **I think all ads containing porn should be banned.**

(Straight man, 17)

**If it's unwanted I feel like they should be able to do more about it to prevent it from either reoccurring or actually happening in the first place.**

(Straight man, 16)

**I would like them [young people] to be able to feel good about it [seeing pornography], because the only time they'd see it is if they WANTED to see it, and looked for it, rather than it being shoved into their faces by strangers.**

(Demisexual panromantic demiboy, 18)

For a few young people in the focus groups, pornography had entirely negative connotations, and their discussion could indicate a desire for the opportunity to develop and explore their sexuality without the influence of online pornography.

 **I just can't think of any positive impacts.**

(Straight woman, 17)

**One of my friends spoke to me about the guilt he was experiencing, and it was a burden on his life.**

(Straight man, 16)

A few other young people viewed pornography as a useful element of sexual development and saw the potential for more realistic and diverse pornographic content to play an even more positive role.

 **[How would you want young people to feel when they encounter pornography?]**

**Just as though it is a normal thing, but for that to happen I think porn also needs to change ... I think for it to be normalised, the things shown in porn also need to be 'normal things'. But in saying this, porn is also extremely addictive, so normalisation could negatively harm people, too.**

(Bisexual woman, 17)

**I think a larger variety than what's shown, more female pleasure-based scenarios and overall to just know that everyone's experience is different.**

(Straight woman, 17)



Amid nuanced focus group discussions about why young people may choose to watch, or not watch, online pornography, some participants acknowledged both choices as valid. Their perspective was that whether or not to view pornography is a decision that people their age have the ability to make for themselves.

**I think porn can be incredibly harmful but also incredibly helpful. It's a mixed bag, depending on who you are and your own situation. You can use it to explore yourself, but it can also hinder you and give unrealistic views and opinions on real matters, plus the industry can be terrible to women and children.**  
(Queer non-binary young person, 17)

**As long as it is consensual, then do what you want with your body.**  
(Straight woman, 16)

What are young people’s perspectives on the impacts of online pornography?

Young people in our study recognised that pornography doesn’t always reflect valuable messages about gender, relationships and what to expect of sex, but that it can be a useful way of exploring sexuality and pleasure.

**I believe it is something that people can view, just like any show or movie. However, when it begins to affect people's expectations/thoughts negatively, then it's bad.**  
(Queer woman, 16)

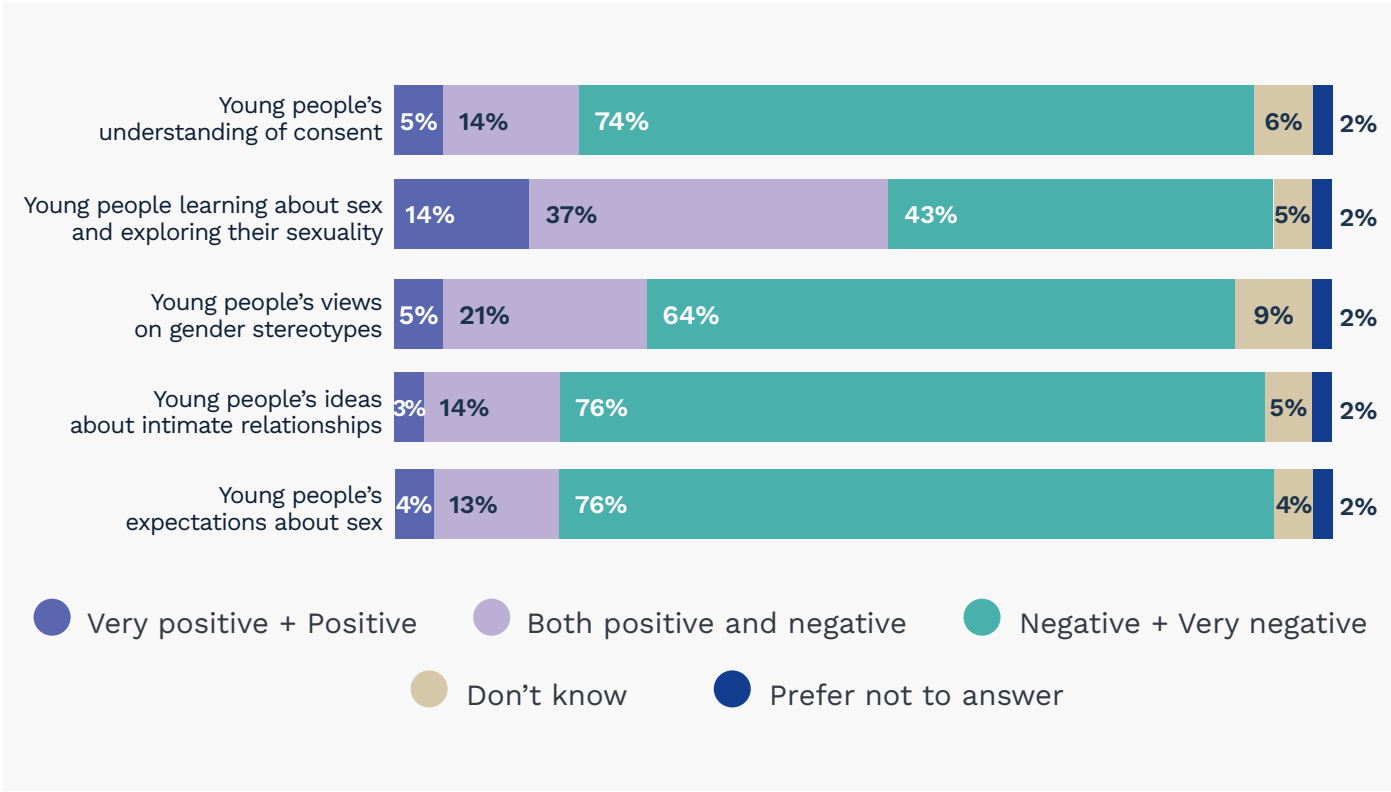
Young people recognise that online pornography can negatively affect their ideas about gender, relationships and sex

A majority of young people in our survey thought there were negative (negative or very negative) effects of online pornography on young people’s understanding and expectations of consent, sex, relationships and gender. Of the young people surveyed (Figure 15):

- 74% thought the effect of online pornography on young people’s understandings of consent was negative or very negative
- 76% thought the effect of online pornography on young people’s ideas about intimate relationships was negative or very negative
- 76% thought the effect of online pornography on young people’s expectations of what sex is was negative or very negative
- 64% thought the effect of online pornography on young people’s views on gender stereotypes was negative or very negative.

A smaller proportion of the young people surveyed (43%) thought that online pornography had a negative or very negative effect on young people learning about sex and exploring their sexuality.

Figure 15. To what extent do you think online pornography has a positive or negative effect on the following?



(Survey sample, unweighted, young people who have seen online pornography n=751) Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference.

This negative aspect of online pornography was elaborated on by young people in the focus groups. Some suggested that it can have negative impacts on young people’s mental health – specifically, negative body image and feeling addicted to pornography. Many focus group participants described porn as negatively affecting young people’s expectations of sex, indicating that many young people understand that pornography may not be a good source of information about what sex is like. Pornography was often said to create ‘unrealistic’ expectations for sex. Few elaborated on what was meant by this. However, those that did elaborate explained:

**It makes you question almost what you're doing wrong if your experience doesn't look like what most videos are portraying.**  
(Straight woman, 16)

**Sometimes positions/activities turn people off or even hurt those involved. Pornography avoids [acknowledging this] and assumes that every sexual activity is enjoyed by both people.**  
(Straight man, 18)

**That sex is focused on men finishing and not providing the woman any pleasure.**  
(Straight woman, 16)

Focus group participants also discussed the harmful stereotypes, or even practices, of men’s dominance and women’s objectification that could arise if some pornographic content online was interpreted by viewers as acceptable sexual practice.

**Well, if someone's first experience of sex is online pornography, it can be incredibly harmful. They might think certain things that happen in porn are normal, which could result in harming others, or doing things without consent, just because they want something.**  
(Straight woman, 16)

**I think a lot of porn is fetishised, which can create harmful stereotypes.**  
(Straight woman, 18)

Some of the young people expressing negative sentiments towards pornography reflected that they believed their parents/caregivers and/or culture had instilled this attitude in them, while a few said they gained this perspective from watching pornography. Both reflections can be understood as young people demonstrating a critical awareness of how their perspectives and experiences of pornography are, among other things, shaped by their wider social context.

**[In] my culture, pornography is always perceived as negative.**  
(Straight woman, 16)

**It isn't bad. Parents just tell kids it is.**  
(Straight man, 16)

**Young people recognise that online pornography can positively affect their learning about sex and explorations of sexuality**

In addition to identifying elements of online pornography that are negative, many young people in our research noted positive aspects that could be valuable to them. For example, focus group participants noted that online pornography can be a source of pleasure, entertainment and self-gratification. This might indicate that young people are both seeking pleasure from online pornography and learning from it that sex can be pleasurable.

**Most teenagers are usually pretty horny, so when they search up porn, they do it to get off.**  
(Pansexual woman, 17)

**[It] can be for self-enjoyment.**  
(Straight man, 18)

**[It can] provide satisfaction and pleasure if you’re having a rough day.**  
(Straight man, 18)

A number of focus group participants also identified that online pornography could be a helpful way for young people to learn about and explore their sexuality.

**Some good things: a way for people to explore their sexuality.**  
(Straight woman, 18)

**[It] can also be good in allowing people to understand their sexuality.**  
(Bisexual woman, 17)

**[It] can also help people [to] explore themselves and their sexuality.**  
(Queer non-binary young person, 17)

In the survey data, some young people also indicated that online pornography may be particularly helpful for those who are exploring their sexuality (Figure 15).

- One in two (51%) young people surveyed thought there were some positive effects (i.e. very positive or positive, or both positive and negative) of online pornography on young people learning about sex and exploring their sexuality.
- LGB+ young people were significantly more likely than heterosexual young people to think there were some positive effects (i.e. very positive or positive, or both positive and negative) of online pornography on young people learning about sex and exploring their sexuality (60% vs. 48%).

A smaller proportion of young people thought there may be some positive effects of pornography on young people’s views on gender stereotypes, expectations of what sex is, ideas of intimate relationships and understanding of consent.

- One in four (26%) young people surveyed thought there were some positive effects (i.e. very positive or positive, or both positive and negative) of online pornography on young people’s views on gender stereotypes (see Figure 15).
- Close to one in five young people thought there were some positive effects (i.e. very positive or positive, or both positive and negative) of online pornography on young people’s expectations of what sex is (17%), on their ideas about intimate relationships (17%), and on their understanding of consent (19%).



## Discussion: What we have learnt about young people's perspectives on online pornography

### Young people want agency over whether, when and where they view online pornography.

Many young people have nuanced perspectives on pornography that may reflect their desire for choice and capacity for critical thinking. Young people in our study emphasised their ability and right to make decisions about online pornography – that is, to have agency. Having agency, or control, over one's sexuality is a key part of healthy sexual development (Jiang 2019; McKee et al. 2010). It appears that it is important to young people that they have agency over when and where they view, or don't view, online pornography.

Our research confirms that young people may be critical consumers of pornography, in that they can distinguish between harmful and useful aspects of the content they see (Byron et al. 2021; Litsou et al. 2021). Consistent with similar research, young people in our study recognised that pornography can reflect harmful messages about consent, relationships, what to expect of sex, gender stereotypes and body image (British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) 2020; Our Watch 2020; Wright et al. 2021). Young people also told us that pornography can be useful for exploring sexuality and pleasure, in line with findings from other studies (Byron et al. 2021; Litsou et al. 2021). Some highlighted that pornography can be a neutral or positive part of young people's sexual development. This was especially the case for those in our study and others who thought that it could be a site of sexual exploration and imagination (Attwood et al. 2018; Litsou et al. 2021). Our findings confirm that online pornography can be particularly useful for young people who are exploring their gender or sexuality and/or are LGB+ (Litsou et al. 2021; McCormack 2018). Young people's capacity to be critical viewers of pornography indicates the great potential of pornography literacy education to build on and develop these skills (Dawson 2019; Dawson et al. 2019; Goldstein 2020). (For more on the role of education, see the following section.)



# Young people's reactions to encounters with online pornography

Our findings suggest that young people dislike unintentionally encountering online pornography. Yet, such encounters appear to be becoming normalised, and young people are more likely to ignore content than to report it or seek support and help.

## What do young people think, feel and do when they encounter online pornography?

**Young people dislike unintentionally seeing pornography but are unlikely to seek support when this happens**

Young people in our study typically felt very negatively about unintentional encounters with online pornography. For many focus group participants, the experience of encountering online pornography unintentionally was unwelcome and unwanted. They said the experience of seeing online pornography unintentionally felt intrusive and disempowering and made them uncomfortable.

💬 **Depends on the intentions. Some people would feel very uncomfortable if they came across it accidentally, but on the other hand feel pleasure or interest when looking for it.**

(Straight woman, 18)

**It's different when we see it by force. If we search it up, we're prepared for it. But when we stumble across it, it's gross and unwanted.**

(Pansexual woman, 17)

**Takes away the choice to access explicit content, as it's pretty much shoved in your face.**

(Straight man, 18)

Further, a number of focus group participants were emphatic in their view that online pornography shouldn't appear on unrelated websites.

💬 **I don't want to see explicit smut and gifs on my Facebook homepage! I don't want to see dildo advertisements while I'm reading about certain medical conditions!**

(Queer non-binary young person, 18)

**Make it illegal for websites to put advertisements for porn on sites that may be accessed by children under 16.**

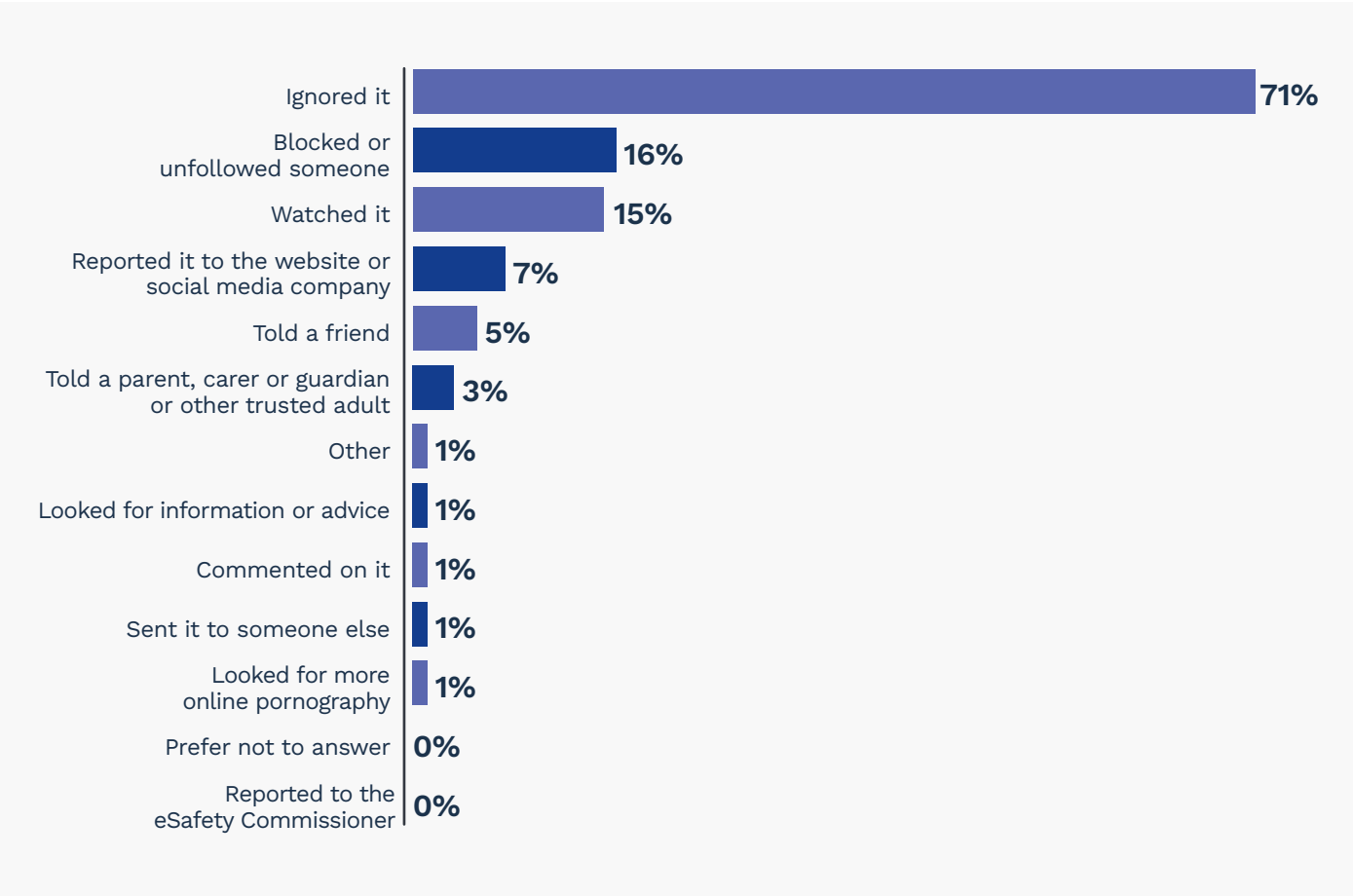
(Straight woman, 16)



Our survey findings suggest that young people who have unintentional encounters with online pornography (i.e. they saw it by accident, or someone sent content to them without asking) are likely to ignore it (Figure 16). Their responses when asked about the most recent time they saw online pornography were as follows:


- Most (71%) young people whose most recent encounter with pornographic content had been unintentional ignored it. Smaller proportions had watched it (15%) or had blocked or unfollowed someone (16%).
- Few survey respondents who had most recently unintentionally encountered content reported it to the website (7%), looked for information or advice (1%), told a friend (5%), and/or told a parent, carer or guardian (3%). No survey respondent reported their experience to the eSafety Commissioner.

**Figure 16.** How did you respond on the most recent occasion when you unintentionally saw online pornography?



(Survey sample, unweighted, young people who most recently saw online pornography by accident or because someone sent it without asking n=315)

This pattern of response was also reflected in focus group discussions, where some participants described responding to unintentional encounters with online pornography by ignoring it.

 **A lot of my friends (girls ...) get uncomfortable if [it's] privately shared, but if we come across it on the internet, we've just learnt to ignore it, [to] refrain from watching [it].**  
(Straight woman, 18)

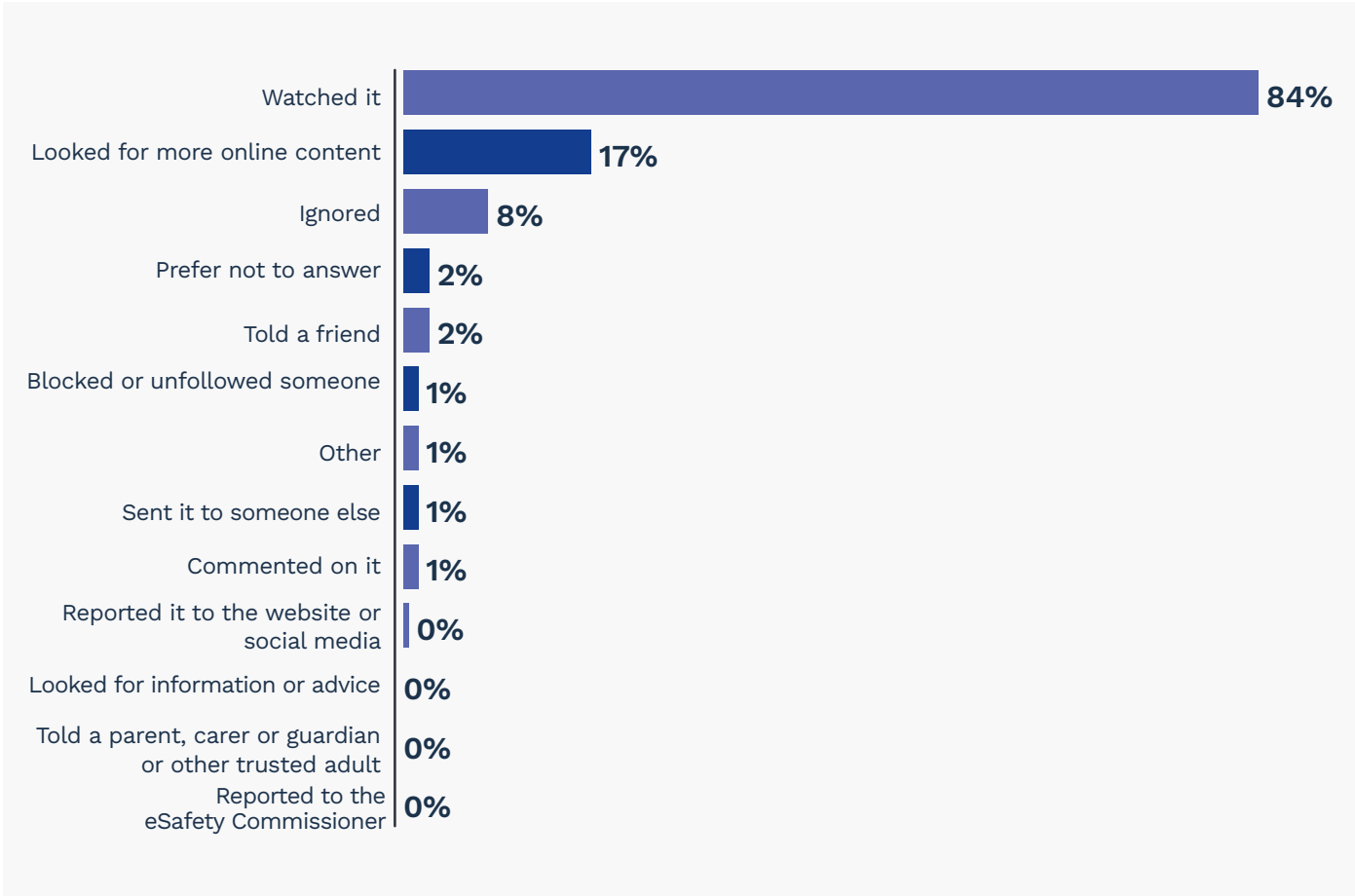
**Young people who intentionally seek out pornography watch it and may feel positive about their experience**

Findings from our survey and focus groups indicated that some young people do seek out online pornography to watch. When young people surveyed had intentionally encountered content (i.e. by specifically looking for it or asking someone to send it or to show them), they tended to watch it (Figure 17).

When asked how they responded the most recent time they intentionally encountered online pornography:

- 84% watched it, and 17% had looked for more content
- 8% had ignored it, and very few blocked or unfollowed someone (1%) and/or told a friend (2%).


**Figure 17.** How did you respond on the most recent occasion when you intentionally saw online pornography?



(Survey sample, unweighted, young people who most recently saw online pornography by specifically looking for it or asking someone to send/show them n=407)




In addition to some of the positive aspects of online pornography detailed by focus group participants above, including exploring sexuality and/or for pleasure, entertainment and gratification, young people described that seeing online pornography intentionally can be pleasurable and interesting and can give young people a sense of control.

- 

**It depends on whether it's deliberate or not. If it's intentional, then they might be pleased and interested; however, they may be uneasy and disgusted if [it's] unintentional.**  
(Straight man, 18)
- Well, if a child is searching for porn intentionally, they are most likely doing so for arousal.**  
(Bisexual man, 16)
- [When it's] unintentional, there could be unreasonable guilt, but [when it's] intentional they could feel in control [of] their emotions and [of] what they learn.**  
(Bisexual woman, 16)


One focus group participant said that in an ideal world

- 

**... you would only encounter it by choice.**  
(Straight man, 16)

**Young people may become desensitised to unintentional encounters with online pornography**

A few focus group participants suggested that people their age are desensitised to pornographic content because it has become so normal to see it online. This may explain why some young people ignore unwanted unintentional encounters with online pornography, rather than engage in more active responses such as seeking support or reporting the content to the website.

- 

**I think most of my generation is entirely desensitised. After all, we had animal crossing porn plastered all over social media as a trend.**  
(Queer non-binary young person, 17)
- We are definitely more desensitised than the older generations, and the younger generations are even more desensitised than us, which is worrying to me.**  
(Queer non-binary young person, 18)
- Porn isn't anything to gasp at, as most of us know what it is and how to find it. It has already been normalised, [among] teenagers at least.**  
(Pansexual woman, 17)

**Discussion: What we have learnt about young people's reactions to encounters with online pornography**

**Young people are becoming desensitised to explicit content.**

We found that what young people think, feel and do when they encounter online pornography depends on the context in which they see it. Our research reinforces findings from other studies that most young people who encounter online pornography don't tell anyone about it (Healy-Cullen et al. 2022; Lim et al. 2017). This is especially the case for young people who encounter pornography unintentionally. Young people who see unwanted sexual content online often feel that it's best to ignore it. They may even see it as their responsibility to ensure that they aren't shown this kind of content again (Setty 2022). When young people unintentionally encounter online pornography, they are unlikely to be prepared for what they see (Massey et al. 2021). It follows that these encounters were neither welcome nor wanted by young people in our study. They say the experience felt intrusive and disempowering and made them uncomfortable.

In contrast, we know that young people intentionally view pornography out of curiosity, for pleasure and for entertainment (British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) 2020; Healy-Cullen et al. 2022; Henry and Talbot 2019; Our Watch 2020). This is likely why we found that young people who had intentional encounters with online pornography were likely to watch it.

Regardless of what young people choose to do when they see pornography online, some of our study respondents observed that people their age can become desensitised by seeing online pornography. For the most part, this was believed to be a result of the high volume of pornographic content that features in young people's online lives. This supports other studies which suggest that young people's perception of and responses to online pornography may shift with time, in that they may become habituated or desensitised to explicit content (Daneback et al. 2018; Martellozzo et al. 2016).



# Young people's needs when encountering online pornography

Young people identified key barriers, including embarrassment and shame, that may preclude people their age from seeking help and information in relation to online pornography. However, when seeking information and support, they are most likely to turn to online sources, including social media, and their peers. Empowering young people through education and open dialogue to make informed decisions and to have realistic expectations of sex and relationships was described as important for young people to be able to navigate encounters with online pornography.

## What are young people's perspectives on seeking help around potential negative impacts of online pornography?

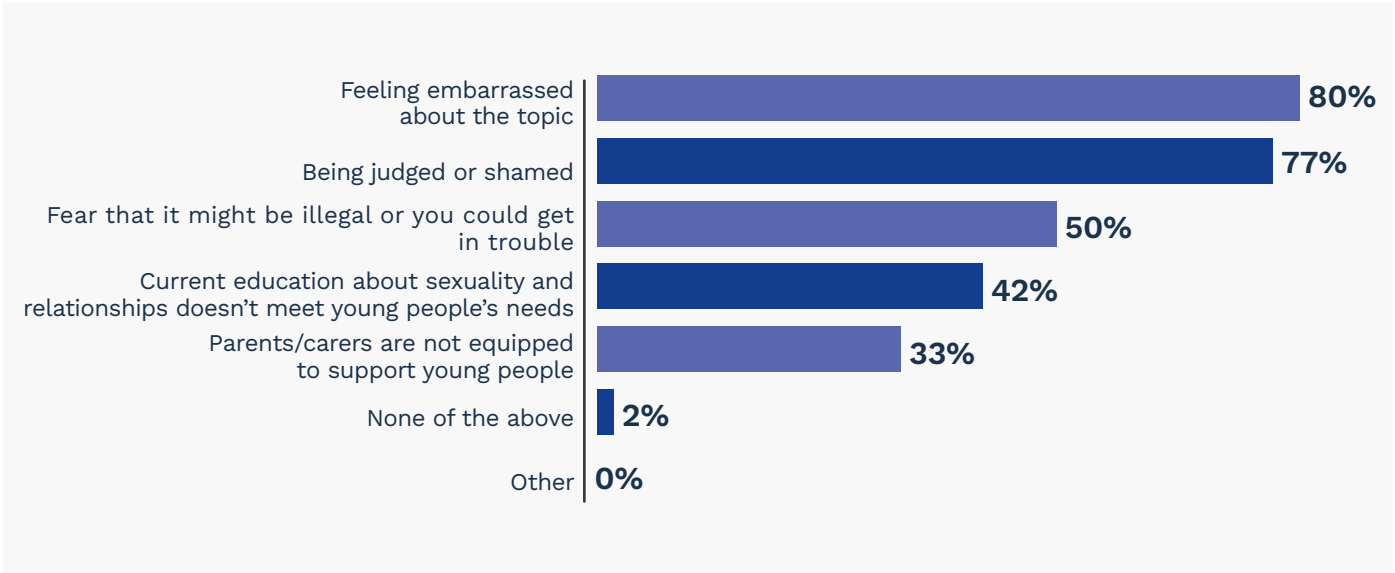
Young people think that embarrassment and shame may be the main barriers to information- and help-seeking in relation to online pornography

Data from the survey suggested there are barriers that may prevent many young people from seeking support in relation to online pornography. Young people in the focus groups described the shame and stigma surrounding pornography, which may be at the foundation of many of the barriers to help-seeking identified in the survey. Only 2% of young people in our survey thought that none of the suggested barriers (Figure 18) would prevent young people from asking for help in managing the impacts of online pornography.

- Four in five young people surveyed thought that feeling embarrassed about the topic (80%) and being judged or shamed (77%) are the main reasons why young people may not seek help in managing the negative impacts of online pornography (Figure 18).
- One in two (50%) young people thought that others their age may not seek support around seeing online pornography, due to fear that it might be illegal or that they could get in trouble.
- Two in five (42%) young people felt that current education about sexuality and relationships doesn't meet young people's needs.



**Figure 18.** What do you think might be stopping young people from asking for help to manage the impacts of online pornography?



(Total sample, unweighted, base n=1,004)

 **Yeah, society usually has negative stereotypes around anything to do with porn.**  
(Straight woman, 16)

**Even though it's more normalised, I feel like there's still a bit of a stigma around it, which there shouldn't be.**  
(Straight woman, 18)

**It has a negative perception in most cultures.**  
(Questioning man, 18)

Further, some young people in the focus groups contended that their education about sexuality and relationships had been inadequate, with a few citing shame and stigma as playing a counterproductive role in their sex education.

**There is too much stigma being taught, even in mandatory sex education at schools.**  
(Queer non-binary person, 18)

**Half the time it doesn't even work. It just makes them feel shameful when they DO look for it or see it.**  
(Demisexual panromantic demiboy, 18)

One in three (33%) young people in our survey thought that parents/caregivers are not equipped to help young people, which may prevent help-seeking to manage the impacts of online pornography.

While there are many ways that parents/caregivers may not be well equipped to support young people around pornography, a few focus group participants noted that their parents/caregivers were the source of anti-porn stigma in their homes – creating a potential barrier to young people seeking support from their parents/caregivers.

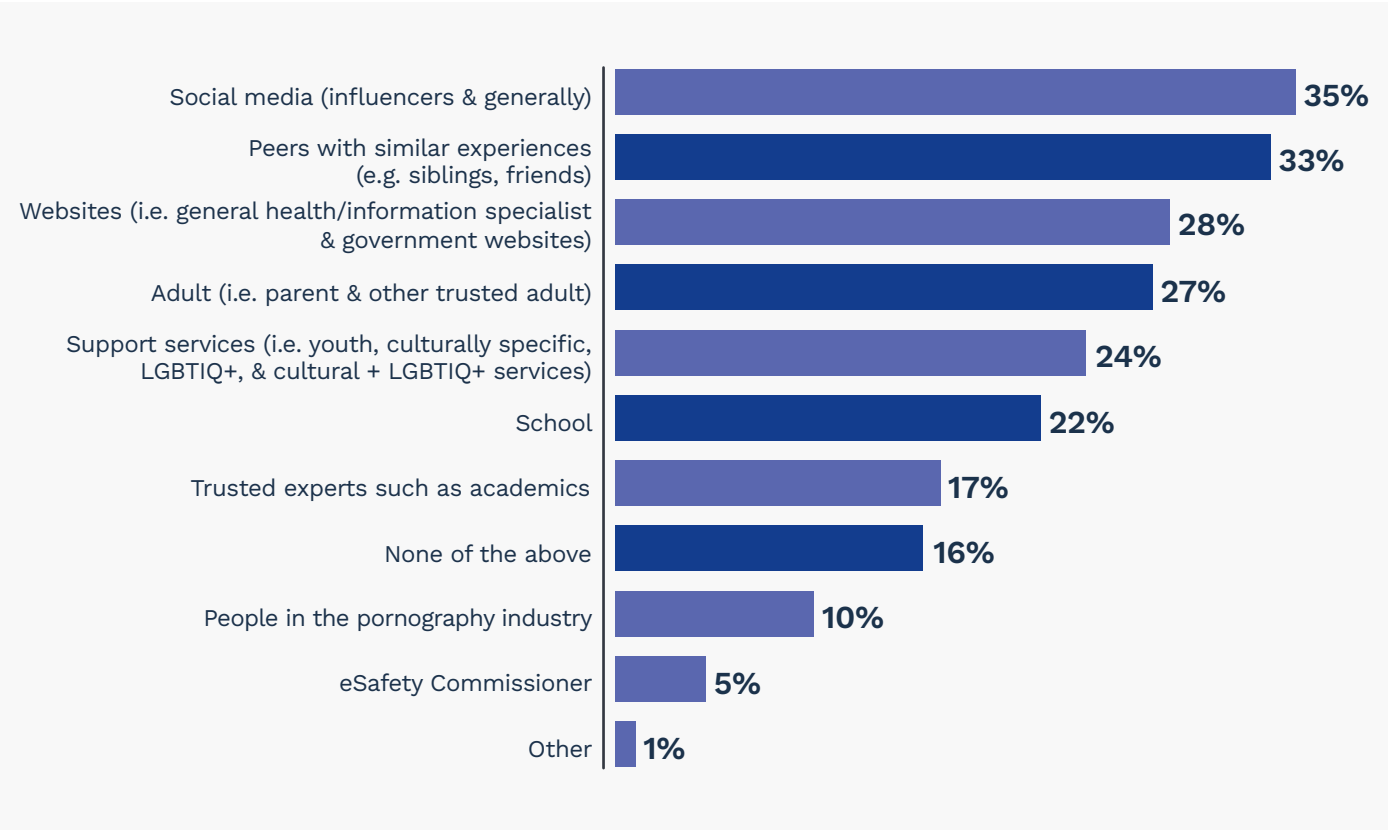
**My parents have always taught me that it's inappropriate content that I should never actively search for or view.**  
(Straight woman, 16)

**Young people tend to favour online sources and their peers when seeking information and advice about online pornography**

Survey responses found that young people’s preferences for sources of information and advice about online pornography vary (Figure 19), as did the preferences mentioned in the focus group discussions. The survey findings suggest that young people tend to prefer online sources and their peers.

- More than one in three survey respondents (35%) preferred social media (i.e. influencers and/or social media generally) as sources of information and advice about online pornography.
- One in three (33%) preferred to seek information and advice about online pornography from peers with similar experiences.
- Two in seven (28%) young people preferred to obtain information about online pornography from websites (e.g. general health and information sites, specialist and/or government sites).

**Figure 19.** What are your preferred sources of information and advice about online pornography?



(Total sample, unweighted, base n=1,004)

Focus group participants also spoke of young people’s preferences for peers and online sources, including social media, when seeking information and advice about online pornography.

 **I feel like I just found all the information online.**  
(Bisexual man, 16)

**I think that for teenagers, one of the most comfortable places is around their friends, so possibly having these sorts of things on social media and stuff would make sense.**  
(Straight man, 16)

**I think finding educational videos and websites to answer questions maturely and well and sharing them with the children so they can learn about it when they're ready and where they feel safe is an incredible way to go.**  
(Queer non-binary young person, 17)


Some reasons for survey participants’ preference for learning about pornography from peers and online sources may be found in focus group discussions about the challenges of gaining useful information from schools and parents/caregivers. Young people in the focus groups explained that education in schools can be awkward and unhelpful, and that sometimes parents/caregivers are ill-equipped to provide guidance.

 **Although it’s taught at school, I feel they don't cover it enough, so teenagers are still left with lots of questions.**  
(Gay trans man, 16)

**Some responsibility should be [on] schools and [some] should be [on] parents. Sometimes it's hard for parents to educate, though, because some aren't as tech-savvy as others.**  
(Straight man, 16)

**Well, at home it might be uncomfortable, since some people's parents have religious backgrounds which are very against the idea of porn.**  
(Straight man, 17)

Additionally, our qualitative research showed that young people take a nuanced view of the best way to learn about online pornography. Focus group participants described a role for schools and parents/caregivers, as well as expressing concerns about young people’s access to high-quality sources of information.

 **Schools are good. Social media could be a good place to educate people with facts and things. I think parents need to talk to their children about it, too. I think that's important.**  
(Straight woman, 16)

**I feel like providing more support WITHIN the school system would be more helpful than outside the system, since some kids don't have access to outside sources of information. From where I am, the sex-ed is taught horribly, and I learnt more online than [from] my parents OR from school.**  
(Gay trans man, 16)

**Learning outside of school is a bit of a mixed bag. Personally, that’s how I found out about a lot of things, but it could have very easily gone wrong if I ended up looking towards the wrong communities or role models.**  
(Asexual non-binary young person, 18)



Types and sources of support should be tailored to the needs of diverse populations of young people

Examination of survey responses by demographic characteristics – in particular, age, gender and sexuality – indicated that young people have varied preferences for sources of information and support, as well as differing barriers to support-seeking. These differences are presented in Table 1. Some key observations include:

- LGB+ young people reported that they were more likely than straight young people to seek information and advice about online pornography from peers, people in the porn industry, social media sources, support services, and websites.
- Young people who speak a language other than English said they were more likely to seek information and advice about online pornography from school and support services, compared to young people who don't speak another language.
- Young men told us that they were less likely than young people overall to seek information and advice about online pornography from their peers, from people in the porn industry or from social media.



Table 1. What are your preferred sources of information and advice about online pornography (by current age, gender, sexuality, LOE)?

	Age (%)				Gender (%)		Sexuality (%)		LOE (%)	
	Total	16 yrs	17 yrs	18 yrs	Men	Women	LGB+	Straight	Yes	No
Parent or other trusted adult	27	31	26	25	29	28	19↓	29↑	28	27
Peers with similar experiences (e.g. siblings, friends)	33	33	33	35	26↓	37↑	40↑	32	33	34
School	22	23	22	20	26↑	20	16↓	23↑	28↑	20↓
Trusted experts such as academics	17	12↓	20	19	16	17	18	16	18	16
People in the porn industry	10	7	9	14↑	6↓	12↑	15↑	9↓	12	9
Social media & influencers	35	26↓	36	42↑	25↓	41↑	43↑	33↓	35	35
Support services	24	21	24	27	20	25	33↑	22↓	33↑	21↓
Websites (general, specialist, govt)	28	25	30	29	26	29	34↑	26↓	32	27
eSafety Commissioner	5	6	4	5	4	5	6	4	4	5
Other (please specify)	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1
None of the above	16	16	17	14	20	13	16	15	13	17
Column n	1,004	338	333	333	356	614	219	771	247	748

(Total sample, unweighted, base n=1,004)  
Note: Multiple comparison correction: False Discovery Rate (FDR) (p=0.05); ↑ significantly higher than comparable sub-groups; ↓ significantly lower than comparable sub-groups.

We also found:

- LGB+ young people were more likely than other young people to seek support from LGBTIQ+ services (e.g. ACON), and cultural and LGBTIQ+ services (e.g. Black Rainbow, BlaQ).
- Young people who speak a language other than English were more likely than other young people to seek support from youth support services (e.g. ReachOut, Headspace, Kids Helpline, etc.).

The barriers to help-seeking to manage the negative impacts of online pornography also varied among young people in the survey based on age, gender and sexuality (Table 2).

- Overall, young women and/or LGB+ young people were significantly more likely to perceive barriers to help-seeking.
- Overall, young men and/or heterosexual young people were significantly less likely to perceive barriers to help-seeking in relation to online pornography.

**Table 2.** What do you think might be stopping young people from asking for help to manage the impacts of online pornography (by current age, gender, sexuality)?

	Total	Age (%)			Gender (%)		Sexuality (%)	
		16 yrs	17 yrs	18 yrs	Men	Women	LGB+	Straight
Being judged or shamed	77	75	77	80	71↓	81↑	87↑	75↓
Feeling embarrassed about the topic	80	80	79	81	74↓	83↑	86↑	78↓
Current education about sexuality and relationships doesn't meet young people's needs	42	35↓	44	46	33↓	45↑	58↑	37↓
Parents/caregivers are not equipped to support young people	33	28	32	39↑	28↓	35	41↑	30↓
Fear that it might be illegal or you could get in trouble	50	46	50	55	45↓	52	63↑	47↓
Other (please specify)	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
None of the above	2	2	2	1	3	1	1	2
Column n	1,004	338	333	333	356	614	219	771

(Total sample, unweighted, base n=1,004)

Note: Multiple comparison correction: False Discovery Rate (FDR) (p=0.05); ↑ significantly higher than comparable sub-groups; ↓ significantly lower than comparable sub-groups.


These findings suggest that when considering how best to provide support around online pornography to young people, a one-size-fits-all approach may not be effective. Not only are different groups of young people likely to be more receptive to different supports, and to experience different barriers to support-seeking, but our survey findings have indicated variations in how and when young people encounter online pornography during adolescence. These factors may impact upon both the nature of young people’s encounters with pornography and the supports they may require and respond to.

**What is seen by young people as the most helpful way to mitigate the potential harmful impacts of online pornography?**

**Education is seen by young people as the most helpful way to mitigate the potential harmful impacts of online pornography**

Almost all the young people surveyed thought there were ways that young people could be helped to manage the negative impacts of online pornography.

Education was an area highlighted by most (88%) young people in our survey as a helpful response pathway to manage the potential negative effects of online pornography. This was echoed in the focus groups, with most participants indicating that education was a means to equip young people with the skills needed to navigate encounters with pornography online.

 **They should feel informed about this taboo topic and be able to make their own opinion about it.**  
(Bisexual woman, 16)

**Yeah! Just like how they teach safe sex in school, they should teach safe use of online pornography. You will never be able to stop teenagers from using it, so teaching them how to navigate it safely would benefit them.**  
(Pansexual woman, 17)

**I feel like education is the BIGGEST factor in how people feel about online porn. Those who don't get the right education either think it's completely wrong [for everyone to consume pornography] or take it as the Bible [of sexual practice].**  
(Demisexual panromantic demiboy, 18)

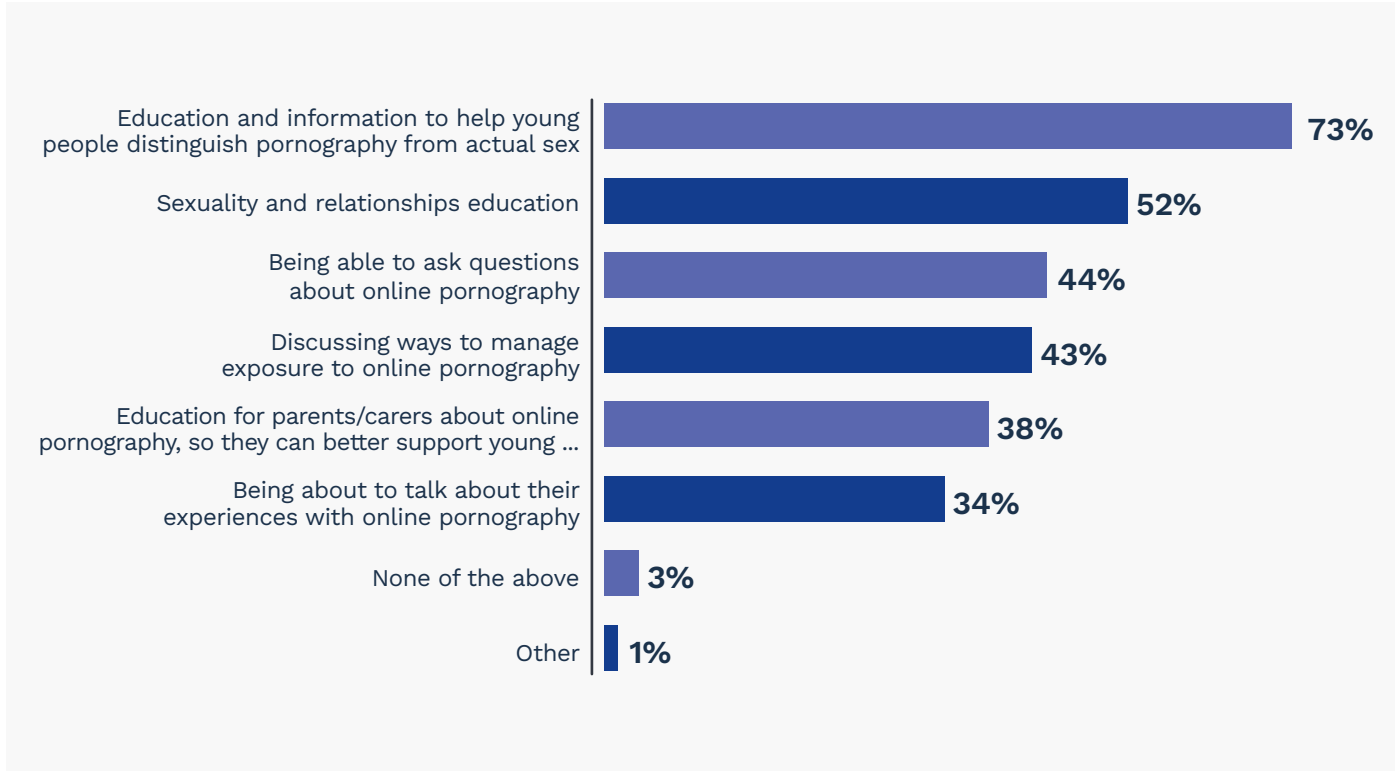
Almost three in four (73%) young people surveyed thought that education and information to help young people distinguish pornography from actual sex would be helpful in managing the negative impacts of online pornography (Figure 20). Some focus group participants also saw the ability to distinguish pornography from sex with another person as a key thing young people need to be taught about pornography.

 **[They need to understand that pornography] doesn't necessarily represent reality.**  
(Straight man, 16)

**[They need to] realise that porn most times is just like any film or show, and that it's not reality.**  
(Queer woman, 16)



**Figure 20.** What do you think would help young people to manage the negative impacts of online pornography?



(Total sample, unweighted, base n=1,004)

Approximately, one in two (52%) young people surveyed thought that sexuality and relationships education would be helpful. Sexuality and relationships education was also described in the focus groups as being helpful for young people, with an emphasis on concepts such as consent and pleasure.

- Maybe education on healthy sexual relationships [is needed] so there is some reference point to viewing nsfw [not safe for work] content and in deciding if it's too extreme.  
(Asexual, non-binary young person, 18)
- [Young people should be taught about] pleasure, consent, [and] what is and isn't okay.  
(Straight woman, 16)

In addition, almost two in five (38%) young people indicated that education about online pornography could extend to parents/caregivers so that they are better equipped to support young people.

- Also, while educating the children, the parents should undergo a similar program, so that they are working hand-in-hand and it's more holistic education, as that way it's not up to the child to continue the conversation at home.  
(Queer non-binary young person, 18)

The young people in the focus groups also discussed a balanced approach to education, whereby young people have the opportunity to learn about both the harmful and positive aspects of pornography.

- It should be a safe environment, where the message doesn't make porn look like a bad thing, but should definitely highlight the cons.  
(Straight woman, 18)
- As long as both pros and cons are covered, because then they can make an informed decision for themselves.  
(Straight woman, 18)

Focus group participants also described wanting sex education that provided meaningful information about what to expect from sex.

- What to expect their first time, [and about] how sex can be different for everyone.  
(Straight woman, 18)
- How sex can be initiated, what to expect, how to know if sex is okay (e.g. erection issues).  
(Bisexual woman, 17)
- Where to get help, what is/isn't normal, and just generally how queer relationships and sex can work, because approaching sex as a queer person is so scary when all that is portrayed in the media is the fetishisation of lesbians.  
(Queer non-binary young person, 18)



Some young people in the focus groups emphasised that this education should be sex-positive and non-judgemental, while others noted that there would always be some discomfort associated with learning about these subjects. Focus group participants also suggested that education on these subjects should ideally feel open, friendly, comfortable, safe, neutral, calm, funny and casual.


 **I think we should be able to create a safe space to discuss/learn/educate. So, while people can enjoy it [online pornography], at least they can be aware that it's not the most realistic thing, and not just for relationships but also for body image, consent, and how sex works, etc.**  
(Straight woman, 18)

**I think it should be taught in a way that doesn't make porn seem evil and life ruining, but in a way where kids know how to be safe, and to know that it isn't what real relationships are like.**  
(Straight man, 17)

**It should be relatable and include real-life examples so a young person can understand [that] this type of stuff is okay in real life.**  
(Straight woman, 16)

There was some disagreement among focus group participants over when this sort of education should be received, with a few pointing out that earlier is better given the young age at which some people are seeing pornography, and others noting that a level of maturity and understanding would be important for the education to be effective.

Focus group participants' discussions of the need for education about online pornography were also linked to their desire for autonomy in this area. This can be understood as these young people valuing their ability not only to make choices for themselves, but to make informed choices in line with models for healthy sexual development (McKee 2010).

 **If you understand the negative effects, then you can mitigate them and make online pornography a positive experience.**  
(Straight man, 17)


**[Is there a right time to see pornography for the first time?] Same as is there an appropriate age to lose your virginity, have a first kiss, etc. Everyone is different. As long as everyone is safe, consenting and informed, then that's life.**  
(Queer non-binary young person, 18)

**Young people think that open dialogue around online pornography could help to mitigate its potential harmful impacts**

Findings from the survey also indicated that around two in three (68%) young people surveyed thought that enabling open dialogues and discussion around online pornography could help to mitigate its potential harmful effects.

- Around three in seven young people thought that being able to ask questions about online pornography (44%) and discussing ways to manage encounters with it (43%) would be helpful (Figure 20).
- One in three (34%) young people said that being able to talk about their experiences with online pornography would be helpful.

Some focus group participants elaborated on this, while also suggesting that conversations about pornography are best held in casual contexts.


 **Oh, yeah. [It] would be great if they had enough healthy discussions prior to encountering porn accidentally to know if it's harmful or not.**  
(Asexual non-binary young person, 18)

**Some of these talks [are] sometimes [held] at schools and they're always in small groups where people have their friends and it's very casual. It's more of a discussion than a presentation and people feel comfortable asking questions.**  
(Straight woman, 18)

Many focus group participants argued that pornography should be destigmatised, suggesting that, ideally, young people would learn that a desire to explore pornography to satisfy their curiosity isn't a bad thing.

 **Pornography isn't always bad and it's okay to want to watch it/be curious about it.**  
(Straight woman, 16)

Destigmatising pornography may facilitate open dialogue around online pornography, as noted by one young focus group participant.

 **In addition, I feel an effect of laughing at porn with friends is that there's less of a taboo placed on the topic of sex for younger people (teens) which could be healthy towards their sexual development and help them be more open in discussing things.**  
(Asexual non-binary young person, 18)

## Discussion: What have we learnt about young people's needs in relation to online pornography?

**Young people see education, for themselves and their parents/caregivers, as the most useful way to mitigate the potential harmful impacts of online pornography.**

Many young people are aware that pornography can have negative impacts on themselves and others. Yet, in line with other research, we found that embarrassment and shame are significant barriers to help-seeking (Gulliver et al. 2010). It follows that young people expressed a preference for seeking support from online sources and their peers. Online sources of information about pornography may allow young people to seek help anonymously, reducing embarrassment (Pretorius et al. 2019). Similarly, young people may perceive their peers to be less judgemental about online pornography than parents/caregivers and other adults they know (Naslund et al. 2016).

Young people's preferences for sources of support varied based on their identities and backgrounds. This suggests that support should be tailored to the needs of different groups of young people (Brown et al. 2016). LGB+ young people appear to prefer specialist LGBTIQ+ sources of support. This may reflect the lack of mainstream supports that cater to this group. Young people who speak a language other than English were more likely to seek support from youth services. However, other research shows only minimal differences between formal help-seekers who are culturally and linguistically diverse and those who are not (Shepherd et al. 2021). More research into pornography-specific support-seeking and young people who speak a language other than English may therefore reveal valuable insights about this group and their needs.

Young people in this study saw education as the most useful way of mitigating the potential harms of online pornography. Young people in other studies have suggested that relevant education can help to reduce any harmful attitudes towards sexual relationships and women that arise from encounters with online pornography (Martellozzo et al. 2016). It has been found that education may also help young people to become critical consumers of pornography (Martellozzo et al. 2016). Based on our findings, there may be a desire among some young people to learn about sex from more reliable sources than pornography (Dawson et al. 2019; Litsou et al. 2021; Our Watch 2020; Wright et al. 2021). Education about pornography, along with comprehensive relationships and sex education, is also endorsed by experts as a means of mitigating the potential harmful impacts of pornography (Crabbe and Flood 2021; Dawson et al. 2019; Goldstein 2020; Wright et al. 2021).

However, there is a lot of evidence that sex and relationships education is delivered inconsistently in Australia. Some young people find the education they receive useful, while others find it insufficient (Ezer et al. 2020; Fisher et al. 2019). This aligns with research about the limits of school-based sex education (Albury 2014; Dawson et al. 2019; Ezer et al. 2020; Fisher et al. 2019; Jones and Hillier 2012) and some parental sources of information (Internet Matters 2019; Rosengard et al. 2012; Rothman et al. 2015). In particular, many studies have found

that sex education in Australian schools doesn't meet the needs of LGBTIQ+ young people (Ezer et al. 2020; Fisher et al. 2019; Jones and Hillier 2012). Young gay men and transgender youth often find information in online pornography that was missing from their formal sex education (Bradford et al. 2019; Litsou et al. 2021).

Many young people also thought that being able to have an open dialogue about online pornography could help to reduce its potentially negative impacts, something echoed in previous research (Goldstein 2020). In line with other studies, it was highlighted that shame and stigma around pornography is a barrier to open discussion (Dawson et al. 2019; Hare et al. 2015). This may apply to both educators and parents/caregivers. Many study participants thought that pornography education could beneficially extend to parents/caregivers, so that they are equipped to support their young people. Thus, increasing educator and parental awareness and confidence to have conversations about pornography without shame or stigma may play a role in empowering young people to navigate encounters with online pornography.

It isn't surprising that young people in our research emphasised the need for high-quality education about pornography, sex and relationships in schools and beyond. There is strong support for non-judgemental, sex-positive sex education among young people, in this study and others, as the best way to equip them to navigate seeing online pornography (Dawson et al. 2019; Hare et al. 2015; Wright et al. 2021). This may reflect the value that young people place on having the tools to make informed decisions about their sexuality (McKee et al. 2010).



# Implications

This study found that online pornography is highly present in the online lives of young people, with Australian young people encountering online pornography at high rates from a young age. Many young people's first encounters with online pornography are unintentional. Throughout adolescence, young people encounter online pornography, both unintentionally and intentionally, via pornography and other unrelated websites, social media and their friends.

Our findings suggest that young people find unintentional experiences with online pornography to be unwelcome, unwanted and unavoidable. Yet, due to the pervasiveness of pornography in the online worlds of young people, such encounters appear to be becoming normalised and young people are more likely to ignore content than to report it or to seek support and help.

Young people described aspects of online pornography that could be valuable to them, including learning about sex and exploring their sexuality. However, they also acknowledged the negative impacts that online pornography can have, especially in relation to young people's understanding and expectations of relationships and sex. Young people considered education to be the best way to reduce the negative impacts that could arise from encounters with online pornography. In addition, they emphasised the value of providing support to young people so that they can make informed decisions and have realistic expectations of sex.

This research builds on existing evidence and offers new insights into young people's encounters with and attitudes towards online pornography. Taken together, these insights point to a series of practical implications across six areas: the online industry, parents/caregivers, schools, frontline workers, young people and researchers.

## The online industry

This research indicates that many young people have unintentional encounters with online pornography throughout adolescence. Unintentional encounters occur in a variety of ways, including (but not limited to) via pop-ups of pornographic images on unrelated websites, by entering an incorrect web address, via an internet search engine, and/or through the receipt of unsolicited messages on social media and instant messaging platforms.

Focus group participants provided further insight into the accessibility of online pornography on social media, including specific social media platforms and websites that young people use, such as Instagram, Reddit, Snapchat, TikTok and Twitter. Some of these social media services' terms of service or community rules don't allow pornography. Others do allow pornography and state that they apply measures to prevent it from being seen by younger users.

We found that although young people don't like or want to have unintentional encounters with online pornography, when this occurs they are unlikely to report it or to seek support and help.

This suggests the following:

- Online services must have strong, effective strategies to prevent young people from seeing online pornography unintentionally.
  - Search engines and messaging apps can play an important gatekeeper role in reducing children's access to this content – for example, through default safe search filters, warning messages and the blurring of explicit content.
- If a service doesn't allow pornography, this should be clearly set out in its terms of service or community rules, and such terms or rules should be enforced.
  - This requires services to have accessible and effective mechanisms for users to report any pornography they encounter on the service, as well as proactive content detection tools.
- If a service does allow pornography, it should put in place effective safeguards to prevent younger users and those who don't wish to see pornography from encountering this content.
  - This requires robust age assurance measures to accurately capture the age of users in a way that doesn't compromise their privacy, coupled with age-appropriate safety features enabled on accounts by default so that pornography isn't recommended to, or accessible by, younger users.
  - It also requires user empowerment features to enable users to identify the types of content they do and don't wish to see, and to alert the service if they are being served content they don't like.
- The online industry should continuously improve tools and practices to prevent unintentional encounters with online pornography. In addition, it should raise awareness of existing measures that young people and their parents/caregivers can choose to apply at various levels, including device-level, network-level, browser-level or account-level measures.

## Parents/caregivers

Most young people were at home when they first encountered online pornography, and most of them first encountered it unintentionally. Further, while most of the focus group participants agreed that seeing pornography unintentionally is a common experience for young people, a few participants noted that controls such as firewalls at home and/or adblockers meant they didn't encounter porn unintentionally. This indicates the following:

- Parents/caregivers should be supported and provided with strategies and skills to implement controls across all devices to reduce the likelihood of children and young people having unintentional encounters with pornography (e.g. through turning on parental controls, safety and privacy settings, and filters).

Our research also indicates that parents/caregivers can be a source of anti-porn stigma for young people. Further, many young people thought that parents/caregivers are not well equipped to help them manage any negative impacts that may arise from encounters with online pornography. Accordingly, a large number of young people suggested that education about online pornography could extend to parents/caregivers so that they are better able to support young people. This indicates the following:

- Resources should be allocated to supporting and educating parents/caregivers to:
  - increase their awareness of young people's encounters with online pornography, including the difference between unintentional and intentional encounters
  - develop their skills and confidence to have conversations about pornography with their children without shame or stigma, with an emphasis on how to talk to them about seeing pornography unintentionally.

## Schools

The majority of young people in our study saw education as having an important role in reducing the potential negative impacts of online pornography. Most young people thought that education to help them distinguish pornography from in-person sex would be useful. A large proportion of young people also thought that sexuality and relationships education would be helpful. Our research has also shown that young people may have the capacity to be critical consumers of online pornography, which highlights the great potential of pornography literacy education to leverage and build on these existing skills. This, along with our finding that many young people first encountered online pornography before the age of 13, indicates the following:

- Developmentally appropriate education to support students who encounter age-inappropriate content and to build their critical viewing skills should be included as part of comprehensive F-12 respectful relationships education.
- This content, as part of comprehensive respectful relationships education, should be delivered following a whole-of-school approach.

We found that it was common for young people to encounter online pornography as a result of someone sending it to them, often without their permission. This indicates the following:

- Young people should receive a robust education around consent and age-inappropriate content, particularly around sending unsolicited sexual images to others and the emotional and legal implications that this could have for themselves and others.

LGB+ young people were more likely than straight young people to think there were some positive effects of online pornography for young people wanting to learn about sex and explore their sexuality. However, our analysis of young people's enthusiasm for sex and relationships education, as well as pornography education, indicates that they may desire to learn about sex from more reliable sources than pornography. This indicates the following:

- All young people should have access to high-quality, comprehensive, respectful relationships education that addresses the needs of gender- and sexually diverse young people.

In addition, we found that most young people identified embarrassment, shame and judgement as significant barriers to seeking support to manage the impacts of encounters with online pornography. Young people in focus groups also noted that shame and stigma had negative impacts on their sex and relationships education. This indicates the following:

- Effective whole-of-school approaches to respectful relationships education should be implemented in schools, so that all members of a school community are supported to be confident in having conversations and delivering education and support about age-inappropriate content in a way that is free of shame and stigma.





## Frontline workers

Our research found that some young people are more likely to seek support and information from sources outside of home or school. Young people surveyed who speak a language other than English at home indicated they were more likely than other young people to seek information and advice about online pornography from support services. This indicates the following:

- Frontline workers, and other professionals working with or providing care to children and young people, should be provided with resources and guidance to address online safety issues in children’s and young people’s lives. This includes discussing online pornography in an informed, safe and judgement-free way.

## Young people

Our research shows that young people experience distress, discomfort and even desensitisation when they unintentionally encounter online pornography. Young people in our study also expressed a strong desire to be able to choose if, where and when they see online pornography. This indicates the following:

- Young people may benefit from being equipped with skills and strategies to minimise their unintentional encounters with online pornography (e.g. through increased algorithmic literacy and greater awareness of user controls and platform safety features).

We found that while most young people disliked unintentional encounters with online pornography, few of them reported such encounters to the websites concerned, preferring instead just to ignore them. This indicates the following:

- Young people may benefit from encouragement to report instances of encountering pornography unintentionally. This could take the form of education about their rights to not see sexual content they haven’t consented to view, and demonstrations of the positive outcomes of reporting.

Additionally, our study found that when it comes to seeking support for the potential negative impacts of online pornography, help-seeking behaviours and attitudes differed among young people based on their age, gender, sexuality and whether they speak a language other than English. This indicates the following:

- Support for young people cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach and should be tailored to meet their age, diverse identities, needs and preferences.

## Researchers

This research has emphasised that unintentional and intentional encounters with online pornography are distinct experiences, which likely evoke different feelings and responses in young people. Young people described having feelings of distress and discomfort when they unintentionally encounter online pornography, which suggests that unintentional encounters may negatively impact upon some young people, more so than intentional viewing.

This indicates the following:

- Future research into young people’s encounters with and attitudes towards online pornography would benefit from close examination and consideration of the differences between intentional and unintentional viewing.
- Future research should further examine the short- and longer term impacts on young people of unintentional encounters with online pornography and protective factors that may mitigate any negative impacts.

This study asked young people aged 16–18 years to consider the age of their first encounter with online pornography. We found that the average age was 13 years, and that many young people had first encountered it by that age. We therefore recommend the following:

- Future research should be conducted with young people closer to the point of first encounter (i.e. at a younger age) in order to develop a more proximal understanding of the nature of first encounters with online pornography and to explore the impact of those first encounters.

We found that participants from some marginalised cohorts, such as those with disability and who speak a language other than English at home, were highly likely to encounter online pornography before the age of 13. Therefore, we recommend the following:

- Future research should explore the lived experiences with pornography of marginalised and minority young people. This includes young people with disability, those who speak a language other than English at home, and those who are First Nations and LGBTIQ+ populations. This research should be led by lived experience researchers from these communities or be co-designed with these communities to be culturally safe and accessible.





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