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July 20, 2017

To the Education, Tourism, Innovation and Small Business Committee

Re: Inquiry into improving the delivery of respectful relationships and sex education relevant to the use of technology in Queensland state schools

Please find attached the Burnet Institute's submission to the Committee Inquiry. Our submission is based on our own research and extensive literature review of other research into pornography, sexting, and sexuality education.

I would be happy to answer any further questions about this research if needed.

Regards

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Equity through better health



Burnet Institute submission to the Senate Inquiry for the matter: Improving the delivery of respectful relationships and sex education relevant to the use of technology in Queensland state schools

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July 2017

A response to the Submission Terms of Reference

Inquiry into improving the delivery of respectful relationships and sex education relevant to the use of technology in Queensland state schools:

1. That the Education, Tourism, Innovation and Small Business Committee consider and report on how to improve the delivery of respectful relationships and sex education in regards to the use of technology in Queensland state schools.

The Committee is asked to consider the following:

- a. the prevalence of sexualised content and the unsafe use of technology by students;
 - b. how adequately the Health and Physical Education curriculum supports students to make safe and healthy choices and understand respectful relationships, particularly given students' greater access to technology; and
 - c. consideration of other jurisdictions' approach to tackling sex education and the issue of at risk behaviour and sexualised content creation by students.
2. In undertaking the inquiry, the committee should also consider, the potential benefits of students being better informed about the risks behind the use of technology in a sexual nature.

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INTRODUCTION

Burnet Institute is a medical research and public health organisation that develops practical and innovative solutions to complex health issues that mostly affect disadvantaged, poor and vulnerable people. We aim to promote evidence informed policy and practice that leads to better health outcomes, including for young people. The institute has conducted research on young Victorian's use of sexualised new media, including pornography and sexting, and relevant health outcomes. The institute has also conducted two extensive reviews of relevant literature, which summarise a) available information on the impact of pornography on the sexualisation of children and young people, and b) features of successful sexual health promotion programs for young people.

Our submission focuses on responding to the Terms of Reference by outlining what evidence currently exists to understand the prevalence of sexualised content and the unsafe use of technology by children and young people, relevant health outcomes, and evidence-based recommendations for school-based education.

In preparing this submission, we acknowledge that the public debate about sexual media use and its impacts, particularly on children and young people, are sensitive and highly controversial. In particular, children's increasing access to sexualised media is a concerning and complex trend which will require a multi-sector response that also seeks out the perspectives and needs of children and young people themselves.

Despite the complexities of this issue, a sound evidence base must be established to ensure that as a community, we are able to respond in a way that focuses on the wellbeing of children and young people and avoids causing any unintentional harm.

SUBMISSION SUMMARY

- i. Our research indicates that lifetime pornography use is near ubiquitous among young Australians (i.e., Australians aged 15-29), with young men watching pornography more frequently than young women.
- ii. Our research indicates that 40-46% of young Australians aged 15-29 have ever sent or received a sext.
- iii. Most online pornography depicts sexual behaviours considered to be 'normal' or 'non-deviant' such as vaginal intercourse, fellatio and cunnilingus. Condom use is rarely depicted. Extreme forms of violence are rare, although more 'minor' acts such as spanking are more common. Pornography frequently depicts gendered inequalities such as depicting more male than female orgasms.
- iv. Research indicates that pornography and sexting use are *associated* with some harms including less frequent condom use, more sexual partners, and mental health issues. These harms should be taken seriously. However, there is little evidence, at least in an Australian setting, to say that pornography and sexting *cause* these harms, although there is a significant body of cross-sectional and qualitative evidence suggesting a link between them.

- v. Many young people enjoy watching pornography and have described positive effects of pornography use, including learning more about the mechanics of sex and their own sexual interests. Many young people report benefits of consensual sexting, perceiving it to be normal and fun, and do not condone the non-consensual sharing of sexts.
- vi. Any school-based interventions should be inclusive, multi-pronged and evidence based; interventions should also be comprehensively evaluated to avoid unintended negative consequences.
- vii. It is recommended that school-based interventions avoid abstinence-only messages and consider the complexity of sexualised media use, focusing on media literacy and the role of consent in real-life sexual relationships.



YOUNG PEOPLE AND SEXUALISED MEDIA USE: BURNET INSTITUTE AND OTHER RESEARCH

PORNOGRAPHY

PORNOGRAPHY USAGE PATTERNS AND ATTITUDES IN AUSTRALIA

The Burnet Institute has conducted [research](#) into the prevalence of pornography use among young Australians and associations with sexual risk behaviours (1). This was conducted as part of the 2015 [Sex, Drugs and Rock'n'Roll study](#), an annual online survey examining sexual health, alcohol and drug use and other sexual behaviours. This study involved a convenience sample of 941 Victorians aged 15 to 29 years who completed the survey in 2015. This study found that 87% of participants had ever viewed pornography. Male participants also watched porn more frequently than female participants, and had seen it for the first time at a younger age (Table 1). More recent results from the 2017 *Sex, Drugs and Rock'n'Roll* study (currently unpublished) indicate that among teenage boys, around half reported watching pornography daily, with 49% of 15-17 year olds and 46% of 18-19 year olds watching this often. Among teenage girls, many reported watching not at all, endorsed by 35% of 16-17 year olds and 31% of 18-19 year olds. However, 36% of 15-17 year old girls and 37% of 18-19 year old girls reported watching at least monthly.

Table 1 – Frequency of pornography related behaviours in 15-29 year olds, by gender, as reported in 2015 Sex, Drugs and Rock'n'Roll survey (1)

	Young men (n=258)	Young women (n=683)
Ever viewed pornography	100%	82%
Median age first viewed pornography	13 years	16 years
<i>Among those who had ever viewed pornography...</i>		
Frequency of viewing in 12 months prior to survey (%)		
Daily	39	4
Weekly	46	19
Monthly	10	25
Less than monthly	5	35
Not at all	1	17
<i>Among those who viewed in the past year...</i>		
Most common mode of viewing (%)		
Phone	33	41
Computer	63	49
DVD/magazine/other	4	10
Who did they usually view with (%)		
Alone	95	83
With partner, friends or others	5	17



In general, motives for viewing pornography can be broken down into four broad factors: relationships (both within sexual relationships and non-sexual relationships, i.e. bonding with friends), mood management (e.g. managing arousal, curiosity, boredom), fantasy, and habitual use (2). Burnet Institute has conducted research into the types of pornography that young people watch in a study of 900 participants recruited via social media (currently unpublished). This study found that men's pleasure was the most commonly observed behaviour, seen most of the time by 82% of participants. Also common were men as dominant (70%), women's pleasure (54%), ejaculation onto a woman's face (43%) and violence against women that appears consensual (37%). Only 13% frequently saw condom use.

Of note, pornography is a diverse medium and it is likely that many people have been exposed to a variety of genres, whether or not they sought them out. Burnet Institute is currently conducting a systematic literature review which synthesises content analyses of pornography. These analyses aim to determine which behaviours pornography depicts. Preliminary findings from this review indicate that, in regards to heterosexual online pornography, the most common behaviours depicted are those considered to be 'normal' or 'non-deviant' such as vaginal intercourse (68-88% of Internet videos), fellatio (79-86%), kissing (41-45%), cunnilingus (37%) and anal intercourse (15-32%; 3, 4). Condom use is very rare, with only 2-3 % of videos with heterosexual encounters depict condom use (3, 4); however, condom use is more frequently seen in gay male pornography (5). Depictions of gender inequalities are common, e.g. female orgasms depicted much less frequently than male orgasms (6). Overt violence appears in a minority of videos, found in less than 4% of videos, although minor aggressive acts such as spanking are more common (3, 4, 6). However, depictions of aggression, violence and force against woman are considered by many young viewers to be common in modern pornography, and can be easily found if one is seeking these genres (7, 8).

Research indicates that most young people are generally not passive consumers of pornography, and many are able to think critically about pornography use and its potential impacts. In general, adolescent boys report more positive attitudes towards pornography than adolescent girls; however, girls have increasingly positive attitudes as they grow older (9). Attitudes towards pornography tend to be more negative among young people who are religious, less sexually active, and have viewed pornography less often (10). Young adults generally report significantly more positive effects of pornography than negative effects, particularly among young men (11). There is also general observation of a '*third person effect*', in which pornography consumers recognise that pornography consumption might be harmful for other people, but do not believe it affects them personally (10). For example, in an unpublished study from our 2017 *Sex, Drugs and Rock'n'Roll* study, 65% of participants agreed that pornography is harmful for some people but not everyone, while 17% believed it is not harmful and 11% believed it is harmful for everyone.

CORRELATES OF PORNOGRAPHY USE

The aforementioned 2015 *Sex, Drugs and Rock'n'Roll* study also examined the association between pornography use and various behaviours and demographics (1). More frequent pornography viewing was associated with male gender, younger age, higher education, non-heterosexual identity, ever having anal intercourse and recent mental health problems. Younger age at first pornography

viewing was associated with male gender, younger current age, higher education, non-heterosexual identity, younger age at first sexual contact and recent mental health problems. Sexual risk behaviours related to casual sex and condom use were not associated with pornography viewing behaviours. In summary, this study provides some evidence to support an association between pornography and some adverse phenomena such as mental health problems; however, the nature of this analysis means that we cannot say whether pornography *causes* these problems.

A growing body of mostly international research has also studied correlates of pornography use, although there is little research with children and adolescents due to ethical issues researching this topic. Longitudinal research has found that early exposure to pornography, and more frequent exposure, are both associated with initiation of sexual behaviours at younger age among adolescents (12, 13). A recent systematic review showed an association between pornography consumption and sexual risk behaviours among adult consumers;(14) studies of adolescents and young people generally show similar trends including condom non-use, more lifetime sexual partners, using drugs or alcohol during sex (15-17), and engaging in sexting (7, 18).

Longitudinal research in the U.S. indicates that pornography exposure is associated with a higher likelihood of engaging in sexually aggressive behaviour among adolescents (12, 19, 20). For example, in one study, adolescents who intentionally accessed violent pornography were six times more likely to be sexually aggressive than those who were exposed to nonviolent pornography or no pornography (19).

Other research indicates that pornography use among young people may affect other areas, including less relationship and sexual satisfaction (12), having sexist attitudes toward women (21), and increased mental health problems (22, 23). Pornography ‘addiction’ is not formally recognised, although it has been reported anecdotally. Recent brain studies support the notion that adults can be addicted to be porn due to changes in the brain’s reward system (24, 25). There is conflicting evidence about the relationship between pornography and body image, although young women have reported feeling pressured to achieve an ‘ideal body’ that is often represented in pornography (7, 26, 27) and some people are concerned that pornography is influencing rates of labiaplasty (28). However, pornography might also have a positive effect on sexual satisfaction for some, including less sexual anxiety in young adults (10) and bringing closeness and satisfaction when used together in a relationship (29, 30).

Young people have reported using pornography as a form of sexual education, such as incorporating pornography-inspired practices into their real life sexual experiences.(31-33) Preliminary results from another Burnet Institute study, which asked young people how pornography had influenced their lives, are consistent with these reports. Participants suggested that in some cases pornography had been better than formal sex education, by providing opportunities to “see genitals” and the “mechanics of sex” in detail during the act of sex. For example one participant said: “[I] Learned what to do and how to do it, instead of what to avoid when I was in School”, or another who commented that pornography had given them a “Greater understanding of the mechanics of sex (which parts go where, what aroused genitals look like etc)”.

Others used pornography to find “new positions” and “techniques” to practice in real life. Many looked to pornography to explore their own sexuality and ideas about pleasure and desire. These insights suggest that despite recent research showing that schools and parents remain the most trusted source of sexual education (34), the information provided may not be meeting the basic needs of young people.

While some found access to pornography “helpful” and “liberating” and normalising of a range of bodies and sex, others noted their exposure had resulted in a problematic understanding of what “sex should be like”. Viewing pornography had an impact on expectations of sex, pleasure, identity and on body image among these respondents. For some this occurred as a result of a sexual partner’s expectations; however, for most (including for young women) this was as a result of their own viewing.

SEXTING

SEXTING BEHAVIOURS AND ATTITUDES IN AUSTRALIA

The Burnet Institute has published two studies into sexting among young Australians. The first of these studies, published in 2014, analysed a convenience sample of 1372 young people aged 15-29 years attending a Melbourne-based music festival (35). The study found that 40% of participants had ever sent or received a sext, most commonly with a regular partner.

The second study, published in 2016, aimed to explore young people’s attitudes towards sexting behaviours (36). This study involved 469 young people also recruited from a Melbourne-based musical festival who reported their responses to a number of statements; 46% of this sample had ever sexted (Table 2). A systematic literature review published in 2014 (37), which included international research, found that many people are concerned that sexting can be risky and dangerous, fearing potential outcomes such as exploitation, bullying, and legal issues. Reasons for sexting relate to being sexy or initiating sexual activity from a partner, self-expression and pressure from others. Several studies have explored the non-consensual distribution of sexts, with prevalence of this act ranging between studies (with 2%-17% of participants reporting distributing sexts). Reasons cited for this behaviour included ‘showing off’, joking/humour and boredom (37).

CORRELATES OF SEXTING BEHAVIOURS

In Burnet Institute’s 2014 study, sexting was associated with having a lower level of education, greater recreational spending, a higher number of sexual partners, inconsistent condom use with regular partners, non-heterosexual identity, and higher alcohol consumption (35). Further, in our 2016 study, more permissive attitudes towards sexting were associated with being male, lower sexual health knowledge, inconsistent condom use with casual partners, and higher alcohol consumption (36). As an extension of the 2014 study, focus groups were held with 39 young people, who emphasised the importance of consent when creating, sending, possessing and sharing sexts. Participants reported that consensual sexting is a normalised and generally positive aspect of sexual interaction. Non-consensual sharing of sexts was viewed as a serious negative outcome and violation of trust.

Table 2. Attitudes towards sexting among a sample of 469 young Australians (36).

Statement	Sex of participant	Strongly agree or agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Strongly disagree or disagree (%)
Most people my age sext regularly	Male	52	30	18
	Female	50	33	18
It should be illegal for people under 18 to sext	Male	76	15	8
	Female	78	14	8
It should be illegal to pass on a sext without permission	Male	42	21	37
	Female	50	31	19
It's risky for a girl to send a naked picture of herself to someone	Male	79	14	7
	Female	93	7	0
It's risky for a boy to send a naked picture of himself to someone	Male	69	21	10
	Female	82	12	6
If my girlfriend or boyfriend sent me a sext, I might show it to some friends	Male	12	14	74
	Female	15	15	71
If someone I'd just started seeing sent me a sext, I might show it to some friends	Male	28	22	51
	Female	30	22	48

A systematic literature review published in 2014 found that people who have sexted are significantly more likely to be sexually active than those who have not, and are more likely to report high levels of alcohol use (37). Mixed findings have been observed regarding relationships between sexting and condom use, mental health problems, and diagnoses of sexually transmissible infections, suggesting that more research is needed in this area (37).

INTERVENTIONS TO PREVENT THE HARMS OF SEXUALISED MEDIA

INTERVENTIONS OUTSIDE OF THE SCHOOL

There are already efforts in place which aim to prevent harms of sexualised media use. Legislation aims to prevent those aged under 18 years from viewing pornography or sexting in Australia; the high prevalence of these behaviours among teenagers indicates that this law is not effectively preventing such behaviours (1). Age verification software and filtering software appear to be ineffective at stopping young people from accessing pornography online, although they may help prevent accidental exposure (38). Age verification measures can usually be avoided with a few clicks, or interested viewers can simply seek pornography through different websites or apps. Filtering software often makes one of two types of errors: over-blocking (blocking a page that should not be blocked) and under-blocking (failing to block a page that should be blocked) (39). In a survey of American teenagers, 50 of 51 participants stated no problems circumventing filters to access pornography (40). An Australian study found no correlation between parents installing Internet filters and children's exposure to violent and sexual material.(38)

Many parents and guardians report setting rules and boundaries for their children's Internet and social media use (41). Parental filtering and monitoring is also not always effective, especially when young people can access the Internet privately from a mobile device in their bedroom or at a friend's house. Children are often more knowledgeable about the Internet than their parents. The casting of parents as gate-keepers of the Internet can backfire by making young people reluctant to talk to their parents about risks or problems encountered online; children may be unwilling to raise concerns or discuss what they have seen online for fear that their parents will remove Internet access (39, 41). Regardless, sexual education-based discussions between parents and children are considered to be important in a child's sexual development, although timing and comprehensiveness of such discussions obviously differ between families (42).

Young people demonstrate variations in attitudes towards pornography interventions outside of school settings. Our unpublished study from the 2017 *Sex, Drugs and Rock'n'Roll* survey identified that 57% of young people support national education campaigns about pornography, 22% support a national filter to block all access to pornography, 63% support requiring condom use in all pornography, and 66% support banning violence in pornography, although concerns were raised by participants about definitions of violence and aggression.

CONSIDERATION FOR SCHOOL-BASED INTERVENTIONS

It is important to note that discussion of topics such as pornography and sexting in school-based settings is controversial. The advisory group is urged to consider the current high levels of sexualised media among young people identified by our research, and consider both the harms and benefits identified by young people. An unpublished study from our 2017 *Sex, Drugs and Rock'n'Roll* survey has identified a high level of acceptability among young people, with 85% of participants supporting the notion of school-based pornography education.

Burnet Institute recently conducted a review of systematic reviews to identify features of successful sexual health promotion programs for young people (43). This review found that the most common features of effective programs were those conducted over a longer-term period or involving repeated implementation; those involving multiple settings or at multiple levels (e.g. individual, family, community); those involving parental involvement; those tailored to be appropriate and sensitive to different cultures, genders and ages; those which included skills-building; and those involving multiple components (e.g. education, skills-building, and condom promotion).

In this context, it is important that any changes to school curriculum consider the factors above. Any awareness and educational measures need to be evidence-based and formally evaluated to ensure they are able to prevent harms among their target audiences. School-based educational programs such as *Reality and Risk* (44) is based on evidence but more evaluation is needed to understand the impact of this program. Meanwhile, significant research and resources have gone into developing comprehensive teaching resources such as *The Practical Guide to Love, Sex and Relationships*, which includes a video and lesson guide for discussing issues around pornography (45). However, without mandatory curriculum or consistent teaching standards this resource may not be widely used.

Further, it is important to consider the messages that will be given by education programs. Abstinence-only messages are known to be ineffective in general sexual education programs (46). Further, some educational messages in the context of sexting have been criticised, failing to consider the role of nuance and pleasure in sexting behaviours and blaming the subject if images are shared without their consent (47). It has been argued that in an ideal education setting, pornography literacy education might ‘permit a dialogue that offers the opportunity for educators to learn more about young people’s sexual cultures, and for both teachers and learners to extend their knowledge and understanding of the intersections between mediated representation and lived experiences of sex, sexuality, and gender’.(48, pg. 176) School-based educational initiatives need to address these issues with consideration of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex communities, influence from parents and peers, and individual differences.(48, 49)

Interestingly, many young people in our studies appear to have a complex relationship with pornography, simultaneously recognising its utility for learning about sex while reflecting on its negative impacts on their sexuality and wellbeing. Young people’s often contradictory and insightful reflections on their use of pornography as a sex educator reinforces the need to address gaps that still exist in formal sex and sexuality education. For example, both young people and researchers have criticised sexual education programs that are overly negative and focus exclusively on risks of obtaining a sexually transmissible infection (STI) or pregnancy at the expense of pleasure and healthy relationship development (50). These results support previous studies (51-53) which have identified the need for alternative approaches to ensuring that young people have a number of safe spaces to learn about sex and sexuality (including about desire, mutual pleasure and sexual ethics), rather than focusing only on their ability to critique the images in pornography or avoid sexual risks.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This submission provides an overview of available data and literature on pornography and sexting exposure, and current strategies to mitigate harm. Although we do not aim to systematically review the research in this submission, we provide the following summary:

- i. Our research indicates that lifetime pornography use is near ubiquitous among young Australians (i.e., Australians aged 15-29), with young men watching pornography more frequently than young women.
- ii. Our research indicates that 40-46% of young Australians aged 15-29 have ever sent or received a sext.
- iii. Most online pornography depicts sexual behaviours considered to be 'normal' or 'non-deviant' such as vaginal intercourse, fellatio and cunnilingus. Condom use is rarely depicted. Extreme forms of violence are rare, although more 'minor' acts such as spanking are more common. Pornography frequently depicts gendered inequalities such as depicting more male than female orgasms.
- iv. Research indicates that pornography and sexting use are *associated* with some harms including less frequent condom use, more sexual partners, and mental health issues. These harms should be taken seriously. However, there is little evidence, at least in an Australian setting, to say that pornography and sexting *cause* these harms, although there is a significant body of cross-sectional and qualitative evidence suggesting a link between them.
- v. Many young people enjoy watching pornography and have described positive effects of pornography use, including learning more about the mechanics of sex and their own sexual interests. Many young people report benefits of consensual sexting, perceiving it to be normal and fun, and do not condone the non-consensual sharing of sexts.

The recommendations below provide a starting point for addressing these issues using evidence informed and participatory approaches:

- a) Invest in evidenced-based and participatory interventions to promote healthy sexual development and relationships. Avoid reactive and under-evaluated program content which may be ineffective at best, and cause unintended harms to children and young people at worst.
- b) Engage young people in dialogue and research about any adverse outcomes of sexualised media use and possible ways to reduce their likelihood, without shaming young people for their developing sexuality and curiosity.
- c) Consult with parents and educators to understand their concerns and develop suitable strategies to assist them in navigating a response.
- d) With consideration of these factors, Burnet Institute recommends consideration of the following broad messages to be included in sexualised media school-based education:
 - It is normal for teenagers to be curious about pornography and sexting as they continue to develop and learn about their own sexuality.

- Some of the messages in pornography can be misleading and unhealthy relating to gender relations, condom use and aggressive behaviours.
- Many people find sexting to be fun and exciting, but there are risks involved and there are legal issues to consider, particularly if participants are aged under 18 years.
- Consent is critical when it comes to real-life sexual behaviours, including expectations from sexual partners regarding taking and distributing sexts.



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