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# Growing up with porn

Insights from young New Zealanders

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## Insights from young New Zealanders (2020)

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## Contents

<b>FOREWORD FROM THE CHIEF CENSOR</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>KEY FINDINGS</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>RESEARCH METHOD</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>YOUNG PEOPLE ARE GROWING UP WITH PORN</b>	<b>14</b>
When young people first see porn	16
The place of porn in young people's lives	18
Why young people watch porn	21
Porn and gender	24
<b>YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS ON THE IMPACTS OF PORN</b>	<b>28</b>
Personal experience, feelings, and impacts of porn	30
The impact on sex and relationships	34
<b>WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE WANT</b>	<b>38</b>
Changing the conversation	40
The role of whānau and communities	43
Education, information and support	45
<b>CONCLUSIONS</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>APPENDIX 1: YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL STATEMENT</b>	<b>51</b>

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# Foreword from the Chief Censor

## “What can be done about kids watching porn?”

As Chief Censor, I get this question a lot. I know a huge number of parents are concerned about what their children or teens might have seen, and how they might be affected. The anxiety is real – but there just don't appear to be any clear answers.

In order to work out solutions, it pays to understand the issues. This report is the third in our research series designed to help build that understanding from a New Zealand perspective. Our first report in the series *NZ Youth and Porn* surveyed nearly 1% of all 14 to 17 year olds in this country, finding that porn was indeed a fact of life for young people. We gained many insights from this work, and some were concerning. For one thing, we found that one in four young Kiwis see porn before the age of 12. That isn't good, as the young people themselves told us.

Our second report *Breaking down Porn* took a look at the content frequently watched by New Zealanders on a popular pornographic website, to gain a sense of what people (including young people) were consuming online. On the positive side, we found indications that extreme or violent porn was not generally favoured in this country. But it was troubling to see non-consensual behaviour in over a third of the most popular clips.

So our research so far has given us good evidence about the 'how' (how many, how old, how often and so on) as well as the 'what' of porn (what does it contain, what is more popular). In this study we have interviewed 52 wonderful and generous young people to understand the 'why' – why young people watch porn, why it matters, and why we need to rethink our approach to it.

In compiling this research we had the privilege of hearing direct, thoughtful and sometimes painfully honest accounts from young people. They openly talked about their experience of porn and their views on how it could affect attitudes and relationships. Many of them told us that they thought porn wasn't all bad (it is a very effective masturbation aid for example, and some felt it helped them to explore their sexuality and preferences). But most of them also had

real concerns about porn. Young people frequently told us that they were worried about how porn could influence sexual behaviour, shape expectations and reinforce stereotypes. They didn't like how porn downplayed or disregarded consent in its depiction of sexual interaction. And they often wished they had not been as young as they were when they first saw it.

Interestingly, we did not hear much about the things that the media often focusses on when talking about pornography. We heard few concerns around compulsive or 'addictive' use of porn, or of porn use leading to erectile dysfunction, for example. The young people we talked to seldom expressed concerns about the risk of violent and aggressive porn directly inspiring real life sexual violence. They generally found violent porn unpleasant and tended to avoid it.

This does not mean to say that there are no issues with violent or illegal porn, or no correlation between porn use and aggression or harmful sexual behaviour. We have all seen the disturbing media reports of brutal crimes against women where porn forms part of the narrative, and research focussed on sexual offenders has raised real concerns about these correlations. I personally think that extremely violent and illegal pornography is much too accessible, and that more must be done to eradicate this material.

But what this research tells us is that starting any conversation with young people about porn by focussing on (say) illegal material risks missing the boat. Overwhelmingly, we learned from young people that they understand that porn is a 'fake' commercial product. They generally know that it is a very poor guide to what real sex is like. Despite this, for many, it is a primary reference for finding out about sex – they simply don't feel that they have any better source of information. Young people worry about what this means for their own expectations about sex, and the expectations others may have of them. They have real concerns about porn's influence on attitudes towards sex and gender.

These concerns are very real, and are likely to become more acute as we consider a world adapting to the implications of the Covid-19 virus. Already we are seeing reports from major commercial porn sites of massive spikes in traffic from acutely affected countries. As New Zealand responds to a crisis that will likely mean that young people spend even more time alone and online, now is the time to consider what steps will help them the most.

**Have the conversation:** Young people are telling us that they would hugely value the opportunity to have safe, honest and non-judgemental discussions with adults about sex and porn. The difficulty is that this is often a difficult and embarrassing conversation on both sides, and adults often feel poorly equipped to deal with the subject. To help with that, the Classification Office is producing simple guides for parents and caring adults to broach the subject. There will never be a better time than now to have an open and honest conversation with teens about their online lives.

**Educate to provide a counter-narrative:** We know that accurate and informative sexuality education can form an effective counter-narrative to the messages that porn sends young people. Young people tell us that it is more important than ever for education to provide them with that counter-narrative. A good step in the right direction is now being taken, with information about porn to be included in the Ministry of Education's updated relationship and sexuality education guidelines. The Classification Office is working with the Ministry to develop online resources and education modules for schools. But we need greater national consistency about the health and sexuality curriculum to ensure the right information and messages get to the young people who need them.

**Parents, Industry and Government can all play a part:** We consistently see issues in relation to young children seeing porn when they don't want to. Parents can find themselves out of their depth in taking basic

steps to put in place parental locks and filters to help protect their younger kids. The government can step up to help provide consistent and trusted guidance in this area, as well as working responsibly to ensure that illegal material is not easily accessed. While the porn industry is unlikely to make any substantial changes without external pressure from regulators, they have to accept that their product is not for children. New technologies are establishing effective and privacy-protective means of age-verifying consumers online. In an era when the porn industry has a bigger audience than ever before, it should also shoulder some responsibility for reducing harm.

So what can be done about kids watching porn? By approaching young people themselves, and listening to them, we have found out that there are some sensible, practical things that will genuinely protect and help them. It turns out it is not so difficult. If we provide good, effective and consistent sex and sexuality education, if we equip parents and adults to have informed and open discussions, and if we have basic tools and laws in place to protect young children, we can take a real step forward.

Let's do that. Now.

Ngā mihi nui,



David Shanks – Chief Censor



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Lastly, and most importantly, we would like to thank the rangatahi who participated in the research. To make this research possible, 52 young people from throughout New Zealand chose to talk with a complete stranger about porn, and this was often the first genuine conversation about porn they'd ever had. These young people showed courage and openness, and we're grateful for the valuable insights they gave us.



**“I would say people’s personal stories make the most impact. If I can relate to that story, then it’s going to make the biggest difference.”**

MALE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN



## Key findings

### YOUNG PEOPLE ARE GROWING UP WITH PORN

#### Porn has become normalised for young people – whether or not they watch it

Young people are growing up with porn – often seeing it for the first time as children. It's highly accessible and to a large extent normalised for young people. They assume that others their age will have seen it and that some will watch it regularly. This is generally accepted as a fact of life for young people today, whether or not they watch it themselves.

Young people have diverse experiences and views about porn, and it's not possible to make assumptions based on age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality or religious beliefs. While easy access to porn may be seen as normalised, watching it regularly isn't necessarily common.

#### Young people are curious about sex, and porn is a default learning tool

Young people are curious about sex and human bodies. If young people want information about sex and bodies, it's right there – a world of information – literally held in the palm of their hands, on their phone or other device. Young people are more likely to look at porn for sexual pleasure rather than for sex ed, but whether intentionally or not, sexuality education is what they're getting from porn. This 'education' can begin before they reach high school, and most young people agree that's a bad idea.

#### Yes, girls watch porn too (for similar reasons as boys), but they see a double standard

Boys are much more likely to watch porn often. However when girls do watch porn, they're likely to do so for similar reasons, including sexual arousal and masturbation, to explore their sexuality, and learn about the mechanics of sex. However girls and boys face different societal expectations about porn. Girls described a sense of taboo or stigma around sex and sexuality, and this 'double standard' extends to watching porn.

### YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS ON THE IMPACTS OF PORN

#### Porn can have a negative impact on body confidence

Young people often talked about porn having a negative influence on body image. It was common for girls to feel bad about themselves because their bodies didn't match up to the 'ideal' portrayed in porn, and boys often feel insecure about penis size. Even where a young person knows what they see in porn isn't the norm, they still worry about the perceived expectations of current or future sexual partners.

#### Most young people aren't worried about the amount of porn they watch

It's common for young people's porn use to change over time, depending on circumstances. Young people who watch porn don't tend to struggle with how often or how much they watch it – they look at it when they want to, and usually do not spend much time on it. Some young people talked about 'porn addiction', but thought of it as rare.

A small number of young people did have a problem with porn use, relating to mental health issues, concern about content, or their feelings about the negative influence of porn.

#### Young people think porn can negatively influence sex

Young people often talked about how porn isn't realistic, and it can give people false expectations about sex and relationships. It was widely acknowledged by young people that both boys and girls may be influenced by gender roles seen in porn – and that young people who act out behaviour in porn often do so because that is what they think their partner may want or expect.

However most young people don't think porn is a good guide, and the influence of porn can lead to negative experiences as they begin to explore sex.

### WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE WANT

#### Young people and adults are not talking about porn

Young people share many of the same concerns about porn and think open communication is necessary for children and young people's healthy social and sexual development. However, they are seldom having good conversations with adults – or each other – about porn.

Our findings show that children and young people are watching porn by themselves, and having to make sense of what they see by themselves. If adults don't talk with them, the internet will.

#### Young people think the way adults talk about porn needs to change

Through this research, young people have provided guidance for how to talk about porn in a positive and effective way. Young people by and large share real, sometimes serious concerns about the influence of porn. However persistent negative messages from adults often don't match their own feelings and experiences, and that makes it harder for young people and adults to talk about porn.

Young people also talked about the taboo and stigma around sex and porn, the fear of punishment, and how these things can lead to feelings of guilt or shame. This was seen as another barrier to having supportive and open conversations.

#### Young people want information about porn to be part of sexuality education in schools

Young people advocated for information about porn to be included as part of comprehensive sexuality education. They felt this should be available to all, not just schools who decide to offer it.

Our participants' own experience with sexuality education was varied, but they viewed this as the most effective measure society can take to mitigate the potential harms of porn.

#### Young people think access to porn is too easy

The young people participating in this study often thought they were too young when they first saw porn, and most saw a need for change in how porn is accessed. This was broadly consistent with findings from our 2018 survey *NZ Youth and Porn*, in which we found that a majority (71%) of 14–17 year-old New Zealanders think that online pornography should be restricted in some way for children and teens (such as filtering content or age verification)<sup>1</sup>.

While some participants supported age verification for online porn in principle, they often pointed out that such a system may be difficult or even impossible to implement in a way that stopped teens from accessing porn. Some young people thought that restrictions could apply to children only, both because the risk of harm was greater, and because children would be less likely to find ways around a restriction.

While views around age restriction were mixed, participants strongly supported the idea of content warnings, so that young people could make informed choices about what they watched. This is consistent with earlier research we have undertaken, where we found that the importance of providing good clear warnings and information to young people came through strongly<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Classification Office (2018): *NZ Youth and Porn: Research findings of a survey on how and why young New Zealanders view online pornography*. P54 <https://www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/news/latest-news/nzyouthandporn/>

<sup>2</sup> Classification Office (2017): *Young New Zealanders viewing sexual violence: Stage 3 research report: interviews with young New Zealanders*. P51 <https://www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/news/latest-news/young-new-zealanders-viewing-sexual-violence-stage-3>

## Background and objectives

### THE STORY SO FAR ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE, PORN AND RESEARCH

**Modern technology has made porn freely available to almost anyone with a smartphone or internet connection – including children and young people.**

This is a fact of life for young New Zealanders, and it's the essential underlying phenomenon that makes access to porn today so different than it was even a decade ago.

So what does this mean? There's a lot of research about porn going back decades, but the subject remains contentious in a lot of ways. Despite decades of research, there is ongoing debate about how and to what extent porn can have negative (or in some cases positive) influences on people. What we do know beyond doubt is that many young people are using porn as a way to learn about sex, and that it can have impacts on attitudes and behaviours – especially for young people who are exploring their sexuality and beginning to have intimate relationships.

We know that porn is a product made for adults, and there is significant public concern about young people watching it. There is also a general lack of awareness about where to find good information and support to balance the messages young people might receive from porn. Consequently, parents and sometimes young people are not getting the support they need.

**This is why we worked with Colmar Brunton in 2018 to undertake a nationwide, representative survey of over 2000 young people aged 14-17.**

The final report, *NZ Youth and Porn*, was published in December 2018 and provided comprehensive information on how and why young New Zealanders watch online porn. For the first time, New Zealanders had solid evidence to turn to when considering policy responses or working on educational programmes.

**There also wasn't any relevant and up-to-date information about what people tended to see in 'mainstream' or popular porn – so we took a look ourselves.**

The report of findings, *Breaking Down Porn*<sup>3</sup>, was published in December 2019 and gives us an indication of the type of porn that is popular amongst New Zealand viewers according to Pornhub. The findings of this analysis were consistent with the 2018 survey *NZ Youth and Porn*, in which young people told us about the types of sexual behaviour they commonly see in porn. This matters, because if we don't talk about porn in a way that makes sense to young people who actually have experience of porn, then we'll be talking past them, not with them.

### WHAT DOES THE CURRENT RESEARCH ADD?

**The 2018 survey** gave us an overall picture of how and why young people watch porn and how they think and feel about it. However we needed to get a more in-depth understanding of young people's experiences with porn and the impact this might have on relationships. Doing this will enable tailored approaches to resources and support, with messages that resonate with young people.

This is why we commissioned The Collaborative Trust for Research and Training in Youth Health and Development (the Collaborative Trust) to undertake a series of more than 50 in-depth interviews with New Zealanders aged 14-17 years.

The research also sought to learn more about the experiences of young New Zealanders from diverse backgrounds, with a particular focus on the experience of Māori, Pacific, non-heterosexual youth and young people with disabilities. This is important, because education for young people, and support for their whānau and community, need to be grounded in solid evidence within a New Zealand cultural context.



<sup>3</sup> Classification Office (2019): *Breaking Down Porn: A Classification Office Analysis of Commonly Viewed Pornography in NZ.* <https://www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/news/latest-news/breaking-down-porn/>



# Research method

## The research involved 52 young people aged 14–17 years from Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, and throughout New Zealand, in both urban and rural communities

The findings are primarily based on interviews (most conducted by phone, some in person) and also three written responses from young people who wanted to take part but did not want to be interviewed. The young people involved are referred to as ‘participants’ in places throughout the report. There was one paired interview – all other interviews involved a single participant.

Each young person was also asked to complete (in private) a written demographic questionnaire. The questionnaire also included some information about participants’ own experience and use of porn.

## Parental consent was not a requirement as this is known to be a key barrier to young people’s participation in research

Where young people under the age of 16 years were recruited to this study without parental consent, capacity for the young person themselves to give informed consent was assessed as part of the recruitment process<sup>4</sup>. The research was given ethics approval by the New Zealand Ethics Committee in August 2019 (NEC2019\_36).

## A multipronged approach was taken to recruitment

Recruitment was done via youth agencies, social media, relational approaches, and ‘snowball’ recruitment amongst participants’ peers.

## Thematic data analysis was undertaken by the Collaborative Trust

This formed the basis of the final report prepared by the research team at the Classification Office, which includes comparative analyses with the nationally representative survey *NZ Youth and Porn* (2018).

## A diverse group of young people were involved

- In total, 52 young people took part in the qualitative research, 40 through telephone interview, nine via a face-to-face interview, and three via electronic written response.
- Fourteen year olds made up 11% of the total, 29% were 15, 33% were 16, 27% were 17.
- 25 were female, and 27 were male (including three who identified as male and transgender).
- 63% identified as New Zealand European, 25% New Zealand Māori, 15% Pacific, 10% Asian, 4% Middle Eastern, Latin American or African, and 12% as ‘other’, comprising three European/British and three Pacific/Asian. Some young people identified as more than one ethnicity.
- 40% were heterosexual, 31% were attracted to males and females, 6% were males attracted to males only, 6% were females attracted to females only, one (2%) was asexual and 8% were unsure. Four participants did not complete this section.
- Disability status was reported by 45 of the 52 young people who took part in the research. Nine (20%) of these young people indicated that they had some form of disability.

We’re proud of the youth-centred approach to this research, and encourage anyone who’s interested in the finer details of the methodology to contact our research team at [info@classificationoffice.govt.nz](mailto:info@classificationoffice.govt.nz)



## OUR RESEARCH EXPLORED THE FOLLOWING TOPICS

- The size and scope of pornography use by young New Zealanders, including how old young people are when they first see porn, how often they see porn and the types of porn young people see
- Why young people view pornography and how it makes them feel
- Young people’s views about the potential influence of pornography on sexual behaviour or attitudes, and the use of pornography as a source of information about sex
- The types of content young people see in pornography (e.g. behaviours and narratives), how this is perceived, and how they feel about and react to the content
- What young people want in terms of education, information and support in relation to pornography
- Young people’s views about online age restrictions such as filters or age verification technology.

## Limitations

Compared with population data from *NZ Youth and Porn*, participants in the current research were more likely to be: same-sex attracted; currently in a sexual relationship (or had previously been in a sexual relationship); more frequent viewers of porn. These characteristics are associated with more positive and less restrictive views about porn. However the potential ‘positive bias’ of participants is taken into account by contextualising our current findings with statistics from the nationally representative 2018 survey.

As with any research exploring sensitive or personal topics, young people may have been more likely to express opinions or describe experiences in a way they perceive to be more socially desirable.

## Notes on terminology

Findings are based primarily on interviews with additional analysis from the demographic and porn use questionnaire. Throughout the report, findings are discussed and compared with our 2018 survey *NZ Youth and Porn*, sometimes referred to as the *2018 survey*.

Young people reported who they are usually attracted to sexually. They were not asked to identify with a sexual orientation – e.g., ‘gay’ or ‘straight’. In the report we have used the terms ‘heterosexual’ and ‘non-heterosexual’ or refer to young people who ‘experience same-sex attraction’.

Young people reported gender by selecting all options that applied to them from a list (male,

female, transgender, non-binary, and other, the latter for which they could specify). Three identified as transgender and as male. They were included in the male category for data analysis by gender. In quotes they are identified as transgender and male.

In this report, ‘youth’, ‘teen’ and ‘young people’ refers to people aged 14–17 years. Child/children generally refers to people aged 13 years and under. The report also uses the term ‘rangatahi’, meaning younger generation or youth.

When discussing findings from the 2018 survey *NZ Youth and Porn*, ‘regular’ viewers refers to people who looked at pornography at least monthly, weekly or daily. ‘Recent’ viewers refers to those who had seen any pornography in the past six months.

For the purposes of this research, pornography was defined using the same definition used in the 2018 survey *NZ Youth and Porn*: “By porn, we mean explicit images, video, or movies of a person or people having real sex or doing sexual things and you can see their genitals (e.g. penis, vagina).”

In this report we use the shortened term “porn” rather than “pornography”. This is for readability, and also because this is usually the word young people use.

<sup>4</sup> We consulted our Youth Advisory Panel about the consent process, read more about this in Appendix 1 (page 51)

# YOUNG PEOPLE ARE GROWING UP WITH PORN



**"It makes me a bit sad cos I wish I hadn't had to see that at that age. I would have understood it better and had a different reaction if I was older."**

FEMALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

**"Obviously, the majority of people do it because it's pleasurable but I feel some people watch it to better understand what it is and how to perform in the bedroom."**

FEMALE, 16, PACIFIC & ASIAN

**"You can't have that conversation unless it's seen as the norm that people would stumble upon it."**

MALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN & PACIFIC

**"The majority, specifically boys, stumble upon porn at an early age. We're talking primary school... or early high school. At that age, there's really no one to talk to and that's the struggle."**

MALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

**"I think boys feel generally less ashamed because it just seems more normal."**

MALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

**"When I hang out with my guy mates, they don't really care and they talk about it openly but I'd hardly ever hear any of my girl mates talk about it."**

FEMALE, 17, MĀORI & PACIFIC

**"It's incredibly accessible at any time and place, even on your phone, so if you want to seek out literally any content of even a niche nature, you can."**

FEMALE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

**"Some people might use it to fill up their loneliness, some people might use it to make themselves feel satisfied, some people might just do it because their friends do it."**

MALE, 14, PACIFIC & ASIAN

# When young people first see porn

## How and why do young people first see porn?

This research is about the experience of young people age 14-17 years, but we're going to start by talking about children. In our 2018 study *NZ Youth and Porn*, we found that the national average age for seeing porn for the first time is 13 years old. The majority of young people we heard from in the current research told us they first saw porn as kids aged 12 or under, the youngest age mentioned being under four years. That said, some participants only saw porn for the first time as teens, the oldest age mentioned being 15 years.

In interviews for this report, it was quite common for young people to have seen porn for the first time by accident. Young people said this sometimes happens through pop-ups, mis-clicks or viruses.

Several young people saw porn for the first time when another young person showed it to them, and a small number of participants were first shown porn by an adult. In these extreme situations porn can be used or, as one young person said, "weaponised" by an adult as a form of sexual abuse.

Where participants talked about the age at which children and young people generally start seeing porn, a number identified children as more likely to see porn if they had seen older siblings access porn or heard them talk about it, or had adult family members in the household who had it on their devices.

**"I guess it's a little bit sad because I feel like I really did not need to be seeing that kind of thing at that age. I guess as I'm older now, I'd probably handle it a bit better than I did back then."**

FEMALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

**"Again, I think it depends on the person but probably shocked. I actually accidentally saw some porn once cos this guy in my class was showing it around. I was grossed out because it was just really honestly gross. That was my reaction personally. I really think it depends on the person."**

FEMALE, 14, NZ EUROPEAN & ASIAN



**"It's far too easy for any 12 year old to hear the word porn...and suddenly they're welcomed with seven million sites all showing images."**

MALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

While children and young people are more likely to see porn for the first time by accident or to be shown it by someone else, it's also quite common for them to go looking for it<sup>5</sup>. In interviews, young people told us the most common reason for this was curiosity.

The next most common reason mentioned was to keep up with peers or fit in, or simply to "see what everyone's talking about", especially in the early teen years. A small number of participants mentioned that young people might first look for porn in response to peer pressure.

### INSIGHTS FROM OUR 2018 SURVEY NZ YOUTH AND PORN

One in four children aged 12 or younger had seen porn. A majority of young people have seen porn by age 14 and most have seen it by age 17.

Fewer than one in four 14-17 year olds were intentionally looking for porn when they first saw it. It was more common to have seen it by accident or to be shown it by another person.

## What's it like seeing porn for the first time?

Seeing porn for the first time, a child or young person is most likely to feel confusion, especially if they have seen it by accident. Also widely identified were feelings of embarrassment, shock, or a feeling of weirdness and discomfort. These more negative feelings were seen as particularly likely for children especially, and for young people yet to receive pubertal change or sex education at home or school. Less commonly, young people mentioned distress, sadness, fear, intrigue and excitement as feelings likely to be experienced when first seeing it. Some felt that young people's reactions vary with mindset, maturity, and reason for looking. In general, while the impact was almost always seen as negative, it was rarely associated with long term distress.

**"I think a lot of it is definitely confusion because I don't know what this is. I've never talked about it. It doesn't really explain anything, it just is."**

MALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN & PACIFIC

## What do young people think about children seeing porn?

Most of our interviewees felt that children should not see porn. Furthermore, it was quite common for young people to think they saw porn too young, and would have preferred to have been older when they first saw it.

The young people interviewed were in agreement that it would be unlikely that a child would talk to an adult about what they had seen. The most common reason given was a fear of getting into trouble and worrying that they had done something naughty, even if they had seen porn by accident.

The remainder of the report is focused on young people aged 14-17 years. Sometimes the findings relate to people younger than this, and if so we will generally use the term 'children' specifically.

**"I think it's extremely negative for a kid at 12 to be exposed to that cos they haven't really done their thing, they haven't really lived."**

MALE, 17, MĀORI & PACIFIC

**"If someone was sending you threatening messages on the internet, you'd say, 'Mum, this person's being scary.' If you had a porn pop up, that's probably a lot scarier to tell your parents."**

FEMALE, 16, MĀORI & NZ EUROPEAN

### INSIGHTS FROM OUR 2018 SURVEY NZ YOUTH AND PORN

One in three felt it was ok for teens to look at porn, but nine in ten agreed that it's not ok for children.

<sup>5</sup> *NZ Youth and Porn* (2018), P27.

# The place of porn in young people's lives

## The normalisation of porn

Porn is seen as highly accessible, and has to a large extent become normalised for young people. Young people can easily access a huge volume and variety of free porn via their smartphones and other devices, and almost all the young people we heard from had seen porn. Participants generally assumed that most young people will have seen porn, and that some young people choose to watch it and do so regularly. Even if they did not watch porn themselves, young people felt that others' porn use was a matter of personal choice. This sense of normalisation is also strengthened by some young people showing porn to others in and outside of school, sharing porn memes on social media for laughs, and by talking about porn with friends (mostly by boys and in a joking kind of way).

**"It's going to happen, it's inevitable. They're going to view it and it's just maybe not so natural in porn but it's a thing. Humans do it."**

MALE, 14, NZ EUROPEAN

**"One of them's going with a Christian at the moment and he watches porn if that is what you're asking. The other one is doing drugs all the time and he watches porn and then another one is very very successful in school and very smart and getting Excellences in all his classes and he watches porn."**

FEMALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

## DIVERSITY, CULTURE AND ETHNICITY

The young people we heard from had diverse experiences and views about porn irrespective of their ethnic or cultural backgrounds. This is consistent with findings from our 2018 survey *NZ Youth and Porn*, in which few significant differences emerged relating to ethnicity: young people tended to see porn about as often, to look at porn for similar reasons, to use it as a way to learn about sex, and to have similar views about the influence of porn.

More generally, we found that it is not possible to make assumptions about porn use – or about an individual's views about porn – based on things like gender, sexuality, ethnic background or religion.



**"It's just so easy to get your hands on it. I think where it stands is it's a big part of our generation at the moment, I guess."**

FEMALE, 17, MĀORI & PACIFIC

Some participants talked about porn as something that young people are likely to see – and sometimes choose to watch – regardless of background, and this was reflected in the experience and views of the diverse group of young people we heard from.

When asked about culture a number of young people highlighted its inter-connection with religion, and appeared to see religious beliefs and traditions as more important when considering the issues around porn for young people. We discuss views about the role of religion on page 43.

**"I feel that cultural differences don't necessarily change the ratio of people who watch it but they change how it is addressed."**

FEMALE, 16, PACIFIC & ASIAN

## HOW COMMON IS REGULAR VIEWING?

Young people's experience with porn ranged from those who almost never see it, to those who tend to watch it multiple times a week or even daily. Interview findings suggest that the frequency with which young people are seeing porn varies widely, and also that viewing habits often vary significantly over time.

Of those participants who chose to watch porn, around half indicated consistent, regular porn use over time, while the other half showed declining use. Young people talked about their use of porn changing over time for various reasons, for example watching porn less often after getting a boyfriend or girlfriend. This is consistent with the 2018 survey in that just under half of regular viewers reported going through stages where the amount of porn they watched would vary over time.

It appears to be common for porn use to change over time for some young people, and the evidence does not support a widespread linear progression of ever-increasing porn viewing over time. Some young people do express concerns about how much porn they or others watch, and we discuss this later in the report (see page 33).

## INSIGHTS FROM OUR 2018 SURVEY NZ YOUTH AND PORN

15% of 14–17 year olds saw porn at least monthly, and 8% saw porn at least weekly.

Most young people usually spend between a few minutes to half an hour looking at porn. Of those who have recently seen porn, 3% usually watch it for more than an hour.

**"If they first start watching it, they'll watch it heaps and then they'll just get bored with it and then they'll only watch it once a week. I guess it just depends when they were saying that. Most people that have been watching it for a while, I'd say are only watching it once a week now."**

FEMALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

## How young people watch porn

Almost all young people involved in the research owned a smartphone and had access to good quality wifi at home. Many also accessed wifi at other locations. Consistent with the 2018 survey, those who watched porn most commonly did so on their smartphones, and most often on their own at home.

Around two thirds of the participants identified the sites that they personally used to look at porn. Findings revealed that Pornhub was by far the most popular place to watch porn, as was the case in recent UK research<sup>6</sup>. Few other dedicated porn websites were mentioned at all.

**"I know that people sometimes see porn accidentally but that's more of a symptom of the problem, it's so common you can just stumble across it, regular porn watching is the real root issue, if you regard it as an issue."**

FEMALE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

**"If the kids want to find it, then they will find it."**

MALE, 17, MĀORI & PACIFIC

<sup>6</sup> BBFC (2020): *Young people, Pornography & Age-verification*. P4 <https://www.bbfc.co.uk/about-classification/research>

Perceptions of online safety were mentioned by some young people as a reason for favouring a specific site – for example concern about viruses, ads, and “dodgy” content.

A few young people mentioned Reddit, which is not a dedicated porn website but was described by one person as offering porn content of more extreme genres and fetishes. We discuss how young people navigate and feel about the content of porn in more detail on page 30.

**“We are smart and I want to have the most legitimate in terms of cyber safety. You don’t want to give yourself a virus. On those dodgy sites or less well-known sites, there can be a lot of bad material, like animal abuse and heaps of other bad stuff...The internet is a big place and there’s all this screwed up stuff on there. That’s why Pornhub is the main.”**

MALE, 17, MĀORI & PACIFIC

**HOW PORN IS ACCESSED - ALONE OR WITH OTHERS**

Consistent with our 2018 survey, participants were far more likely to watch porn on their own, and this was generally seen as the most common situation for people to watch it, with some young people feeling that it would be “weird” seeing porn with other people. That said, a number of them had also seen porn with friends, though this was talked about as more of a joke rather than a sexual context. Around 20 of the young people we talked to were currently in a sexual relationship, but very few mentioned ever watching porn with a partner.

**“I don’t think, at least in my experience, people watch porn together.”**

FEMALE, 16, PACIFIC & ASIAN



# Why young people watch porn

Participants had a variety of reasons for watching porn, with porn commonly seen as a masturbation aid. It was also common for young people to look at porn out of curiosity and to see it as a learning tool or a way of exploring their sexuality. These reasons aren’t mutually exclusive – for example young people will often look at porn for sexual arousal while also using it as a way to learn about sex.

**Sexual arousal and masturbation**

It was very common for participants to have looked at porn for sexual arousal or pleasure, and this was often talked about in interviews.

This is consistent with our 2018 survey, which showed that eight in ten regular viewers looked at porn for sexual arousal or pleasure<sup>7</sup>.

Some young people mentioned the activity of masturbation specifically, while others used more euphemistic language.

In interviews, participants didn’t tend to go into much detail about why young people watch porn for sexual pleasure and masturbation. The strong implication was that they assumed it to be obvious why people watched porn for these reasons.

**“Jerking off, quite literally is what I mean.”**

MALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

**“Obviously, if it didn’t turn people on or whatever, no one would watch it. If it didn’t have some positives, again, no one would be watching it.”**

FEMALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

**“I would say the stress relief cos our high school, we live in a very tense ... you have to pass, you have to do this, you have to do this, have to do this. It’s always go, go, go. Having some kind of stress relief can be seen as a positive.”**

MALE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

**“At a younger age, I think, it’d be more about curiosity for both sexes and as you get older, it becomes more about the enjoyment.”**

FEMALE, 16, MĀORI

When they were more descriptive, young people tended to use language around biological urges or hormones, particularly in relation to males.

It was also quite common to describe watching porn as a form of relaxation, a way of dealing with stress, or a sleep aid.

**INSIGHTS FROM OUR 2018 SURVEY NZ YOUTH AND PORN**

Young people choose to look at porn for a variety of reasons, the most common being curiosity, entertainment, sexual arousal or pleasure, boredom, ‘for a laugh’, to see what someone else is looking at, for information and ideas about sex, and ‘because my friends look at porn’.

<sup>7</sup> NZ Youth and Porn (2018), P47.



### Curiosity and learning about sex

It was quite common for participants to have looked at porn for information and ideas about sex. They had mixed views about whether it was helpful as a learning tool, yet most of them thought that porn had at least sometimes been helpful for this.

A number of young people described using porn as a way to understand how to perform different sexual acts, but also learn about people's bodies and get an idea of what sex is like.

Several mentioned that porn is useful for those who prefer to find things out in private rather than asking someone, with one commenting that porn is a less embarrassing information source than alternatives.

Many participants talked about how young people turn to porn to learn things when they have not had sex explained to them either by parents or at school. Young people often mentioned that porn was the easiest option for those whose parents do not want to have conversations around sex, and whose schools do not "do sex education well". Having said this, participants also noted that even when sex education was done well, porn might still be seen as an additional source of information for some young people.

Porn was sometimes seen as a helpful learning tool, but overall young people tended to think that porn wasn't a good way for young people to learn about sex and relationships. As a number of young people pointed out, porn is not designed as a learning tool and so is not fit for this purpose. Reasons for why porn is not a helpful learning tool are explored in more depth from page 34.

**"It should never be assumed that is a learning tool, in the same way that *Lord of the Rings* isn't a great learning tool about the setting of New Zealand."**

MALE AND TRANSGENDER, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

#### INSIGHTS FROM OUR 2018 SURVEY NZ YOUTH AND PORN

Non-heterosexual youth were more likely to think porn can have positive influences, nearly twice as likely to say they learn about sex from porn, and twice as likely to have tried something they've seen in porn.

They were also significantly more likely to think the information they received at school about sex was 'not that useful' or 'not at all useful'.

### Exploring sexuality

Alongside sexual arousal and learning about sex, it was common for young people involved in the research to have looked at porn as a way to explore their own sexuality. Although feedback was mixed, most of them thought that porn was sometimes helpful in this way.

Exploring this in interviews, several young people talked about porn as a way to figure out what they enjoy sexually. Some commented that porn helped them feel more confident about their sexuality and sexual interests.

**"It definitely had a huge role in helping young people figuring out their sexuality. It has for me as well. Watching or looking at different kinds of porn does help you figure out what your preferences are."**

MALE, NZ EUROPEAN, ATTRACTED TO MALES AND FEMALES

**"In school, the most you can talk about is how reproduction works. You know gay sex doesn't really fit into that."**

MALE AND TRANSGENDER, 14, NZ EUROPEAN

It was quite common for young people to talk about porn as being helpful as a way to figure out who they are attracted to, and to explore their sexuality more generally. Young people who experience same-sex attraction were much more likely to mention this and to think of this as something positive about porn. This may in part be due to the mainly heterosexual focus of sex education, which several participants raised as an issue.

When thinking about young people who experience same-sex attraction, porn was sometimes seen as more useful for males specifically, with some commenting that while there was porn made for gay men, 'lesbian porn' tended to be aimed at a heterosexual male audience.

While porn could be useful for these reasons, several non-heterosexual young people identified porn as the place to go simply because there were no alternative information sources known or accessible to them.

It was quite common for participants to have watched porn as a way of helping them understand the sexuality of other people, and a few mentioned that young people might look at porn to understand what sex between same-sex partners might be like.

Others suggested that porn can be helpful in reducing a sense of taboo or negativity around sex and sexuality generally.

It was also quite common for young people to think that porn was unhelpful for figuring out attraction and sexuality, suggesting that young people need to explore attraction in real life and that porn gives mixed messages and does not portray any sexuality accurately. Some mentioned that just because something is arousing to watch, it does not mean you would like it in real life.

**"I think it's a very very important part of people developing their sexuality, that they have to look at this material. Well, they don't have to but it's a useful way for them to understand other people's sexuality, why people are gay, why people are lesbian, why people are transgender but also to discover themselves."**

MALE, NZ EUROPEAN, ATTRACTED TO MALES AND FEMALES

**"Sex can be scary for a lot of young people and I guess going into it for the first time with never having seen any examples or references to it could just be confusing, scary and upsetting."**

FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN & MĀORI, ATTRACTED TO MALES AND FEMALES

**"With the pressuring side of things...I know I've stayed at a mate's place and they've stayed at my place and they've done stuff like that. This was back when I was 14 or younger even and they've grabbed out their phone and they've been like, "Look at this."**

MALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

### Seeing porn unintentionally

Seeing porn by accident was often raised as an issue for children, although it was seldom raised as an issue that concerns those over 13.

Likewise, being shown porn by others was seldom raised as an issue that concerns those aged over 13. However, when it did happen it could be a very negative experience for young people – for example one participant had been pressured into watching porn by friends and a boyfriend.

#### INSIGHTS FROM OUR 2018 SURVEY NZ YOUTH AND PORN

Six in ten recent viewers of porn sometimes saw it by accident, and one in five sometimes 'felt pressured by someone else to look at it with them'.

## Porn and gender

We know there are real differences between boys and girls when it comes to viewing habits and frequency. Our 2018 study found that boys were more likely to watch porn more often, although the reasons for watching porn were broadly similar between boys and girls. However, in this study we were struck by how boys and girls experience very different expectations and double standards around their sexuality and use of porn.

**“Porn has such a stigma around it that’s so negative, especially for girls and girls my age. It’s just so negative. I think that’s why people don’t talk about it so much.”**

FEMALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

### Gender differences in watching porn

While it was quite common for girls to sometimes look at porn, it was much more common for boys to watch it frequently. Just under a third of male participants reported watching porn daily or almost daily, while no girls reported this. This reflects the gender differences in porn use we found in our 2018 survey.

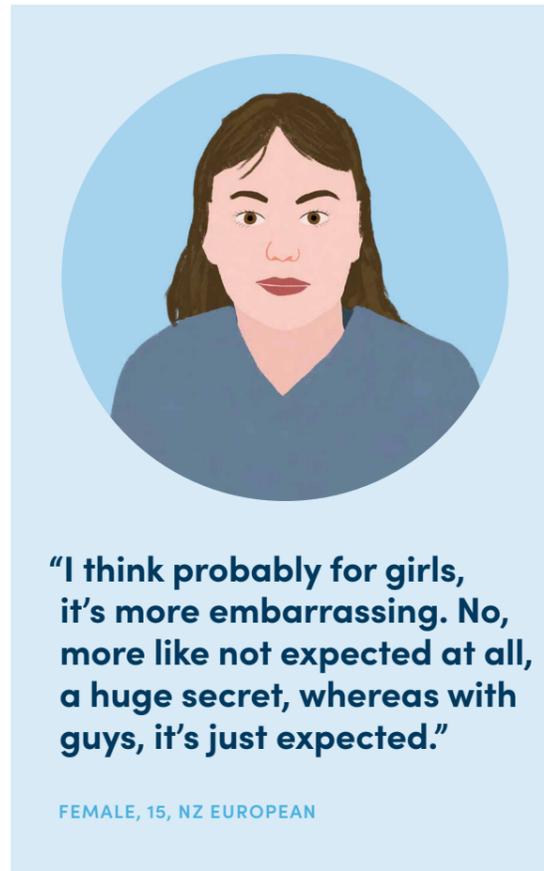
#### INSIGHTS FROM OUR 2018 SURVEY NZ YOUTH AND PORN

Boys were twice as likely to view porn at least monthly, and four times as likely to view at least weekly. One in twenty boys saw porn at least once a day, compared with less than 1% of girls.

### Similarities in why boys and girls look at porn

In terms of why boys and girls look at porn – and how it makes them feel – the similarities are greater than the differences. Our 2018 survey showed that boys and girls look at porn for a variety of reasons, including curiosity, boredom, and learning about sex. Of regular viewers, 84% of boys and 66% of girls had looked at porn for sexual arousal or pleasure<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> NZ Youth and Porn (2018), P47.



**“I think probably for girls, it’s more embarrassing. No, more like not expected at all, a huge secret, whereas with guys, it’s just expected.”**

FEMALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

**“A lot of the time, people have these weird unreal expectations of girls on how they don’t masturbate or the only thing they like is sex and all of that, when in reality, that is not true.”**

FEMALE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN & MĀORI & PACIFIC

In interviews for our current research, both boys and girls talked about looking at porn for a variety of reasons, and often mentioned sexual arousal or pleasure. Just under half of female participants and two-thirds of males had looked at porn for this reason.

### Young people’s perceptions of gender differences in porn use

Young people’s perceptions of gender differences are broadly in line with actual reported differences in relation to boys watching it more often. The majority of young people thought it was much more common for boys to look at porn often.

**“I think guys watch it way more because me and my friends that are girls, we don’t watch that sort of stuff. We’re not into that.”**

FEMALE, 15, MĀORI

**“Boys definitely look at it more frequently. I think that might have something to do with their little private sessions happen a lot more frequently.”**

MALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

A number of boys couldn’t say why girls might look at porn, and how much they might be watching, because they had never heard girls talk about it. In contrast, none of the girls struggled to talk about how and why boys might be seeing porn.

It was quite common for young people, regardless of gender, to talk about fundamental differences in why boys and girls watch porn. Boys were often seen as more likely to watch porn for sexual pleasure and masturbation, while girls were seen as more likely to look at porn to understand or learn about sex and sexuality. A number of participants explained these differences as innate and due to hormonal or genetic differences, with boys perceived as having higher sex drives. However, this view was balanced by other participants who believed boys and girls do watch porn for the same reasons.

#### INSIGHTS FROM OUR 2018 SURVEY NZ YOUTH AND PORN

Most young people (85%) think it’s common for boys their age to look at porn, while only around half as many (41%) think it’s common for girls. 39% think it’s very common for boys, and 8% think it’s very common for girls.

### Taboo, stigma and the double standard

In interviews, many young people expressed a perception that girls and boys faced different societal expectations around porn use. Watching porn was generally seen as more acceptable for boys, while girls described a sense of taboo or stigma around porn use. This was seen in the wider context of a double standard about sex and sexuality generally. Several young people identified this as a reason why girls’ porn use is less understood or even acknowledged.

**“I feel like girls would be using it for the same reason as boys do.”**

FEMALE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

**“We know that women masturbate and watch porn, the same as men. I’m hoping women won’t be shamed for it like men aren’t shamed for it.”**

FEMALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

The tendency to underplay girls’ sexual interest, including interest in porn, is frustrating for many young people, girls in particular. For those girls who do look at porn for sexual pleasure, it is seen as unhelpful and unfair to hear repeated messages about porn being normal for boys, and (explicitly or implicitly) ‘abnormal’ for girls.

**“With boys, if they do, it’s not that big a deal, whereas the reason girls don’t expect it from other girls is it’s not that common. I think because they just assume that they don’t, then they feel like it’s a bad thing. That might add to the embarrassment and the reason they don’t want to talk about it and be open with that kind of thing.”**

FEMALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

Consequently, girls tend to talk with their peers about porn in very different ways than boys do. Boys were often perceived as talking about porn considerably more than girls (generally in a joking kind of way), in much the same way that they talk about sex and sexuality a lot more than girls. Relating to this is the perception that it's easier for boys to talk about porn use without being judged. This fear of judgement means girls in general are much more guarded in the way they talk about porn and sex.

**“People normalise boys watching porn a lot more than girls. In the media, you always see male characters and they’re the ones looking at porn rather than female characters and stuff.”**

FEMALE, 14, NZ EUROPEAN & ASIAN

## Discussion

It is clear that there are significant differences in terms of the number of girls who watch porn often when compared with boys. But female participants felt it was more difficult for girls and young women to discuss sex, sexuality, and porn openly. This may intensify feelings of shame or guilt around these sensitive issues.

**“I think it’s slowly working towards where people are realising that girls also have hormones, believe it or not. They’re just better at concealing them.”**

FEMALE, 16, MĀORI

It's also not possible to assume or predict a person's experience or views about porn, whether positive or negative, based on gender – as demonstrated by the quotes throughout this report.

The findings suggest that if we as a society – young people and adults – want to deal effectively with issues around porn, then we may need to focus less on assumed differences and more on the experiences people of various genders share in common. We need to talk in a way that resonates with individuals who do watch porn – rather than creating barriers to open conversation based on ideas around gender that can work to perpetuate a sense of stigma for girls in particular.



# YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS ON THE IMPACT OF PORN



"I certainly think it can ruin the first encounters with intimacy, especially if it was two people who had been watching porn and it was all they knew."

MALE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

"What you might see somebody achieving in a porno is not going to be something that you'll be able to achieve as a 17 year old having sex for the first time."

FEMALE, 16, PACIFIC & ASIAN

"I think that porn devalues sex and devalues intimacy."

FEMALE, 16, PACIFIC & ASIAN

"I think there is a real big stigma around "you have a small dick, you have a small penis". That's all from porn, because that wouldn't have been a major thing if it wasn't for porn."

MALE, 17, MĀORI & PACIFIC

"If...they would just watch porn to try and learn about consent, they wouldn't have a clue."

FEMALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

"...a vast majority of the teenagers who do watch porn...they're not addicted to it. They just do it for recreation, fun, to have a look."

MALE, 17, MĀORI & PACIFIC

"They say, [porn] is the cause of these problems in young people's relationships ... but the reality is a lot deeper than that...there's all these different factors and porn is just one of them."

MALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

"I think that people... just want to enjoy sex. If they see "I shouldn't be taking control cos I'm the girl" and "I shouldn't be doing whatever cos I'm the guy or girl", then they won't be able to have fun with it."

FEMALE, 15, MĀORI

# Personal experience, feelings, and impacts of porn

## How young people think and feel about the content of porn

The content of porn was discussed in various contexts during interviews – for example regarding why porn might make a person feel uncomfortable, its use as a learning tool, and influences on sex and relationships.

Young people were sometimes vague or even guarded about sharing information about the types of content they had seen in porn. For example, they might talk about content being 'weird', 'kink' or even 'gross', while not being more specific. That said, enough information was provided to get a fairly clear picture of the types of content seen and how they feel about it.

It was commonly reported by participants that interests can change over time, depending on whether they're driven by curiosity and a desire to learn a particular thing, general exploration, or seeking content for purposes of arousal and sexual pleasure. While most had a favourite site, some would supplement this with other sites for wider variety or because they showed particular types of content that the young person wanted to see.

### INSIGHTS FROM OUR 2018 SURVEY NZ YOUTH AND PORN

Young people report a variety of feelings when they look at porn. The most common being curious, sexually aroused or turned on, worried about being caught, happy or positive, and relaxed.

Of those who watch porn regularly, 23% often saw violence or aggression towards a woman and 9% towards a man, and 19% of regular viewers often saw some form of non-consensual behaviour.



**“They just looked so perfect and it made me think, ‘My God, this is what guys are seeing and I do not look anything like this.’ It just made me feel so sad.”**

FEMALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

### WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE SEE IN PORN

It was common for participants to be aware of a variety of porn-genres available on major porn websites. A number of young people also seemed to be familiar with a wide range of niche sites catering to unusual and extreme porn.

It was common to hear young people talk of looking for different content as they got older. It appeared to be more common for participants to see extreme content when they were younger (early high school age) but actively avoided it later as they became more selective.

### INSIGHTS FROM OUR 2019 PORNHUB ANALYSIS BREAKING DOWN PORN

In our 2019 content analysis of the most popular videos on Pornhub, 10% of videos contained some form of physically aggressive behaviour, and 35% contained some form of non-consensual behaviour.

Young people often said they didn't like aggressive or non-consensual porn. This reflects findings from our 2018 survey *NZ Youth and Porn*, which showed that while young people who watch porn are likely to see non-consensual or aggressive behaviour, they are unlikely to see this often. Taken together, findings suggest that it may be relatively uncommon for young people to seek out this sort of content.

A number of young people expressed a desire for porn to cater to a broader audience and to be less focused on the sexual interests of heterosexual males. Some mentioned that this is why a lot of content feels unappealing for females to watch. Others mentioned a desire to see 'ethical', realistic porn but that this was very hard to find. 'Lesbian porn' was singled out by some as being fetishised and made for heterosexual males, with little lesbian porn available designed for a lesbian audience.

**“A lot of things on there, even if you looked up lesbian porn, it seems odd but it's all just male oriented still. A lot of the things that happen in that genre aren't actually what would happen. It would be more just to please a man that was watching that.”**

FEMALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

### WHAT CONTENT MAKES YOUNG PEOPLE UNCOMFORTABLE?

In the 2018 survey *NZ Youth and Porn*, it was quite common for young people to report at least sometimes feeling uncomfortable with content they see in porn. We explored this in interviews, and it appears that young people are commonly concerned about content perceived as aggressive, non-consensual or degrading.

Consequently, most young people we heard from tended to avoid this content. Young people's views about the impact of this type of content are discussed later in this report.

**“You don't want to go and look up amateur or something like that because then it's typically people who are quite young. It's a little bit like, 'maybe not' cos it's a bit uncomfortable seeing someone like that.”**

MALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

Content perceived as violent, 'extreme' or illegal tended to be seen as less common yet potentially of higher impact on a person. This was a concern for a number of participants, regardless of whether they had personally seen it. Examples mentioned include incest, rape porn, underage content or child abuse material.

A number of young people talked about the genre of 'step porn' (sex between performers playing the role of step siblings or parents). This was seen as concerning for the messages it sends about sex within families, and identified as a specific type of content that is likely to make young people uncomfortable.

**“I do notice that lots of the porn actors are all white. They're all Pākehā and then the ones that you do see that have more coloured skin, they're fetishised cos in normal porn videos, it'll have a random title, like Teacher ... if it's a white girl but then if it's a girl with more coloured skin, it'll say Ebony or it'll have Latina in the title or Asian in the title, which is extremely fetishised.”**

FEMALE, 17, MĀORI & PACIFIC

A small number of participants mentioned concern about racial or minority stereotypes being promoted in porn. These young people felt that cultural stereotypes portraying men of colour as aggressive or violent, and women of colour often as subservient or as victims, reinforced unhelpful cultural stereotypes, and could easily make non-European young people feel bad about themselves.

### HOW YOUNG PEOPLE DEAL WITH CONTENT THEY DON'T LIKE

Young people are not passive viewers of porn. Participants tended to take steps to avoid seeing content they don't want to see by visiting sites they trust and know how to navigate.

A small number of participants did mention feeling a lack of control over what they saw in porn, especially when they first started looking at it. One voiced concerns that algorithms on the porn sites incrementally directed viewers into more extreme content.

When asked about dealing with content that makes them uncomfortable, participants said they have the option of switching off the video and looking at something else.

**"It just made me feel gross and I just exited out of the tab and then and I felt better 10 seconds later."**

FEMALE, 17, PACIFIC & ASIAN

### IS PORN REALISTIC?

The vast majority of young people interviewed thought that porn is not a realistic portrayal of sex or relationships. This reinforces the findings in our 2018 survey *NZ Youth and Porn*, in which young people, unprompted and irrespective of gender, age or background, raised the 'unrealistic', 'fake' or 'false' nature of porn and the impact this could have on people. This was by far the most commonly mentioned negative influence of porn.

Young people told us they knew that porn was fake. However, they weren't sure that every other young person knew that.

It was common for young people to talk about views on the 'realism' of porn changing as people mature. A number of participants expressed the view that once young people became sexually active, many would realise that porn was not realistic, lessening its impact.

**"It's not healthy, its not real and neither is her orgasm."**

FEMALE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

### Body image and self-confidence

A number of participants had at some point looked at porn "to compare their body with someone else's". This is understandable, as for many young people, porn may be the only place where they commonly see other people naked.

However, only a few reported that porn had been helpful for this purpose, with two commenting in interviews that porn can help you see and understand differences in body types.

**"The average porn star's dick is eight and a half or more. That can really ruin someone's self-confidence."**

MALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

It was much more common for young people to mention porn's negative impacts on body image and self-confidence. Boys and girls were concerned that watching porn could make young people feel more self-conscious about their bodies. The young people thought it would be common for girls to feel bad about their bodies after watching porn because their bodies did not match up to the 'ideal' portrayed in porn. While for boys, the main focus of this concern was on comparisons of penis size.

These concerns existed even when young people were clearly aware most men and women do not look like professional porn stars. For example, boys were aware that men in porn tend to have larger than average penises, but this did not lessen feelings of inadequacy as they still worried about the perceived expectations of potential partners.



### Concern about watching porn often and 'porn addiction'<sup>9</sup>

Most participants did not feel concerned about how much porn they watched, though some did mention friends or people they knew being over-reliant or addicted to porn.

A few young people said that they had sometimes wanted to look at porn less often, but they did not feel particularly worried about it.

While few participants had concerns with how much porn they watched, they often raised the issue of 'porn addiction'. They held varying views on what the term meant, from simply meaning watching porn often, to a strong physical and mental reliance on porn. Some expressed anxiety about the prospect of becoming addicted in the future, likening porn to a highly addictive substance, such as nicotine.

#### INSIGHTS FROM OUR 2018 SURVEY NZ YOUTH AND PORN

Viewing porn daily or even weekly is quite uncommon regardless of gender, and young people seldom spend more than a few minutes or up to half an hour watching it.

Around one in four daily viewers reported often wanting to spend less time looking at porn and finding this difficult – this accounts for fewer than 1% of 14-17 year olds.

While awareness of 'porn addiction' appeared to be common, no young people described themselves as 'addicted' to porn.

Two young people described a current problematic relationship with porn use. This related to mental health issues, concerns about the content they were watching, or their feelings about the negative influence of porn. Another young person described having been addicted as a child to certain types of sexual content available on YouTube.

Overall, participants had not experienced 'porn addiction' and saw it as uncommon and mostly a male issue where it did exist.

**"I think it's not an issue as in it's widespread and dangerous but I think for people that are affected by it, it's definitely an issue."**

FEMALE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN & MĀORI

**"I don't think I've ever found it hard to spend less time looking at porn. I'm thinking mainly about when I decided to stop watching it altogether, that was a really easy step and I just stopped."**

MALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN



<sup>9</sup> We use this term in quotations as 'porn addiction' is not currently recognised as a diagnosable addiction or mental health disorder.

## The impact on sex and relationships

The young people we heard from thought porn could have an impact on their own sex life and the sex lives of others. While views were mixed, overall they tended to see the influence of porn as more likely to be negative<sup>10</sup>.

Participants in the current research identified a number of positive impacts. These included young people trying things that look fun and pleasurable to see how they feel, and giving young people new to sex an idea of what to do.

Participants tended to have a more negative view of porn's influence overall. Common concerns related to the unrealistic nature of porn and how this can create false expectations or ideas about sex and relationships in real life. They felt this might impact on consent and communication, safe sex, body image, gender roles, and the experience of sex and intimacy.

**"I think that porn only covers the sexual aspect of relationships and it doesn't even do that very well."**

MALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

**"It potentially gives people a bad idea of what sex is and how it works because it doesn't encompass things like consent and safe sex and things like that."**

MALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

**"I think people take a lot of what they see in porn a bit too literally and they try to use that in real life, which in a lot of cases there's a very small chance that that can actually end well."**

MALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN



**"When they're inexperienced at sex, they think that's what you're supposed to do, which is pretty wrong honestly."**

MALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

### GENDER ROLES AND STEREOTYPES

Young people often mentioned what they view as problematic stereotypes of the dominant or aggressive male and the submissive female. This is something noticed and talked about by both girls and boys. Some commented that heterosexual portrayals are particularly likely to be problematic in terms of gender roles and how women are treated, while a few mentioned that non-heterosexual porn also commonly depicted problematic stereotypes.

It was widely acknowledged by young people that both boys and girls may be influenced by gender roles seen in porn – and that young people who act out behaviour in porn often do so because they think their partner will enjoy it.

In this way the young people we heard from provided a counter-narrative to the simplistic view that the negative influence of porn is fundamentally about boys (who watch porn) acting badly towards girls (who don't).

### PORN'S INFLUENCE ON REAL-LIFE SEX

Participants told us that some young people are using porn to figure out what feels good for them and their sexual partners.

However many felt that using porn as a guide could lead to negative experiences as they begin to explore sex. Some mentioned that just because something is arousing to watch, it does not mean you would like it in real life. Some also said that porn only shows sex and ignores other aspects of a relationship.

Both boys and girls tended to expect that porn influences the things young people do and how they act during sex, sometimes in ways that are not enjoyable for either partner. As some young people said, this turns sex into a kind of performance. One participant commented that porn makes it harder to just enjoy sex naturally, and another that young people may feel that they need to conform to what they see in porn.

They often saw this as a problem and thought good communication was important to ensure sex was a positive and mutually pleasurable experience.

It was also quite common for participants to talk about porn potentially making sex disappointing. Several of the young people felt that this might especially be a risk for young people who have watched porn for a long time before becoming sexually active.

Erectile dysfunction is often linked with porn use by some commentators. Only two participants raised this as a potential issue, with one female participant saying that porn can lead to erectile dysfunction in males, and one male participant mentioning this was a concern "from what I've read".

### INSIGHTS FROM OUR 2018 SURVEY NZ YOUTH AND PORN

Young people identified a variety of ways porn can influence behaviours or attitudes – both negative and positive. By far the most common was that porn gives false expectations of sex and what is 'normal'.

**"They figured it out with their partner pretty quick simply because it wasn't very comfortable for them and so they did figure it out and asked where are you getting the idea of what to do from? From porn."**

MALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN & PACIFIC

**"It might work out for them but it might also hurt or it might not work really well. It might be like, I'll just continue with this and then it ends up with it being really an unpleasurable experience and then the person not wanting to be with them anymore or relationships and stuff."**

MALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

**"It probably won't go as smoothly as in the videos."**

FEMALE, 16, ASIAN

**"They're trained professionals and most of the time, they're not enjoying themselves. It's just acting. I feel it sets unrealistic standards for what is actually achievable and it sets unrealistic standards for what is also safe."**

FEMALE, 16, PACIFIC & ASIAN

<sup>10</sup> This reflects findings for our 2018 survey *NZ Youth and Porn*, which showed it was common to see a mix of positives and negatives, regardless of gender, but young people's views were more likely to be negative than positive (p38, *NZ Youth and Porn*).

## PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCE

Around a third of our participants had either tried something with a partner that they learned from seeing porn, or their partner had tried something with them.

It is often assumed that boys act out what they see in porn and that girls are passive participants. However we found that girls were just as likely to initiate a sexual activity from porn as their partner was. Both male and female participants were likely to have had mixed experiences with this, sometimes positive and sometimes negative.

While these findings are not representative of the wider youth population, they do show that both boys and girls are taking cues from porn and trying things out with partners.

## Views on porn – sexual violence and aggression

We did not find widespread concern that porn directly promoted or led to sexual aggression, violence, or coercion and the use of force to obtain sex<sup>11</sup>.

A small number of participants expressed a view that the depictions in porn could influence some boys to be rough and aggressive, or that it could influence boys to make their partner do something they do not want to do.

**“I’ve covered a little bit but the massive thing is just how it shapes young men as they grow up. It can breed abusive relationships. Males can grow up not knowing that women actually don’t like to be treated like this, that it’s just actors doing this.”**

MALE, 17, MĀORI & PACIFIC

**“If people are into dominance, if that’s the genre that they watch and if they’re not into it, then there’s always lots more genres that they can watch. Their behaviour shouldn’t change because of that and if they are showing the whole masculinity thing, then I don’t think that’s the porn, I think that’s them. I think that is more of an excuse.”**

FEMALE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

### INSIGHTS FROM OUR 2019 PORNHUB ANALYSIS BREAKING DOWN PORN

We found that 35% of the most popular Pornhub videos in New Zealand contained some non-consensual behaviour.

## Consent

The portrayal of consent and the impact this could have on some young people was a widespread concern amongst our participants.

Young people usually talked about this in relation to pressure or persistence, unequal power dynamics, or a lack of communication, rather than talking about rape or coercion.

Some young people thought that porn could promote a sense of sexual entitlement amongst boys, and some expressed concern about unequal power dynamics and the objectification of women in porn.

**“Well, before in porn, they don’t really say, “Are you okay with this” or, “Do you want to try this out?” They just start. They might think, I don’t need to ask, I’ll just go ahead.”**

FEMALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

**“Without showing the consent and communication, it could just have an overall communication malfunction in their relationship.”**

FEMALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

How consent was portrayed (or not) in porn was a primary reason given for why porn is an unhelpful learning tool for young people. As with other content in porn, many saw the impact as significant for some but different from person to person, and largely dependent on someone’s maturity, experience, and education.

## Safe sex and risky behaviour

Condom use in porn is rare and this was a common concern for young people. Some identified this as the single most negatively impactful influence of porn. While a number of young people talked about contraceptive measures taken by porn actors and were aware of this, they did not believe that all young people looking at porn had this background knowledge to help them make sense of what they see. This was identified as another reason why porn is an unhelpful way to learn about sex, and why sexuality education was so important.

**“If the guy was about to do something and then he quickly whipped out a condom and chucked it on, I don’t think that would make for a very attractive porno. With porn, you aren’t necessarily teaching safe practice, you’re teaching adventurous, unrealistic sex.”**

FEMALE, 16, PACIFIC & ASIAN

Regarding risky sexual behaviour, some participants mentioned that porn could have an influence on some young people to try risky things they see in porn. However, they tended to see the risk of this happening as slim, and more likely for frequent porn users. As an example, two mentioned ‘choking’ as an activity that is likely to be dangerous if someone “messes it up”.

### INSIGHTS FROM OUR 2019 PORNHUB ANALYSIS BREAKING DOWN PORN

We found that 3% of the most popular pornhub videos in New Zealand showed condoms when depicting penetrative sex.

## Discussion

### YOUNG PEOPLE TEND TO THINK NEGATIVE INFLUENCES ARE REAL – BUT THEY PLAY OUT IN COMPLEX WAYS

Most young people in our study felt that porn could have both positive and negative impacts on sex and relationships. They considered the effects would likely vary from individual to individual, and in different contexts.

Negative impacts were seen as worse for children, and those with a lack of education or experience in sex and relationships. In contrast, once young people have already had some sex education from parents or in school, or had become sexually active themselves, porn was seen as generally less impactful (while not necessarily positive).

The idea that the influence of any entertainment media – including porn – may be different according to who’s watching may seem obvious. But young people felt that adults often missed this point. Some expressed frustration at how the media (or adults more generally) sometimes talk about the negative impacts of porn in overly simplistic terms – implying that porn affects all young people in undifferentiated ways.

This has important implications for adults who want to engage with young people about these issues in an effective way, which we discuss in more detail in the next section.

<sup>11</sup> This echoes the finding of our 2018 survey, in which these were rarely mentioned as a concern for young people. Young people identified a variety of ways porn can influence behaviours or attitudes. Two percent mentioned that it normalises violent, abusive or aggressive behaviour, 1% that it normalises or glorifies violence against women, and 1% that it would encourage sexual abuse or harassment. (p62, *NZ Youth and Porn*)

# WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE WANT



"Like I said, speak openly about it. Have a normal conversation, make it a comfortable topic because it's important."

FEMALE, 17,  
NZ EUROPEAN

"I can understand where the concern comes from but for a lot of people, a great majority of young people that are watching porn, they're watching it purely for pleasure or stress relief."

FEMALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

"All the concerns are valid – I just think that they're presented in an incorrect way."

MALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN  
& PACIFIC

"Until we put people in a safe environment where they can talk about it, no one is going to because that's the culture at the moment. We don't talk about that. It's a taboo."

MALE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

"I feel like that stuff is really awkward to talk about with your parents."

FEMALE, 15,  
NZ EUROPEAN

"...you have to be open with your kids... You can't just rely on the government or the schools doing it, you have to get involved... You can't keep them bubble wrapped forever."

MALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

"The second adults hear the words sex from a 10 year-old, they shut down and go, "You don't talk about that"...they're gonna have questions if you're shutting them down like that. Obviously, you've made it clear that they can't come to you, so where else are they supposed to go."

FEMALE, 16, MĀORI

"I have a lot of faith in my friends and in my generation ...so I think if there was some education or some culture shift that people started talking about [porn], I think there would be a real change in how people treated each other."

MALE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

## Changing the conversation

Children and young people are often looking at porn by themselves, and having to make sense of what they see by themselves. This can potentially lead to negative impacts on young individuals personally, and, eventually, to their partners in intimate relationships.

Our research shows that young people are seldom having good conversations with adults – or each other – about porn. Despite this, many of them share the same concerns, and think open communication about these issues is necessary for children and young people's healthy social and sexual development.

**“Have it as something that's more open to talk about. I feel like it's not talked about. Even at a young age, if it's mentioned in sexuality class, people would feel like it's more normalised and they'd be more comfortable to go forward and talk about it with other people.”**

MALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

### YOUNG PEOPLE THINK THE WAY ADULTS TALK ABOUT PORN NEEDS TO CHANGE

Young people involved in the research shared real, sometimes serious, concerns about the influence of porn. Yet they also talked about the persistently negative and sometimes simplistic messages they heard from adults – messages that often don't fit with their own feelings and experiences.

Young people know these conversations are hard, but through this research they've provided insights that can guide positive and effective engagement.

### Barriers to communication: guilt, shame, embarrassment, and fear of punishment

Participants generally identified porn as a taboo subject, and that for some young people it would be associated with feelings of guilt, shame, anxiety and fear of punishment.



**“I feel it should be talked about more but not in the way it is currently.”**

MALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

**“I think education around it and why it could be damaging or dangerous and other reasons why it might not be...cos there are also positives...there's positives and negatives to everything.”**

MALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

**“This big thing in the media about how terrible it is, it doesn't help at all. It doesn't help broach that conversation at all.”**

MALE, 17, MĀORI & PACIFIC

**“There's like a big taboo around it...I think that the things that are associated with porn are just so negative. That's why a lot of people don't want to talk about it with the adults because it just feels like we'll get majorly judged for it, if that makes sense.”**

MALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

### INSIGHTS FROM OUR 2018 SURVEY NZ YOUTH AND PORN

When watching porn, six in ten recent viewers sometimes 'worried about being caught' and four in ten reported sometimes feeling 'guilty'.

Porn was often thought of as something young people are not supposed to see, which might also be linked with worries about being 'caught' masturbating.

Participants widely believed that feelings of guilt or shame would be more common or have more impact for young people growing up in families with traditional or conservative views on sex and sexuality.

Shame was more commonly discussed in relation to girls seeing porn, due to the stigma associated with female sexuality, discussed earlier in the section on porn and gender (see page 24).

Young people quite often mentioned that embarrassment and shame made them less likely to talk about porn.

**“The negative feelings were not towards the content itself. I always enjoyed the content, it was the ramifications of it. I had to hide this from my parents and from my friends at school and from everyone at Church.”**

FEMALE, 16, PACIFIC & ASIAN

**“I think if there was no stigma around sex, if it wasn't something that you could giggle about when someone asked or if it wasn't so mysterious, I think that would be a lot better for young people finding out about porn in a safe place.”**

MALE & TRANSGENDER, 14, NZ EUROPEAN

**“Porn has such a stigma around it that's so negative, especially for girls and girls my age. It's just so negative. I think that's why people don't talk about it so much.”**

FEMALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

**“I think there's a really big taboo around it. That's the reason why I don't talk about it, is my parents or the adults in my life because I don't feel comfortable talking about something that I feel like I'd get told off for it, I'll get judged for it.”**

MALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

**“I think all young people go through it, that feeling of shame. I think it's because sex is so taboo.”**

FEMALE, 17, MĀORI & PACIFIC

### INSIGHTS FROM OUR 2018 SURVEY NZ YOUTH AND PORN

Young people are unlikely to raise the topic of porn with a parent or caregiver directly – just one in twenty reported doing this.

Given a scenario of a child seeing porn for the first time, young people thought it unlikely that the child would talk to an adult about what they had seen, because they would fear getting into trouble – even if they saw the porn accidentally.

Participants quite often mentioned that it is unhelpful to simply tell young people not to watch porn, as this was likely to shut down conversations and increase feelings of guilt or shame.

A number of participants expressed the view that parents should not shame or punish children or young people who have looked at porn. Several said that it was important for young people to know that it is normal to have seen porn.

**“I just feel like I'm being punished more than accepted and helped. That's exactly what would happen.”**

MALE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

**“I think most people just hide it cos they don't wanna be looked down on.”**

MALE, 16, MĀORI

## The need for positive conversations

Young people often talked about the need for positive and open communication about porn and how this can be achieved. Many young people taking part in the research said that, whatever the situation, adults should respect their feelings and their confidentiality.

Young people told us that the overly negative and unrealistic way that adults often talk about porn gets in the way. It stops young people from seeking help and guidance and creates a climate of fear and anxiety around porn and sexuality more generally.

**“If you see something worrying, you should feel okay to tell someone about it. There shouldn’t be a stigma around it.”**

MALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

**“I would say maybe if you were going to talk to your children or whoever about it, then don’t go straight to the bomb question like, “Do you watch porn?” Maybe build a stable relationship where you feel like it would be okay to talk to your child about that kind of thing before you just jump straight into the hard questions.”**

FEMALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN

**“Be more open, have a normal conversation, make it a comfortable topic because it’s important and it’s normal.”**

FEMALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

## ASSUMPTIONS CAN GET IN THE WAY

It was clear from listening to a diverse group of participants that, when it comes to porn, it’s not possible to make assumptions about a young person’s experience or views about porn based on things like gender.

For example, our research shows that it should not be assumed that a girl will have no interest in porn for sexual exploration or pleasure, or that a boy who does watch porn thinks it portrays realistic sex.

**“I would say people’s personal stories make the most impact. If I can relate to that story, then its going to make the biggest difference.”**

MALE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

### INSIGHTS FROM OUR 2018 SURVEY NZ YOUTH AND PORN

Parents and caregivers were almost twice as likely to raise the topic of porn with boys than with girls.

## PORN VS REAL LIFE

Most of our participants thought young people need to know that real-life sex is not like porn. They think adults should talk about how porn is staged, how most people’s bodies don’t look like porn stars’ bodies, and how consent and safe sex measures would likely be something that goes on behind the scenes, rather than on camera.



## The role of whānau and communities

Talking with trusted adults about the issues was seen by young people as a way to reduce the potential negative impacts of porn.

However, very few of the young people we heard from had ever talked to a parent about porn – and most said they would not want to. As discussed, there are real issues here around embarrassment, shame, or fear of punishment.

Young people talked about the importance of parents being open, compassionate, non-judgemental and supportive – parents should let children and young people know that they are open to talking.

Several young people talked about how families vary in how open they are to talking about sex and about porn, noting that even if parents have more traditional or conservative beliefs, it is important to be supportive and open to talking about the subject in a non-judgemental way if their child has questions.

**“It’s often viewed as if you don’t bring it up, then they won’t seek it out. It’s more like, if you don’t bring it up, then they won’t seek it out safely.”**

MALE & TRANSGENDER, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

**“That’s the first step, to be able to talk to your kids about this. It’s to get them to trust you and you to trust them... If you don’t have that and your parents try and talk to you about something like that, no kid is gonna listen.”**

MALE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

**“Personally, I have quite a dominant connection with my uncles...I think whānau connection is a real important thing. It helps you understand things cos they have a broader understanding as adults.”**

MALE, 17, MĀORI & PACIFIC



**“If you’re really that worried about it, sit your own kids down, have a little chat with them about it. She’ll be sweet as.”**

FEMALE, 17, MĀORI & PACIFIC

### INSIGHTS FROM OUR 2018 SURVEY NZ YOUTH AND PORN

Two-thirds of 14-17 year olds had never talked to a parent or caregiver about porn. NZ European and Māori youth are more likely than Pacific or Asian youth to have had a conversation with their parent or caregiver.

## FAITH COMMUNITIES

Around half of our participants talked about religion playing a role in how young people feel about porn. This included several young people who identified their Christian faith as important to them personally, and a number of other young people who had grown up in strongly religious Christian families, but did not necessarily share this faith to the same extent.

It was common for participants to think that, while young people from religious backgrounds would be just as likely to watch porn, they would be more likely to feel shame, guilt, or fear of discovery. Some participants also said that young people from religious backgrounds would be less likely to approach others for support if they were concerned about their own porn use, or something they had seen in porn.

Regardless of their personal beliefs or background, participants strongly supported quality and age-appropriate education and information for young people about sex and porn.

**“I know from my experience, if I was still watching porn today, I would hate to talk to my Church about it. I would never.”**

FEMALE, 16, PACIFIC & ASIAN

**“I’d probably say that if we can get a sex education as early as possible, that’s probably the best opportunity for those who are religious or culturally religious to get their questions answered, so they don’t encounter things that they probably shouldn’t encounter.”**

MALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN & PACIFIC

### HOW YOUNG PEOPLE TALK ABOUT PORN AMONGST THEMSELVES

Participants told us that when young people talk about porn it is usually with friends. For some this was common, but for others it was seldom or never talked about.

Friends also emerged as the group young people would most like to be able to talk to about porn, and about sex, in a supportive and informative way. However, participants also mentioned that the stigma and taboo surrounding porn meant that young people can be very guarded in relation to expressing how they feel about porn, and friends were not always seen as a safe or healthy place to turn to for advice.

Some young people had been part of serious and helpful conversations about porn, but this tended to be quite rare, especially for younger teens. In most cases, conversations about porn – if they do take place – are much more likely to be in a joking way rather than serious and informative.



**“It’s almost some unspoken agreement that people know you’ve seen it but no one really wants to bring it up.”**

FEMALE, 16, NZ EUROPEAN & MĀORI

## Education, information and support

### Young people want porn literacy included in healthy relationships and sexuality education

Young people often raised the importance of including porn literacy in sexuality education. They tended not to think of porn education as a separate, standalone subject, or as an online safety issue.

This is not surprising, as the young people we talked to also tend to think the most important or widespread negative impacts of porn relate to the influence on sexual behaviour and relationships. Overall, quality, age-appropriate and consistent porn and sexuality education was viewed by young people as the most effective measure society can take to mitigate the potential harms of porn.

We knew from the 2018 survey *NZ Youth and Porn* that it is common for young people to use porn as a way of learning about sex, and young people confirmed this in interviews – explaining that this is more likely when they have not had quality and timely education from other sources.

The majority of young people we heard from believed schools would be a good place to learn about sex and about porn. Learning about these topics at school was commonly seen as less awkward for young people than other places, for example in the home from parents.

**“I think schools are absolutely crucial for sexual health education. I don’t think they do it well but I think it’s very crucial.”**

MALE & TRANSGENDER, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

### SEXUALITY EDUCATION AND PORN – WHAT WORKS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE?

The research findings indicate there is no ‘one size fits all’ best approach to educating young people around porn and healthy sexual development, with information needing to be available in different places, from different people and in different ways in order to reach young people in a way that works for them.

**“I think the most important thing is making sure that we get a great sex education from somewhere that is a reliable source and not just two weird people making sex noises on screen.”**

MALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN & PACIFIC

There was no clear agreement about the age or year level this education about porn or sex should begin at school. However, most thought this should begin before puberty, and before most young people see porn. Feedback from young people suggests that the intermediate years (age 11-13) would be the best time to start addressing sexuality education and issues around porn.

Young people talked about the importance of having educators who were confident talking about the topic. In some cases this might be the health or PE teaching staff who students are comfortable with, and in others may be better covered by visiting presenters who are relatable – a number of young people mentioned that it was more comfortable hearing about it from people they didn't know.

Young people we talked to were conscious of the sensitive nature of the topic. Several talked about the importance of discussions at school being informative, but not personal. Some talked about the importance of anonymity when asking questions, for example using a question box where individual (and anonymous) questions are covered in class.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this research strongly indicate that improving awareness and education about porn is key to mitigating potential harms. Inconsistent implementation of relationships and sexuality education at a local level can present significant issues for responding to this need.

**“They could learn it in school, if school had a more broad, encompassing, mandatory across all high school levels, mandatory to some level throughout all primary school, clear, informed scientific, safe presentation of sexuality and porn in schools. I wish.”**

MALE & TRANSGENDER, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

Porn was covered in fewer than half of the schools the Education Review Office (ERO) visited in their 2017 evaluation of sexuality education in New Zealand. Along with sexual violence, this was the least covered topic in New Zealand schools.

Inconsistent implementation means some young people are missing out on in-school learning about porn, and in-depth coverage of aspects like consent, relationships, sexual violence and digital technologies<sup>12</sup>.

This inconsistency is reflected in the diverse experience of our participants. Some talked about their schools doing sexuality and porn education well, while others considered it to be insufficient or inadequate. Furthermore, young people appeared to widely recognise the inconsistency of porn and sexuality education – with several comparing their own experience to that of friends in other schools – and they considered this to be a problem.

**“My school is really good about teaching sex ed for trans people and for gay people. I wish other schools were more like that.”**

FEMALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

## Resources and information

Young people also talked about information outside of school, though this was much less common. These young people considered alternative sources of information to be particularly important for those who were not comfortable asking questions in class, or for when sexuality education was inadequate or not provided at school. Some mentioned material such as pamphlets might be useful. However it was more common to talk about online resources, with several mentioning social media would be a good place to reach young people with resources about porn.

## Filters, age restrictions and content warnings

Young people were asked about their views on technical measures to prevent access to online porn – for example, age verification, filters or blocking software.

The majority of our participants saw a need for some kind of change, restricting or at least warning about online porn, especially for children.

**“Depending on what sort of thing you’re using, just change your Wi-Fi code and you’ll be fine. Restrictions do not do anything. They’re not even restricting. It just teaches a child how to manipulate the system.”**

FEMALE, 15, NZ EUROPEAN & MĀORI

### INSIGHTS FROM OUR 2018 SURVEY NZ YOUTH AND PORN

Nine in ten agreed that it's not ok for children to look at porn, and seven in ten young people think children and teens' access to porn should be restricted in some way.

A number of young people supported some form of restriction or age verification system for people under 18 years, and some supported a restriction for people 16 years and under, or in one case age 15 years. Several young people supported age restrictions for children only, rather than people their own age or older. In part this was because the potential harm was seen as greater for children, but also because children would be less likely to find ways to get around a restriction.

Parental controls were mentioned by several young people as a way to curb access, with some seeing a need for parents to be educated about how to go about doing this.

**“You can't restrict that for people... It's going to be found and it's gonna be found in more dangerous ways...You can either present them safe ways to get that and get away from that or you can ban it altogether and get them to find very unhealthy ways of dealing with that.”**

MALE & TRANSGENDER, 16, NZ EUROPEAN

Rather than restricting all porn, some young people talked about restricting specific types of content, for example 'step-porn', non-consensual content, or other content perceived to be more extreme and potentially harmful.

It was also quite common for young people to support the idea of restrictions in principle, while also expressing doubts about how this could be achieved in practice – believing that young people could quite easily get around technical restrictions. Some of these young people reaffirmed the importance of education as a preferred way to approach the issue.

In addition to restrictions, or as an alternative, there was strong support for some kind of content warning so that young people could make informed choices about what they watch, and have contextualising information about things like consent and safe sex practices. In addition to providing information, some talked about a warning screen being an extra step that would make it less likely young people will see porn by accident.

A smaller number of participants did not support any restriction or warning on content. This included some who disagreed on principle or saw porn as beneficial, and some who believed the attempt to restrict 'mainstream' porn would put young people at risk of accessing more extreme or unsafe websites.

**“I was born in 2001, so I've always grown up with that digital age. By the time I reached puberty, it was always very accessible. I think you can't deny there has been a change in the accessibility. I think it is really easy. I don't think there's much you can do about that.”**

MALE, 17, NZ EUROPEAN

<sup>12</sup> See Education Review Office, 2018. *Promoting wellbeing through sexuality education*. Wellington, NZ: Education Review Office. P5. <https://www.ero.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/Promoting-wellbeing-through-sexuality-education.pdf>

## Conclusions

### What did we learn from young people?

Young people are growing up with porn, often from childhood and throughout their teenage years. We learned that porn has to a large extent become a normalised part of the lives of many young people. Normalisation in this context doesn't mean most young people are watching it often, or that they dramatically increase their use over time.

Participants' diverse experience and views about porn showed that, when it comes to porn, it is not possible to make assumptions based on age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality or religious beliefs.

What we have found strongly suggests the way adults talk about porn to young people is often unhelpful. Young people share adults' real concerns about the influence of porn. But they told us that the simplistic and overly negative messages about porn they often hear make it even harder to talk about the issues that matter to them. These messages also contribute to feelings of guilt, shame and anxiety around porn use.

Growing up with porn means young people's ideas about sex, and their sexual behaviour, are being influenced by porn from a young age. This matters to young people, and they want adults to take this issue seriously. Despite their diverse backgrounds and beliefs, participants overwhelmingly supported more and better education about porn within a context of comprehensive sexuality education.

Young people (both boys and girls) talked about porn's negative influence on body image, and expressed concerns about the expectations of current or future partners. They overwhelmingly agree that porn can give people false expectations about sex and relationships. This can create pressures on young people about sexual performance, and potentially lead to experiences that are not enjoyable for either partner. In short, they don't consider porn to be a good guide for young people as they begin to explore sex.

### Where to now?

Taken together, our three part research programme<sup>13</sup> has provided a robust and in depth understanding of the issues around porn for young people. This research informs the actions that we think need to be taken. We consider that effective action can now be taken on education, resource development, and support for young people and those who work with them.

### What's happening now

Some work is already underway in this space.

The Classification Office is facilitating a more cohesive and collaborative approach via the work of the inter-agency Pornography Working Party, which includes representatives from the Classification Office, Netsafe, Ministry of Health, Department of Internal Affairs, Ministry for Women, Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Education, ACC, and New Zealand Police. Various initiatives have started and the Classification Office has begun rolling out resources.

### COMPREHENSIVE, CONSISTENT EDUCATION AND INFORMATION

Young people made it clear that education is the best way to deal with the potential negative impacts of porn.

New Zealand schools currently design their own health curriculum with guidance from the Ministry of Education, and boards of trustees are required to consult with their communities on what will be taught. To provide the consistent education and messaging around pornography that young people tell us they need, it will be important for schools to follow clear and effective guidelines. To support this, information about porn will now be incorporated into the Ministry of Education's updated relationships and sexuality education guidelines. The Classification Office has produced video resources that can be used in schools as conversation starters, and we are currently working with the Ministry on further resources for educators.

<sup>13</sup> NZ Youth and Porn (2018); Breaking Down Porn (2019); Growing up with Porn (2020).



Young people also identified external providers as helpful in delivering information at school about porn, sex and healthy relationships. The Classification Office will be engaging with NGOs and government agencies who provide these services to young people, encouraging them to include porn literacy in existing programmes. We will also be making our resources available to any educator who wishes to use them.

Our youth-focused research programme – and the joined-up approach of the Pornography Working Party – provides a unique opportunity for New Zealand to be a leader in this space, with a consistent, comprehensive approach to education about porn.

### EMPOWERING WHĀNAU AND COMMUNITIES TO TALK ABOUT PORN

Some adults may feel they lack the skills to discuss sensitive issues around porn, and others may simply feel uncomfortable talking about it. We know it's not easy, and so do young people. This is why we have been producing resources for parents and whānau about how to approach these topics, including our new parents' guide, *Talking with young people about pornography*<sup>14</sup>.

We will continue to work on resources, workshops and presentations aimed at parents and whānau. As mentioned in the section above, we will also offer advice and assistance to other organisations providing these services.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to talking about porn. While the issues for young people appear to be broadly similar regardless of cultural background, the way these issues are communicated effectively may be quite different across New Zealand's diverse communities. This will be a focus of further resource development.

The research supports the need for open discussion about porn – including within families, places of worship, and schools that may have a strong stance against watching porn. Talking about porn does not require that whānau and communities change their values about sex and sexuality, or about porn. In fact, young people may be more inclined to think positively about values or beliefs about porn if the reasons behind these values are made clear to them in a supportive way.

### PARENTAL LOCKS, AGE VERIFICATION AND REGULATION

The traditional regulatory restrictions on the access of children and young people to porn have broken down.

Prior to the 2000's, most porn was supplied in physical form like DVDs or VHS tapes. Access was restricted to adults, with penalties applying to anyone who supplied porn to someone underage. Obviously, internet porn and the ubiquity of internet-capable devices has completely changed the landscape.

The current reality is that the obligation for restricting children and young people's access to porn (or other adult content) largely rests on parents or guardians. While parental locks and online safety tools are available to help with this, research indicates that many parents do not use these tools.

In our 2018 survey, nine in ten young people agreed that it's not ok for children to look at porn<sup>15</sup>. In the current study, seeing porn for the first time (especially as children) was often considered to be a negative experience for young people. These findings indicate that more could and should be done to support and educate parents in how to use online safety tools and parental locks effectively.

At a certain age parental locks and similar tools tend to become less effective as teenagers become more technically savvy than most parents. Interestingly, even at this point our previous research identified strong support amongst young New Zealanders for some kind of online restrictions on porn. However, while some in this study supported some form of age verification system for online porn in principle, they were quick to point out that such a system may be difficult or impossible to implement in a way that stopped teens from accessing porn. Some young people felt that restrictions could apply to children only, because the risk of harm was greater, and they thought children would be less likely to find ways around a restriction.

While views around age restriction were mixed, we found respondents strongly supported the idea of content warnings, so that young people could make informed choices about what they watched. This is consistent with our 2017 study *Young New Zealanders Viewing Sexual Violence*<sup>16</sup>, where the importance of providing good clear warnings and information to young people came through strongly.

## Appendix 1

### PARENTAL CONSENT – VIEWS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

As part of our decision-making process around parental consent, consultation was undertaken with six members of the Classification Office Youth Advisory Panel, aged 16-19 years. These young people debated and considered this matter carefully and agreed on the following statement to be included in the ethics submission, and in the final report:

"The issues around parental consent for young people's participation in research are complex and there are positives and negatives regardless of the approach taken. Following discussion, we agreed that:

- The requirement for parental consent is for the benefit of parents, rather than ensuring the safety of young people.
- 14 and 15-year-olds should be treated the same as 16 and 17-year-olds
- Requiring parental consent for research on a sensitive topic such as pornography is likely to be a barrier for participation for some young people, and will lead to a less diverse group of participants."



<sup>14</sup> See our website for resources and information: [www.classificationoffice.govt.nz](http://www.classificationoffice.govt.nz)

<sup>15</sup> *NZ Youth and Porn* (2018), P54.

<sup>16</sup> *Young New Zealanders viewing sexual violence* (2017), P51

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