

15: Impact Of Pornography On Sexually Abusive Youth

Pornography, an introduction

Definition of pornography:

The depiction of (or showing) sexual behaviour that is intended to arouse sexual excitement in those watching it. Generally now referred to in the literature as sexually explicit material (SEM).

Pornography has a long history, being seen in artwork from ancient Greek and Roman times to the present. With the invention of photography approximately 175 years ago, the ability to deliver high quality, low cost sexually explicit images exploded and developed into a highly financially lucrative business.

From the mid-1960s, magazines such as Playboy brought pornography 'out' of the closet into mainstream culture. Those early magazine pictorials might now be thought of as comparatively tastefully posed images of women. The first Australian male centrefold appeared in Cleo magazine in the late 1970s. At the time, it was a criminal offence in Australia to show in print or on film an erect penis or anything more than the public hair that suggested a vagina. With the development of moving pictures, pornography made the transition from the printed photograph to filmed moving images.

In the early to mid-1970s, American-made, hard-core pornographic films such as 'Deep Throat', and 'The Devil in Miss Jones' began to be shown in mainstream cinemas in the United States and Europe, and becoming surprise hits – the '.....films to see'.

In the mid-1970s the video cassette recorder (VCR) created a new distribution channel for pornography. Back then the content had a storyline as well as the hard-core pornography. The popular 1970s film "Debbie Does Dallas" has a three-part story, which makes sense even if all the pornographic content is removed.

Since then, over the past 40 years, pornography has become more graphic, with less supporting story, more violence and more extreme sexual activity. There are also, according to veteran pornography actor and producer Nina Hartman, more "make you look" moments. These are extreme acts, used not for arousal but as a marketing tool to separate one pornography product from other pornography being produced.

Pornography flourished further throughout the 1990s, with the emergence of the hand-held video camera and the Internet. Professional and supposedly 'amateur' content flooded the market. Cheap production costs and broad internet distribution assisted pornography to become more mainstream.

15: Impact Of Pornography On Sexually Abusive Youth

From mid-1990 to mid-2010, the number of pornographic films being made grew from several hundred a year to over 40,000 a year, including professional and home-made productions. Pornography had come of age, due in no small measure to the 'Triple A Engine' of anonymity, accessibility and affordability. The internet, proliferation of personal devices and mostly-free pornographic websites, meant that adults and young people viewed pornography at rates never before seen.

Pornography and young people

An emerging body of research indicates that pornography has had a significant influence on both adults' and adolescents' sexual practices. From body image through to sexual behaviour, pornography provides a template for how young people should look, and how they should behave sexually.

Research by Horvarth et al (2013) suggests that access and exposure to pornography can contribute to engagement in risky sexual behaviour, however no definition of what 'risky' behaviour is given.

Latrobe University's 2014 five-yearly adolescent health study (15-17 years, N=2614) found for their sample, there had been:

- Significant reductions in sexual practices such as intercourse, oral sex and deep kissing, but:
- Significant increases in online and 'sexting' type sexual practices such as sending nude pictures via text, and using web-based social sites for sexual purposes.

For her Master's Thesis, Canadian clinician Bente Skau interviewed 470 adolescents with an average age of 19. In her thesis, Skau sought to identify the age of initial exposure to pornographic material, finding that young people who reported viewing pornography for the first time before age 10, as opposed to after age 10:

- Engaged in more sexually questionable acts,
- Expressed a desire to engage in more varied sexual behaviours,
- Were more sexually aroused by violence,
- Consumed more pornography later in life,
- Spent more time per week looking at pornography.

(Skau and Barbour 2011; ATSA presentation).

15: Impact Of Pornography On Sexually Abusive Youth

Skau and Barbour also noted the difficulties of attributing problematic behaviour to pornography, quoting Slade (2011) on the “truth” about pornography:

“Some pornography under some circumstances may affect some people in some ways some of the time”.

Pornography and sexually abusive young people

While it is not possible or correct to state that viewing pornography leads to engaging in sexually abusive behaviours per se, research shows that adolescents who have engaged in sexually abusive behaviours report having had more exposure to pornography than those who engaged in non-sexual crimes (Burton et. al., 2010).

In other words, there seems to be some correlation between pornography consumption and problem sexual behaviours, albeit unclear.

Repeated exposure to pornography may lead to de-sensitisation about the material and contribute to the distorted views of what is considered acceptable in relationships (Shuler and Prescott). For young people at risk, viewing pornography may also increase the likelihood of engaging in coercive sexual behaviour, sexually aggressive language and sex with animals (Owens et. al., 2012).

Why might viewing pornography impact sexually abusive young people?

Sexually abusive young people often present with deficits in social skills, as well as having background issues including exposure to trauma, attachment issues, and other, complex early-life issues. These young people may lack the context for understanding explicit sexual content and may experience feelings of confusion, embarrassment and fear. Additionally;

- They are generally reluctant to seek adult support to make sense of what they are seeing and this coupled with their emotional response, may lead to pornography having a disproportionate influence in their life,
- They suffer from a lack of alternative pictorial representations of sex and life experiences and this further reinforces that these images are valid representations of sex (Skau and Barbour, 2011).

15: Impact Of Pornography On Sexually Abusive Youth

Cited studies suggest that earlier access to pornography may:

- Contribute to or have impact on sexual development, through earlier onset sexual activity,
- Promote sexually abusive behaviours, impacting both a young person's interest in engaging in sexual activity and also their ability to engage successfully in sexual acts.

De-sensitisation may also be an issue when large quantities of hard-core pornography are viewed, although again, this is only one risk factor amongst the many known.

One thing seems clear: pornography provides a "how to" manual which:

- Shows every possible angle of "...what goes where" and "...who can do what to whom",
- Provides sexual stimulation and shapes patterns of sexual arousal.

Young people who have viewed pornography may be equipped and primed for more advanced sexual practices earlier than they otherwise might, or earlier than those who have not viewed it.

In research with clinicians by Pratt & Fernandes (2015), the clinicians stated that they believed pornography was a significant factor in the development of PSBs and SABs, particularly for children between 10-12 years. Respondents were almost unanimous in their belief that pornography:

- Contributes to a child's interest, knowledge and ability to engage in sexually harmful behaviour,
- May distort risk assessment, however this needs to be considered as a part of a broader range of risk factors present in a client's presentation, and;
- May impact on the length and content of treatment.

The responding clinicians requested further targeted training, tools and more evidence-based understanding of pornography's impact on sexually abusive youth.

Does pornography provide a template for sexual actions?

No studies have looked at whether exposure to pornography by an adolescent provides a template for sexual actions. With pornography's "how to" knowledge and sexual stimulation, young people who have viewed it may be equipped and primed for more advanced sexual practices earlier than they otherwise might – or earlier than those who have not viewed it.

We can state that pornography consumption is problematic for some children and adolescents. Anecdotal stories about under 10s and under 12s presenting to SABTS providers in Victoria and across the SABTS field, show that as much as possible, we must protect children under 12 from viewing pornography.

15: Impact Of Pornography On Sexually Abusive Youth

How we should view SABs

Statistics across all jurisdictions support us viewing SABs as a deviation from a positive development track, rather than the start of a life-long slide into sexual offending.

While we cannot make firm conclusions that pornography use lays a pathway to sexually abusive behaviour, it does seem to make sense that pornography consumption will likely impact upon and influence the development of sexual scripts, sexual behaviours, sexual interests, and sexual beliefs of young people.

Although links between sexual violence, aggressive sexual practices, and pornography consumption have been more clearly explored and linked in adult samples (Malamuth, Addison, & Koss, 2000), no such links have yet been established in adolescent populations. The role of pornography related to adolescent SAB remains unclear in adolescent samples.

Considerations for moderating pornography's influence on sexually abusive young people

Sexually abusive young people require support to critique pornography's influence, and to aspire to relationships that are safe, respectful and consenting. Therapy must assist young people to understand pornography's tenuous link to 'real' sex and 'real' relationships.

It is clear that the onslaught of online pornography will not and cannot be stopped. Given this, it is vital to work with sexually abusive young people to ensure they can be 'savvy consumers'; that they can understand that what they are looking at bears little resemblance to sexual practices that occur in relationships. This highlights the importance of quality, 'real' sex education. Part of the therapeutic role should be to assist young people to understand relationships, and how sexual practices 'fit' within them.

Pornography in the assessment process

How pornography use impacts the assessment process in regards to sexually abusive youth is somewhat difficult to define. Pratt & Fernandes (2015) investigated therapists' views on pornography's impact on assessment and treatment.

15: Impact Of Pornography On Sexually Abusive Youth

Findings indicated that the majority of assessors and therapists believed that pornography use must be considered as a driver of sexually abusive behaviours, and thus assessors needed to investigate rates of usage, types of pornography being viewed, masturbatory behaviour when viewing pornography and how 'driven' or 'fixated', if at all, the young person was by and with the pornography being viewed.

As well, Pratt & Fernandes suggested that assessors ensure they investigated whether the sexually abusive behaviours were a re-enactment of what was being viewed.

In regards to statistically-derived assessment processes, Pratt & Fernandes (2015) noted that despite there being a clear belief by respondents in their survey that pornography was a risk factor for sexually abusive behaviours, it was not possible to 'create' a risk factor solely about pornography as in general the viewing of or use of pornography tended to be associated with factors clustered around 'sexual drive and preoccupation' or potentially 'sexual aggression'. As such, assessment of the impact of pornography remains a qualitative judgement made by the assessor on a case by case basis.

Pornography in the treatment process

Because viewing pornography appears to be associated, either closely or loosely, with a young person's engagement in SABs, then treatment must address this association.

At present, most clinicians practice an abstinence model of treatment. Young people who are in treatment must not access or use pornography for any purpose. While this may be appropriate for a small number of young people, the following may be a more rational model to consider:

- Abstinence for young people under 12 years. Research shows that this age group is unable to decode and critique pornography, because of their immaturity.
- Assistance for youth 12 and over to 'manage' pornography use so that it is not a predominant factor or activity in their lives. That they can understand that pornography:
 - Bears little resemblance to actual sexual practice,
 - Demeans women,
 - Presents unreal images of sexual stamina,

15: Impact Of Pornography On Sexually Abusive Youth

- Gives problematic messages about body image:
 - Males – penis size, body shape, performance, unhygienic sexual practices,
 - Females – breast size, body shape, subservience to male sexual desire and fantasy, sexual practices that may be unhygienic, sexual practices that may result in injuries i.e: anal tearing, choking, gagging, slapping, hitting.
- Teaching young people to be ‘savvy consumers’ (Pratt) such that they are clear that pornography is to sex what a ‘Die Hard’ Bruce Willis film is to violence – ie: pure fantasy,
- Ensuring that sex education is taught in real, relational ways and includes how sex fits into a relationship,
- Ensuring that the following are at the forefront of messages about sexual health:
 - Respect,
 - Mutual consent,
 - The freedom to say no,
 - The freedom to negotiate equally about healthy, respectful sexual pleasure and activity.

A caveat – from the author

I **do not** condone or promote pornography use by adolescents, or by anyone. I have not yet seen an abstinence or prohibition model that works. The onslaught of online pornography is unlikely to stop. Neither will the growth in better, faster cheaper devices that can access the internet, or the numbers of younger and younger children who are given these devices.

Promoting abstinence is a losing battle. It may be best to promote responsibility and respect rather than abstinence. If any of you have good ideas for doing this, please let me know!

15: Impact Of Pornography On Sexually Abusive Youth

References

Carter, D, Prentky, R, Venderveer, P and Boucher, R. (1987). 'Use of pornography in the criminal and developmental histories of sexual offenders', Journal of Interpersonal Aggression, June, 196-211.

Kingston, D.A., Fedoroff, P., Firestone, P., Curry, S, and Bradford, J.M., (2008). 'Pornography use and sexual aggression: The impact of frequency and type of pornography use on recidivism among sexual offenders, Aggressive Behaviour 34 (4), 341-351.

Pratt, R., and Fernandes, C., (2015). How Pornography May Distort Risk Assessment of Children and Adolescents Who Sexually Harm. Children Australia, 40, pp. 232-241 doi:10.1017/cha.2015.2

Pratt, R., (2015). The 'Porn Genie' is out of the bottle: Understanding and responding to the impact of pornography on young people. InPsych: The Bulletin of the Australian Psychological Society. April 2015, pp. 12-13.

Prescott, D., and Schuler, S., (2011). Pornography and its place in the assessment and treatment of adolescents who have sexually abused, Holyoke MA, NEARI Press.

Skau, B., (2007). Who Has Seen What When? Pornography's Contribution to the Social Construction of Sexuality During Childhood and Adolescence. Theses and Dissertations (Comprehensive). 1044. <http://scholars.wlu.ca/etd/1044>

Skau, B., & Barbour H., (2011). The pursuit of "Good Sex" in a pornified world: Assisting adolescents in constructing positive sexual scripts. Paper presented at the 30th Annual ATSA Conference, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Wilson, G., (2014). Your brain on porn: Internet porn and the emerging science of addiction, Commonwealth Publishing (See also, Wilson's TED talk The Great Porn Experiment).

Wright, P.J., Tokunaga, R.S., & Kraus, A., (2015). 'A meta-analysis of pornography consumption and actual acts of sexual aggression in general population studies', Journal of Communication.

End of Document