

Fact Sheet: Child and Youth Problematic Online Pornography

What is Online Pornography Use and Sexting?

- Online pornography is the online viewing of erotic behavior with the intention to cause sexual excitement. Access, affordability, and anonymity, along with increased social acceptance, have made internet pornography addiction a new clinical phenomenon. Sexting is the sending or receiving of sexually suggestive or explicit images, messages or videos via electronic transmission. Sexting is becoming a common form of communication and sexual expression among today's youth.

How Common is Youth Online Pornography Use and Sexting?

- A Canadian study done with 470 adolescents reported that 98% of them had been exposed to pornography; the average age of first exposure was around 12 years, and one-third were exposed as young as by the age of 10 [1].
- One in five youth experience unwanted online exposure to sexually explicit material and one in nine youth experience online sexual solicitation.
- 15% to 30% of youth have sexted, with the prevalence increasing with age [2,3].

Who is at Risk?

- Social factors, personality traits, and pre-existing comorbidities may increase the risk of pornography use.
- The mobile pornography use of young males is predicted by perceived peer pressure, suggesting that boys who are more susceptible to peer pressure are at higher risk for sharing and watching pornography on their phones if their peer groups are doing the same.
- Adolescents who exhibit risky behaviour or delinquency in other life areas are more likely to view pornography and develop problematic use. Substance use, depression, and anxiety are also risk factors for developing an online pornography addiction.

Problematic Online Pornography Use is associated with:

- Risk of developing a pornography addiction.
- Development of unrealistic, potentially harmful sexual values, beliefs, and attitudes.
- Imitation of inappropriate sexual behaviours, including greater sexual preoccupation and higher numbers of sexual partners.
- Increase in aggressive sexual behavior in relation to watching pornography showing violence.
- Decreased self-concept (girls report feeling physically inferior and boys sexually inadequate). As self-confidence and social development improves, the use of internet pornography decreases.
- Negative emotional side-effects, such as decreased social integration and emotional bonding with caregivers, increased conduct problems, delinquent behavior, depressive symptoms, feelings of shame, guilt, anxiety, and confusion, and risk of poor social bonds as adults.
- Depersonalization of women, and potentially of men and children depending on exposure
- Risk of drug and alcohol use while engaging in sexual encounters, resulting in an elevated risk of concurrent disorders.

How do I know if a Youth might have a Problem with Online Pornography Use?

Youth starting to develop an online pornography use problem or those with a more established problem may be showing changes in their behavior patterns or signs such as:

- Increased private time spent at the computer, along with clearing browsing history.
- Less interest shown in real face-to-face interactions.
- Interference with completion or engagement in day-to-day activities.
- Use of language that mirrors pornographic material and reflects knowledge of sexual material that exceeds current age.
- Sexual interests and activity above age-appropriate levels.
- Overly intense reaction (anxiety, frustration or anger) when denied access to the internet.

For more information and support, contact: AHS Youth Addiction Services at 1-866-332-2322 (toll free within Alberta).

References

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2. Skau, B. (2007). *Who Has Seen What, When? Pornography’s Contribution to the Social Construction of Sexuality During Childhood and Adolescence*. (Doctoral Dissertation, Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada). Available from Theses and Dissertations (Comprehensive). (1044). Retrieved from <https://scholars.wlu.ca/etd/1044>
3. Madigan, S., Villani, V., Azzopardi, C., Laut, D., Smith, T., Temple, J. R., Browne, D., & Dimitropoulos, G. (2018a). The Prevalence of Unwanted Online Sexual Exposure and Solicitation Among Youth: A Meta-Analysis. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 63(2), 133-141. [doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2018.03.012](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2018.03.012)