

10% of children aged 16-21 had seen online pornography by age 9.

27% had seen online pornography by age 11.

50% of children who had seen pornography had seen it by age 13.

The average age at which children first see pornography is just **under 13**.

'A lot of it is actually just abuse'

– Boy, 18

Young people and pornography

This information sheet contains findings from the Children's Commissioner's survey of over 1,000 young people aged 16-21, conducted in November 2022. The findings are nationally representative of young people in England. At the end, you will find some resources and ways to access help and support.

Half of all survey respondents, **58%** of boys and **42%** of girls, aged 16-21 said that they had intentionally sought out online pornography themselves.



DEFINITIONS

Pornography - Content, images or videos, whose primary purpose is intended to be sexual arousal in the viewer.

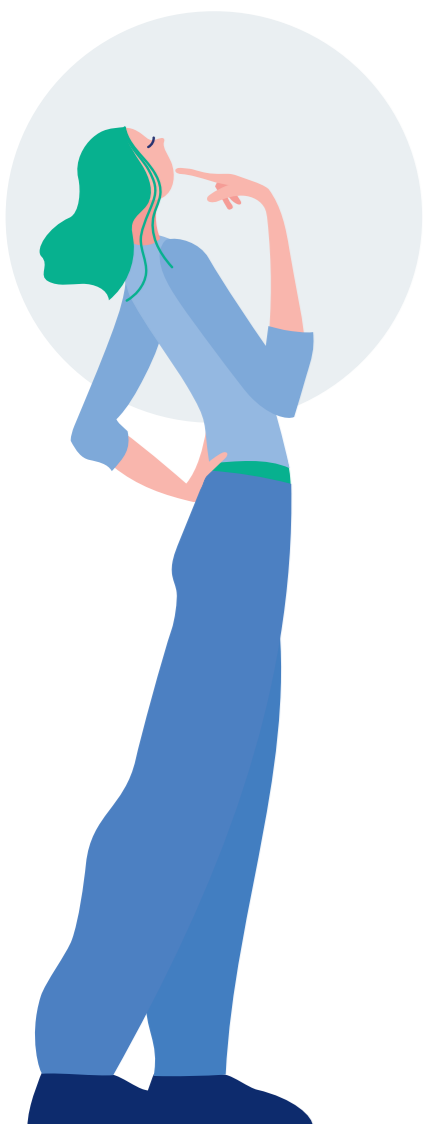
Frequent pornography use – Intentional access to pornography more than twice per week.

Early exposure to pornography - A child first exposed to pornography at age 11 or younger.

Sexual violence - Any sexual act which may be considered as degrading, physically aggressive or coercive.

Growing up and pornography

Based on CCo's survey and focus groups, these 5 pillars depict what the average experience can be for a girl growing up at different ages, and what she may come across online.



Girl A is 9

Girl A starts a new year at primary school. Some of her classmates have recently been given their own smartphone and start talking about 'porn'.

Girl A is confused but pretends to understand. She is scared that she will get in trouble if she asks her mum or teacher.

By age nine, **10%** had seen pornography, **27%** had seen it by age 11.

Children who see pornography for the first time at age 11 or younger are likely to have lower self-esteem as young adults.



Girl A is 11

Girl A starts her first year of secondary school and gets her first smartphone to help her stay safe and communicate with her parents.

Her parents install limited safety functions on her phone such as blocking some websites.

Pornography is messaged around the school via wireless services.

The average age at which children first see pornography is **13**.

Girls and boys are just as likely as each other to see pornography at this age.



Girl A is 13

Girl A is legally able to access most social media platforms and likely to stumble across pornography online.

According to the CCo's survey of young people, Girl A is approximately the average age of first accessing online pornography for children in England.

Children often stumble accidentally across pornography online.

38% of 16-21 year-olds said they had accidentally come across pornography online.

Twitter is the platform where the highest percentage of children had seen pornography (**41%**),

followed by dedicated pornography sites (**37%**), Instagram (**33%**), Snapchat (**32%**) and search engines (**30%**).



Girl A is 14

Girl A may feel pressured to watch online pornography to fit in.

One of her friends says that she won't know what to do if she doesn't watch pornography before having sex.

43% of children aged 16-21 agreed with the statement 'Young people mainly view online pornography due to peer pressure or to fit in.'



Girl A is 16

Girl A is sent explicit images from one of her school friends involving a younger girl at school. A boy who she recently met on Instagram starts sending her nude pictures she didn't ask for, and requesting that she does the same.

Girls are disproportionately the target of 'self-generated' pornography.

51% of girls aged 16-21 had been sent or shown explicit content involving someone they know in real-life,

in comparison to **33%** of boys.



What can we do to help?

The CCo thinks that tech companies need to do their bit now to protect children online. The following is some guidance to what parents can also do to support.

Parents and teachers should talk to their children in an age-appropriate way about harmful content they or their friends might see online. For age-appropriate tips on starting this conversation, see the CEOP Education resource "[Having a conversation with your child](#)".

Parents should have proactive conversations about pornography before their child gets their own phone. For young people's advice on starting these conversations, see the Children's Commissioner's guide "[The things I wish my parents had known](#)".

Tech firms should protect children from pornography. The Children's Commissioner is supporting the passage of the [Online Safety Bill](#) to introduce age verification requirements on platforms. In the meantime, parents should understand how to use parental controls using, for example, the [Set Up Safe checklist](#).

Schools should embed pornography education in the [RSE curriculum](#) which challenges peer pressure to view pornography and addresses its harms. Excellent ideas and pornography lesson plans can be found from various organisations including [NCA](#), [CEOP](#), [NSPCC](#) & [PSHE Association](#), [Childnet](#) and [Barnardo's](#).

Schools should develop a [whole-school approach](#) to preventing sexual harassment. This should include strategies to prevent the creation and sharing of nude images [without consent](#). Resources are available from [NCA](#), [CEOP](#). Parents and schools should use the [Report Remove tool](#) in cases of non-consensual image-sharing.

Growing up and pornography

Based on CCo's survey and focus groups, these 5 pillars depict what the average experience can be for a girl growing up at different ages, and what she may come across online.



Boy A is 9

Boy A is in Year 5. Two of his friends have been given an iPhone for Christmas. They start joking about 'porn'. They saw it on a pop-up ad while playing an online game and show it to Boy A.

Boy A is curious but he finds the videos worrying. He decides not to tell his mum or dad, he doesn't want to get his friends in trouble.

By age nine, **10%** had seen pornography, **27%** had seen it by age 11.

Children who view online pornography at age 11 or younger are significantly more likely to become frequent users as young adults.



Boy A is 11

Boy A starts secondary school. Boy A's parents give him an iPhone and install adult content filters.

Boy A joins a football team with boys from older year groups. They AirDrop porn to his phone. Some of this content is degrading and violent. Boy A finds it distressing but he doesn't speak to his parents in case they take his phone away.

The majority, **79%**, of 18-21-year olds had seen content involving sexual violence before turning 18.

21% of males aged 16-21 viewed pornography at least once a day in the last 2 weeks, compared to **7%** of girls.



Boy A is 13

Boy A asks his parents if he can sign up for social media. Many of his friends already have profiles on Twitter, TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat. Boy A is now the minimum age for most platforms, so his parents agree.

Boy A uses Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat to seek out pornography. He finds this easier than getting round parental controls on porn sites.

The average age that children first see pornography is 13.

The greatest number of young people (**41%**) had seen pornography on Twitter

followed by pornography sites (**37%**), Instagram (**33%**), Snapchat (**32%**) and search engines (**30%**).



Boy A is 14

Boy A watches online pornography several times a week. He shares content with friends. Sometimes they compete to find the most disgusting or offensive content. 'Gross-out' pornography concerns him less than when he was younger, because he is so used to seeing it now.

43% of young people agreed with the statement 'Young people mainly view online pornography due to peer pressure or to fit in'.

36% of young people aged 18-21 have sought out content involving at least one act of sexual violence.



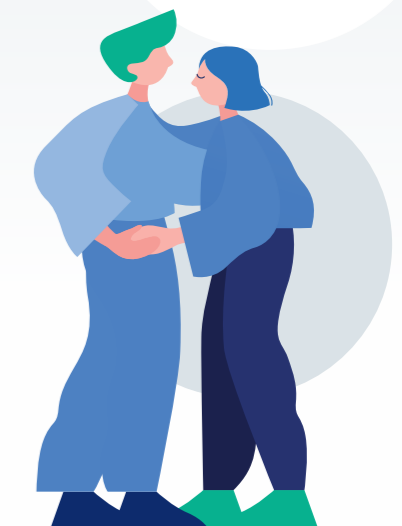
Boy A is 16

Boy A starts a relationship with a girl at school. The only depictions he has seen of sex have been in online porn.

Boy A's girlfriend explains that sex in porn isn't a reflection of real-life sexual experiences. They talk about how pornography can depict women as 'sex objects', and how it doesn't present a variety of normal body types.

58% of young people aged 16-21 agreed that viewing pornography affects young people's behaviours towards one another.

47% of young people aged 16-21 stated that girls 'expect' sex to involve aggression, a further **42%** stated that most girls 'enjoy' sexual aggression.



What can we do to help?

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This is what young people told the Children's Commissioner about the impact of viewing pornography:



'Especially if viewed at a young and impressionable age, young people can start to view their relationships through the lens of pornography'

– Boy, 19, survey, first saw pornography at age 11.

'Pornography is choreographed and edited and not at all what sex is in reality. It sets up young people to have wild expectations of their own sexual performance and body image as well as normalising dangerous sexual practices and views towards women'

– Girl, 20, survey, first saw pornography at age 15.

'Pornography gives unrealistic body image expectations'

– Boy, 20, survey, first saw pornography at age 12.

'I believe pornography skews the perception of how adult relationships work and don't always revolve around sex. This could affect children's behaviour by potentially only seeing their future partners as objects to attain sex and not as individuals that are more than sex.'

– Boy, 20, survey, first saw pornography at age 13.

'I think pornography places children's view of people (especially women) as sexual objects. After viewing some degrading material they may start to act in ways that match these thoughts (degrading women)'

– Girl, 21, survey, first saw pornography at age 14.

'It also normalizes sexual jokes that many times are impolite or straight-up disrespectful (again, mainly towards women and girls) or triggering for those who have been through sexual trauma'

– Girl, 21, survey, first saw pornography at age 14.

'Pornography at its core is inherently misogynistic/ racist/discriminatory with very explicit categories of women. A child/young person watching isn't mature enough to understand that and could think that it's desirable to act like men in pornography or treat people like the women in pornography.'

– Girl, 21, survey, first saw pornography at age 8.

What do you think?



79% of young adults aged 18-21 had seen pornography involving sexual violence before turning 18.

Early exposure to pornography and frequent consumption of pornography significantly increase the likelihood of encountering sexually violent content.

Young people are significantly more likely to see violence perpetrated against a woman (**65%**) than against a man (**29%**) in pornography.

Young people aged 16-21 are more likely to assume that girls expect or enjoy sex involving physical aggression, such as airway restriction and slapping, than don't. Among respondents, 47% stated that girls 'expect' sex to involve physical aggression, a further 42% stated that most girls 'enjoy' acts of sexual aggression.

47% of respondents aged 18-21 had experienced a violent sex act. Girls are significantly more likely than boys to have experienced a violent sex act.

Early exposure to pornography impacts upon young people's self-esteem. Young people who had viewed pornography aged 11 or younger were significantly more likely to present lower self-esteem scores than the average young person.



Sources of support

If you are affected by the issues discussed, the following organisations can provide you with expert information, advice and support:

childline

Childline is a free and confidential service for under-19s living in the UK
childline.org.uk
0800 1111

shout
85258

Shout provides 24/7 urgent mental health support
giveusashout.org
text SHOUT to 85258

 **THE SURVIVORS TRUST**

The Survivors Trust for victims of sexual violence
thesurvivorstrust.org/our-helpline
0808 801 0818

NHS

You can also contact your local NHS urgent mental health helpline or
call 111 for 24/7 advice

nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-urgent-mental-health-helpline