

“Sex is kind of broken now”: children and pornography

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Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



This report is among the most sobering my office has ever published. It paints a stark picture of what childhood looks like in 2025 with an online world that is, in many ways, completely unfit for children.

As Children's Commissioner, I have heard from a million children, parents and carers. Without fail, they all tell me the online world and social media are some of the most significant issues facing this generation.

Shockingly, as this report highlights, pornography is no longer something that children might seek out in adolescence. Today it has become something many children stumble upon accidentally while they are still in primary school. It is something that is shown to them without even looking for it on the same social media sites that were designed to help them connect with other people and be entertained. And it's not just any pornography. It is violent, extreme, and degrading often portraying acts that are illegal - or soon will be.

Two years ago, I published *"A lot of it is actually just abuse"*, a landmark report on the scale of children's exposure to pornography online. At the time, the findings shocked me and many others. We found that the average age a child first saw porn was 13 years old. This has not improved; children are encountering violent and harmful material often before they are even old enough to understand what they are seeing.

This report should be read as a snapshot of what rock bottom looks like. I hope we will be able to look back at the findings, which were gathered in the final weeks before Ofcom's children's codes came into force, and shudder at how things used to be.

As Children's Commissioner, I have consistently said that no child should be exposed to pornography online. That is not an ideal - it is the bare minimum we should expect from an online world which is now where children spend so much of their lives.

We do not tolerate pornographic magazines on school buses or graphic sexual material on children's television. Why children's exposure to it online has ever been tolerated is beyond understanding.

This report shows that the protections for children under the Online Safety Act which came in to force on July 25th could not have come soon enough. My Office has been working closely with Ofcom to support them to make the protections for children as strong as possible.

Now, we will see if they work. And there must be serious consequences for companies who fail to meet the high expectation I have of them.

This report must act as a line in the sand. The findings set out the extent to which the technology industry will need to change for their platforms to ever keep children safe. Take, for example, the vast number of children seeing pornography by accident. This tells us how much of the problem is about the design of platforms, algorithms and recommendation systems that put harmful content in front of children who never sought it out. In my conversations with children, I have heard how some features of online platforms contribute to their exposure to pornography, including ones like disappearing images.

My Office will be watching the implementation of these new protections closely. Online, time matters. With children being able to share intimate images of themselves with each other, and when nearly half of young people agree that "girls may say no at first but then can be persuaded to have sex," we are not just failing to protect children online, we are also allowing attitudes that drive violence against women and girls to flourish. Stepping in early to prevent this is key.

I want this report to be the last of its kind. A final record of the worst days of the internet before real regulation, before real accountability, before the moment we decided that children's safety online is not optional. A society is judged by how it protects its children. Let us be judged well.

Content warning

This report is not intended to be read by children.

This report makes frequent reference to sexual harassment and sexual violence. This includes descriptions of pornographic content, language and discussion of sexual abuse. The CCo acknowledges that this content may be difficult to read. However, we think it is important to understand how pornography impacts on young people, in order that we may better protect all children from harm. We encourage you to take care of your own wellbeing when reading this report.

If you are concerned about a child who is experiencing abuse or harm you should contact your local authority's safeguarding team for advice. You can also make safeguarding referrals to the NSPCC by calling 0800 800 5000 or by emailing help@NSPCC.org.uk

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



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



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



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



supporting *recovery* from childhood abuse

NAPAC offers support to adult survivors of childhood abuse: support@napac.org.uk | **0808 801 0331**



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

Executive Summary

"It's just so common, it's so normalised and everyone's just so desensitised to it." - Girl, 16

It is the view of the Children's Commissioner that no child should see pornography. Yet this report finds that it is normal for children to be exposed to it online. It is also normal for that pornography to be violent, and for children to say that this exposure caused them harm. This report captures what type of pornography children were seeing, and where, before the Online Safety Act's protections came into force in the summer of 2025.

The Online Safety Act requires online pornography providers to put in place Highly Effective Age Assurance (HEAA) to prevent under 18s from accessing their services.¹ The protections for children in the Act focus on their access to porn.

The Act also requires other online services, whose primary purpose is not to provide pornography – for example, social media sites or search engines – to put in place safety measures to prevent children from viewing pornographic and other harmful content.² This second set of rules is called the Children's Code, or protection of children codes. HEAA is not prescribed as a safety measure to meet this duty.

The findings of this report highlight two problems, one of which will be addressed to some degree by the Online Safety Act. The first is that pornography is accessible to children, both on pornography websites themselves and social media sites.

The second problem is that the pornography itself is extremely harmful, depicting sexually violent acts that would not be published in the offline world. This is having an impact on children's view of what is normal sexual behaviour. This report finds that harm happens to children both through accessing online pornography – for example because they find it accidentally – and because the pornographic depictions themselves are highly harmful.

The data in this report was collected just before the suite of rules designed to protect children under the Online Safety Act came into force in July 2025. It provides a benchmark for how prevalent

pornography is in children's online lives, maps the types of pornography children are coming across online, where they are seeing it, and the impact it has on them.

This report finds that:

1. It is normal for children and young people to be exposed to online pornography:

- 70% of survey respondents had seen pornography online, up from 64% in 2023.
- Boys (73%) were more likely than girls (65%) to report seeing online pornography
- A larger proportion of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) (76%) had seen pornography in comparison to those without SEN (69%)

2. Children are being exposed at very young ages:

- The average age a child first sees pornography online is **13**.
- More than a quarter (27%) of respondents had seen online pornography by **the age of 11**.
- Some respondents reported having seen pornography by the age of **"6 or younger"**.

3. Children are most likely to see pornography by accident

- 59% reported seeing pornography online **by accident** up from 38% in 2023.
- X (formerly Twitter) remains the most common source of pornography for children, outstripping even dedicated pornography sites.
- The gap between the number of young people who saw porn on X and the number who saw it on dedicated pornography sites has widened in the last 2 years. X now accounts for 10% points more exposure than dedicated pornography sites (45% vs. 35%) in 2025, compared to only 4% points in 2023 (41% vs. 37%).
- 8 out of 10 of the main sources children access pornography are social media or networking sites.

4. It is normal for the pornography children see online to be violent

- The majority of respondents who had seen pornography reported seeing depictions of acts that are illegal under existing pornography laws,³ or will soon be illegal under the Crime and Policing Bill when it becomes law.⁴
- 58% of respondents had seen porn depicting strangulation, before they turned 18.
- 44% reported seeing a depiction of rape (specifically, receiving sex whilst asleep).

5. Pornography impacts children's attitudes towards women and girls

- 44% of respondents agreed with the statement "Girls may say no at first but then can be persuaded to have sex". Children who had seen pornography were more likely to agree with this statement than those who had not.
- Girls were more likely to agree with this statement than boys were.
- Children were more likely to report seeing pornography depicting women receiving sexually violent acts than they were seeing men receiving sexually violent acts

This report makes recommendations to address these concerns. The report strongly supports the introduction of Ofcom's new age assurance regime for pornography providers and welcomes the implementation the children's code which will require social media sites to make some changes to prevent children seeing harmful content on their sites. These changes will help reduce children's access to pornography, but noting the rapidly evolving technology landscape and capacity to circumvent rules, the Commissioner recommends that:

- Online pornography is audited to ensure it meets the same content requirements as offline pornographic publications.
- That the depiction of non-fatal strangulation is outlawed comprehensively.
- That the Department for Education provides schools with support needed to implement the new Relationships, Health and Sex Education curriculum, including a recruitment drive for specialist RHSE teachers and support for teachers to deliver the curriculum.

- That the government explore options to ensure children aren't able to use VPNs to avoid the age assurance process .

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Glossary

Extreme pornography - As defined by Part 5 of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008,⁵ pornographic content which is grossly offensive or obscene, including acts which threaten a person's life or risk serious injury, necrophilia and non-consensual penetration. The possession of extreme pornography is an offence.

Free School Meals (FSM) - Children who receive free school meals from their school.⁶ Used as a proxy for children from low-income households.

Highly Effective Age Assurance (HEAA) – processes that assess or estimate the age of users.⁷

Part 3 Services – regulated user-to-user and search online services.⁸

Part 5 Services – an online service that publishes or displays online pornography.⁹

Physically aggressive sex acts - Sexual acts which carry a reasonable risk of physical harm, regardless of the perpetrator's intent and the recipient's response. For instance, airway restriction.¹⁰

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

Protection of Children Codes of Practice – also referred to as the Children's Codes of Practice – rules written by the regulator Ofcom that require regulated services to carry out a children's risk assessment and use proportionate safety measures to keep children safe online.

Self-generated sexually explicit images – sexually explicit images or videos created by children.

Special Educational Needs (SEN) - A young person has SEN if he or she has a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for them. Special educational provision is support which is additional or different to support usually available to young people of the same age in mainstream colleges.

WHAT THE LAW ON PORNOGRAPHY SAYS

At the time of writing, there are a number of laws in place which should protect children from pornography and harmful pornography.

1. Online Safety Act 2023

Codes of Practice designed and implemented by Ofcom. These duties are in force from 25th July 2025.

Part 5 duties: require pornography providers to implement Highly Effective Age Assurance to prevent under-18s from accessing their sites

Illegal Content Codes of Practice: duties for providers to assess and manage the risks arising from the offences set out in the Act

Protection of Children Code of Practice: additional duties on service providers to assess the risk of specific harmful content and to mitigate them.

2. Crime and Policing Bill 2025

Note: at the time of writing this Bill is still progressing through parliament.

The Bill contains provisions for:

- Banning the depiction of any act of strangulation
- Criminalises the possession, creation and distribution of AI tools designed to create child sexual abuse material.
- **Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008**

Section 63: outlaws the possession of extreme pornography. Extreme pornography is defined as:

- life threatening injury
- serious injury to a person's anus, breasts or genitals
- bestiality (a sexual act with an animal)
- necrophilia (a sexual act with a human corpse)
- rape or assault by penetration

- **Domestic Abuse Act 2021**

Section 70: Outlaws non-fatal strangulation and also clarifies that a person cannot consent to being harmed for the purposes of sexual gratification.

- **Protection of Children Act (1978) and Sexual Offences Act (2003)**

Section 1 PCA: criminalises the creation or sharing of indecent images of a child (even if the distributor is under 18) and Section 8 and 10 SOA: criminalises 'sexual communication with a child'

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Introduction

This report should be read as a map of what rock bottom looks like. Not only is it now normal for children to have seen pornography before they have left primary school, it is now also normal for that pornography to be the most violent and extreme content available online.

This research builds on the Office's previous report, *"A lot of it is actually just abuse": children and pornography*, released 2 years ago. Many of the problems highlighted then - that pornography is easily accessed, that exposure is often accidental, and that porn is impacting children's sexual behaviours and beliefs – remain, but are now more deeply entrenched.

This report was written to capture what the state of play is just before the new rules under the Online Safety Act 2023 to protect children from pornography came into force on 25th July 2025.

As a statutory consultee of the Online Safety Act, the Commissioner welcomes these rules. The regulator of the Online Safety Act, Ofcom, has written codes which will require pornography websites to implement Highly Effective Age Assurance (HEAA), and for other social media sites to take steps to prevent children seeing porn on their sites.

The Act provides powers to limit children's access to pornography but does little or nothing to alter the type of pornography which is available. Currently, the problem is not just that children can easily access online pornography, which the HEAA rules introduced in the summer of 2025 will go some way to address. The problem is that the pornography itself is extreme, and that there will always be ways around measures which limit access. The acts children see being depicted in online pornography are sometimes so extreme they could not be legally published in offline formats like DVDs. The office is concerned that even with the new rules, users will be able to circumvent restrictions through the use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs). Within a day of the new rules being in place, VPN use in the UK was platformed as an easy work-around.¹¹

Preventing access is just the first step to ensuring that no child is exposed to pornography online, and the Office welcomes the robust step that has been taken towards this this summer. The era of it being normal that children accidentally stumble across some of the most harmful and sometimes illegal types of pornography must end now. This report sets out why and how we should do that.

VIRTUAL PRIVATE NETWORKS (VPNs)

What are VPNs?

Any device that connects to the internet is assigned an Internet Protocol (IP) address. This places the device geographically. This means that devices that connect to the internet are placed in the UK jurisdiction and therefore subject to UK laws like the Online Safety Act.

A Virtual Private Network (VPN) allows the device to connect to a server in another jurisdiction, which may not have the legal requirement that websites have Highly Effective Age Assurance to prevent children from accessing adult only sites.

Are VPNs legal in the UK?

Yes – and in lots of cases VPNs can be beneficial for cybersecurity. There are no provisions in the Online Safety Act which prevents users from using VPNs.

However, Ofcom's guidance to pornography providers on implementing Highly Effective Age Assurance states it must be "robust".

1. Children's access to pornography

The Children's Commissioner's Office's (CCo) 2023 report on children and pornography, "A lot of it is actually just abuse": children and pornography, produced a damning snapshot of how easily children found themselves watching pornography online. This report shows that the situation has not improved, children are seeing porn too often and at too young an age.

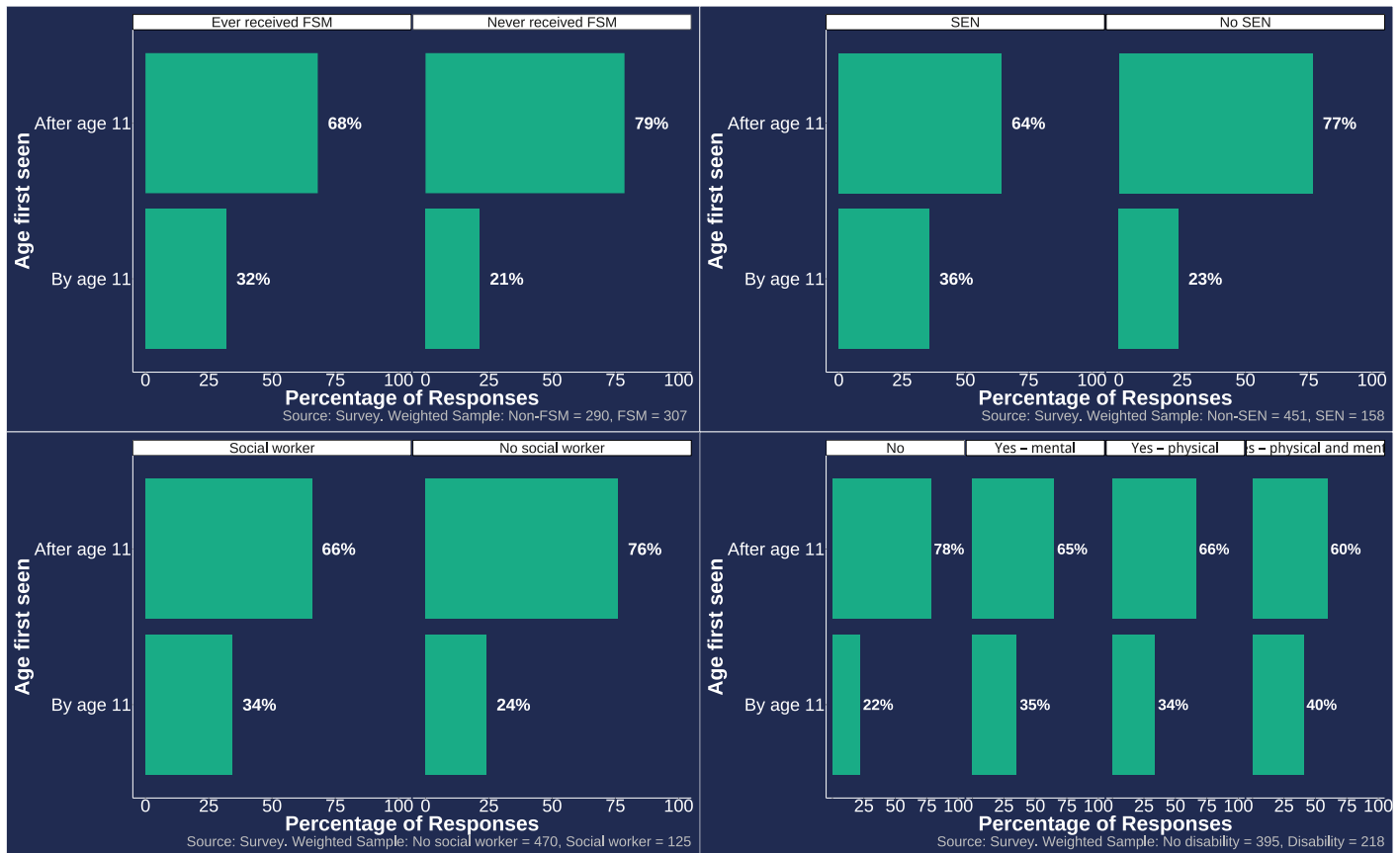
1.1 When children first see pornography

It is normal for children to see online pornography. The majority, **70%**, of respondents to the CCo's survey had seen pornography online.

It is also normal for children to see pornography before they start their GCSEs. Analysis of the survey found that **the average age children first saw pornography online was 13**, and over a quarter (27%) of respondents had seen pornography by the **age of 11 – which is primary school aged**.

Boys were more likely to have ever seen porn than girls (73% compared to 65%), but of this group, more girls (30%) had seen pornography by age 11 than boys (25%). Vulnerable children were also more likely to have seen pornography earlier ages than their peers. Figure 1 sets out the demographic split of respondents who reported having seen online pornography by the age of 11.

Figure 1. Age of first exposure to online pornography by demographic variables



- A larger proportion of respondents who had ever received Free School Meals (FSM) had seen online pornography by age 11 (32%) compared to those who has never received FSM (21%).
- A larger proportion of those with a social worker had seen online pornography by age 11 (34%) compared to those without a social worker (24%).
- A larger proportion of those with Special Educational Needs (SEN) had seen online pornography by age 11 (36%) compared to those without SEN (23%).
- A larger proportion of those with a physical disability (34%), mental disability (35%), or both (40%), had seen online pornography by age 11 compared to those without any reported disabilities (22%).

1.1.1 Children's views on when children access pornography

We presented some of the survey findings set out in the above section to young people in the focus group held as part of this research, and asked whether they found this surprising or not. The consensus from young people was that they were not surprised by the age that most children first see porn, suggesting that pornography's presence in children's online lives has become commonplace.

"I'm not that surprised because at 13 years old, that's when people usually start to access social media and the online world more easily. And I think there's a growing concern of that age, because I think in the future [children] are getting their phones from 12 or 11 years old, and once they have access to that, obviously they're going to start to explore things that are beyond what's suitable for that age." – Girl, 16

"I'm not surprised, but I feel like it could be prevented. [Children's] brain[s] [are] still forming until the age of like 21. And I feel like it's just a bit unhealthy because children can get a reliance on it. So like whenever they feel like upset or something, they'll go back for pleasure." – Girl, 16

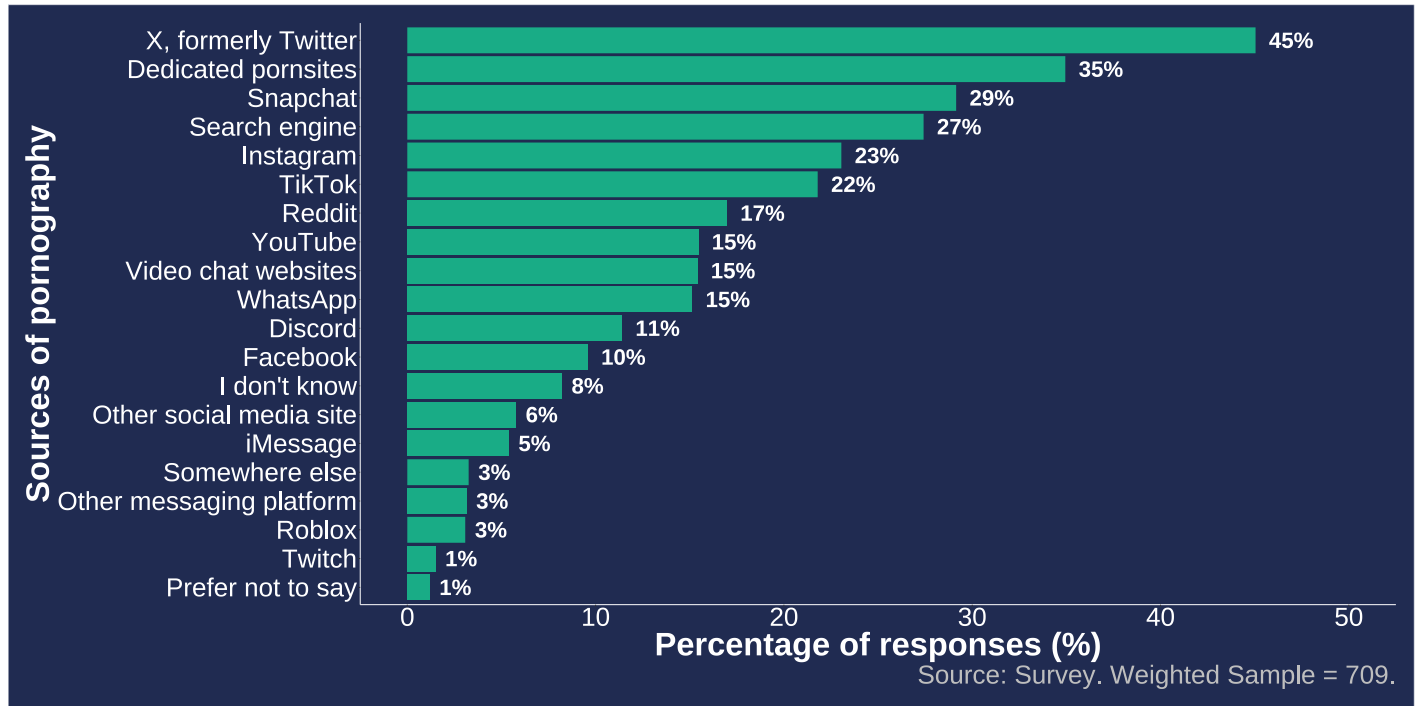
1.2 How children see pornography

Children are more likely to see pornography on social media sites than they are on dedicated pornography websites. Concerningly, they are also more likely to discover pornography by accident than to actively seek it out.

1.2.1 Where children see pornography

Figure 2 shows the percentages of respondents who reported encountering online pornography and where they had seen it. .

Figure 2. Online platforms where pornography was seen



Strikingly 8 out of the top 10 sources of pornography were social media or social networking sites, showing that any steps these technology companies were taking prior to the rule changes - which happened when the protection for children's code came into effect at the end of July 2025 – were ineffective. Dedicated porn services and search engines are also in the top 10. All 10 of these sources of pornography for children are regulated services under the Online Safety Act 2023, which means they are expected to meet the relevant safety duties this side of the rule change.

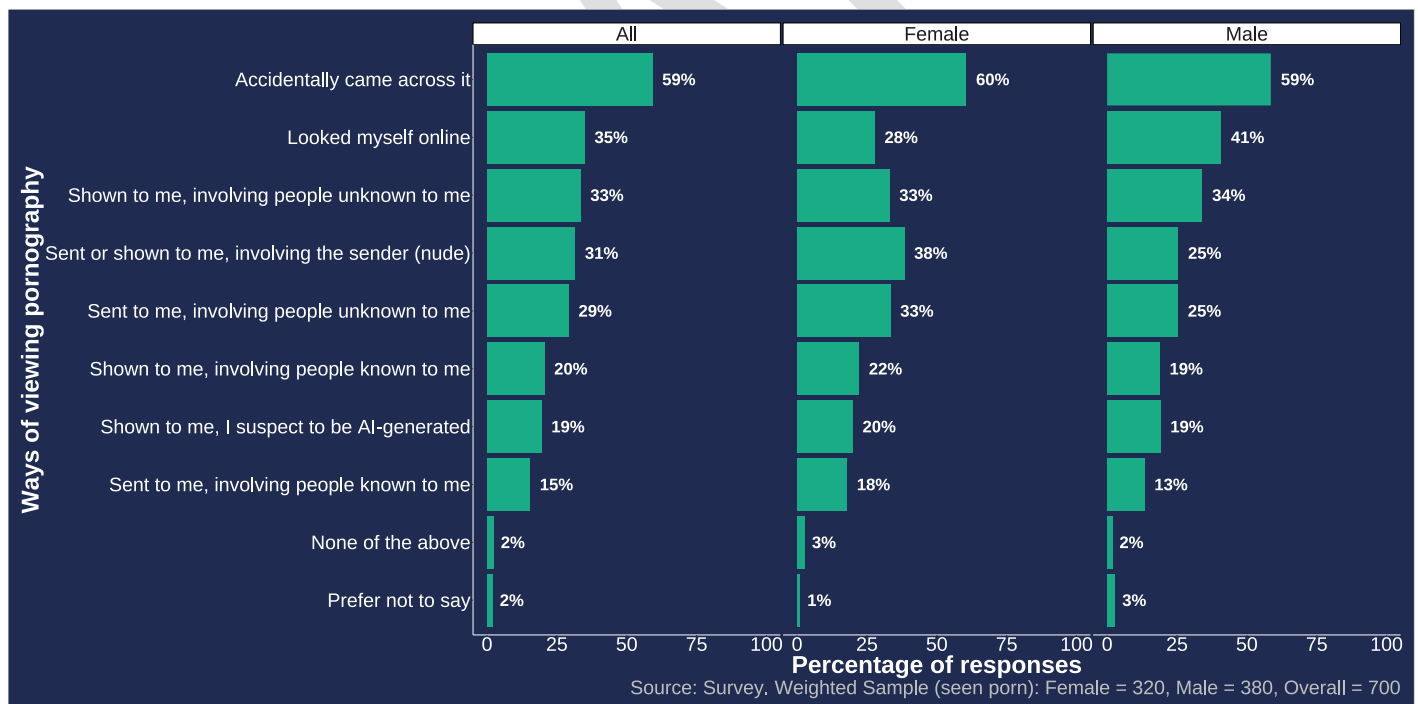
X (formerly Twitter) remains the most common source of pornography, and is worse even than dedicated pornography sites. This is especially concerning given that social media sites will not normally need to implement HEAA. Concerningly, the gap between the number of respondents who saw porn on X and the number who saw it on dedicated pornography sites has widened in the last 2 years. X now accounts for 10% points more exposure than dedicated pornography sites (45% vs 35%) in 2025, compared to only 4% points in 2023 (41% vs. 37%). X must comply fully with the Online Safety Act and the next iteration of this survey must show that exposure to pornography on X is falling.

Other social media companies are also showing up in the survey responses with concerning frequency. Social media sites that are popular among children¹² had high rates of pornography exposure: Snapchat (29%), Instagram (23%), TikTok (22%) and Youtube (15%). The concern that social media sites are gateways to pornography was confirmed by a participant in the focus group carried out for this report: *“[O]bviously social media messaging apps like Snapchat because [...] people get added to random group chats on Snapchat and [...] people [get] sent stickers of really explicit stuff”* - Girl, 16.

1.2.2 How children access pornography

The majority of children are not seeking out pornography online – they stumble upon it. Figure 3 visualises the way children accessed pornography.

Figure 3. Ways children viewed online pornography, overall and by gender



The most common way respondents saw pornography was by accident; 59% reported finding it this way. The proportion of children accidentally seeing porn has increased by 21% since 2023 (from 38% to 59%). Only 35% actively sought out pornography.

1.2.3 What children think is driving them to see pornography

In the focus groups, children told the team some of the reasons they thought children actively sought out pornography. These reasons were driven by a desire to fit in:

Peer pressure and also people who have been exposed to it, thinking it's funny or cool and showing it to their friends who are then going to show it to other people because they think it's cool as well.” - Girl, 16

Another child said:

“[A] reason why some people might go on to it actively is so they can sort of express themselves in that way and find out more about what sex actually looks like. In a way that they can't do it normally with other people.” - Girl, 17

The social reasons that a child might find themselves seeing pornography is particularly interesting in the context of growing evidence of the impact of pornography on children's behaviour towards one another.¹³

The team were particularly interested in the suggestion by one young person that *“the people who had actively sought it out had first come across it by accident because I feel there's a tendency where if you see something accidentally first because you're a child, you're curious. And so the next time or another time, you might find yourself actively seeking it out. So I think there's a pattern where accidentally seeing something once can lead you to seek it out another time” - Girl, 17.*

This would certainly align with some of the evidence being presented about the role algorithms play in enticing viewers of pornography to revisit sites and content.¹⁴

1.2.3 Self-generated sexually explicit images

Pornography is sexualised media which is intended to arouse sexual excitement. Sexualised images of children should never be referred to as “pornography” – this type of media is abuse, not pornography. However, the Office recognises that many young people view self-generated sexual images as

pornographic in nature, and so the Office wanted to capture how much children's exposure to pornographic or sexualised content was driven by peer-to-peer sharing of intimate images.

Analysis of the survey shows that self-generated sexualised images remain prominent in children's exposure to sexualised media. 31% of respondents reported having been sent or shown sexually explicit images involving the sender, and girls and young women were more likely to have been sent or shown self-generated content (38%) than boys and young men (25%).

The demographic trends for these responses also show that vulnerable children were more likely to have seen this type of sexualised media:

- Children with social workers were more likely to have been sent or shown this kind of self-generated content (41%) compared to those without a social worker (29%).
- A larger proportion of those with SEN had been sent or shown this kind of self-generated content (40%) compared to those without SEN (28%).
- Children with disabilities were more likely to report having been sent or shown this kind of self-generated content than those without. This includes children with a physical disability (38%), mental disability (43%), or both (41%), compared to those without any reported disability (26%).
- Children receiving Free School Meals (FSM) were more likely (35%) to report having seen this kind of content than those not in receipt of it (28%).

2. What children are seeing

2.1 Illegal pornography

Online and offline pornography is governed by two different sets of rules, meaning that what is illegal to publish offline is not always illegal to publish online. Offline formats of pornographic videos, for example DVDs, are required to be classified by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) in order to be legally distributed in the UK. It is illegal to distribute pornographic publications like this that have not been classified by the BBFC, and the BBFC will not classify pornographic material that is potentially harmful, including acts likely to cause serious physical harm and material likely to encourage an interest in sexually abusive relationships.¹⁵ Online pornography has none of these guardrails. The Online Safety Act provides protection against illegal material, and access protections for children, but no provisions to regulate the publication of legal but harmful pornography.

The team asked young people if they had seen or searched for certain acts depicted in the pornography they viewed. These were the same sexual acts that the Office asked about in the previous survey carried out for the 2023 pornography report¹⁶ and were chosen with the intention of capturing the range of sexual acts in pornography. The legality of the depiction of these acts in pornographic material published either online or offline is set out in Table 1.

As explained in the introduction, online and offline pornography are subject to two different legal regimes. Online pornography must not depict illegal categories of pornography and pornography published in offline formats must be classified by the BBFC to be legal. As set out in the table below, there are a number of acts in pornography that the BBFC will not classify and are therefore not legal depictions in that format.

Note: The Crime and Policing Bill is set to make the depiction of strangulation in pornography illegal. The legislation is still making its way through parliament but for the purposes of this report but will be highlighted in red in this report to indicate that it will soon be illegal.

Table 1. Legality of depictions of acts in pornography by publication format

| Depiction in pornography | Illegal - offline | Illegal – online |
|--|-------------------|------------------|
| Someone being choked, or gagging, during oral sex | YES | YES |
| Someone being strangled, with another person's hands around their throat | YES | NO |
| A man ejaculating on someone's face | NO | NO |
| Someone being slapped | NO | NO |
| Someone pulling another's hair | NO | NO |
| Someone being called names such as whore, bitch or slut | NO | NO |
| Someone receiving anal sex | NO | NO |
| Someone not consenting to or refusing a sex act | NO | NO |
| Someone receiving sex whilst asleep | YES | YES |
| Someone receiving sex from a step-sibling or step-parent | YES | NO |

The Crime and Policing Bill will make the publication of strangulation in online pornography illegal, bringing it in line with the regulation of offline pornography publications such as DVDs and magazines. The CCo strongly supports this legislation which will bring parity to the regulation of pornography in both online and offline publications. It is not right that online pornography providers, which children are more likely to be able to access and at greater speed, are subject to weaker laws than offline publications.

Table 1 shows that, at the time of writing, there some acts that are illegal to publish in offline publications are legal to publish on online pornography sites. The two types identified here – the depiction of

strangulation, and the depiction of step-relation sex – were identified in the Independent Review on Pornography¹⁷ and the CCo supports that reviews’ recommendation that both are prohibited online as well as offline. This is because incest pornography often strays into age-play, with actors being made to look like children in settings such as children’s bedrooms and costumes complete with pigtails and teddy bears.¹⁸ This is not illegal, but it should be because it normalises the sexualisation of children. Such normalisation of child sexual abuse poses a danger to children and the Children’s Commissioner wants to see this banned with immediate effect.

2.2 Prevalence of illegal and harmful pornography

This report has already established that it is normal for children to see pornography. It is also completely common place for that pornography to be illegal, extreme and/or harmful.

The team only asked the older respondents to the survey (aged 18-21) a set of questions about types of pornography they have seen, the findings from which are presented in the following section.

2.2.1 It is normal for children to see illegal or harmful pornography

Despite some of the acts included in the survey being illegal types of pornography, the percentages of respondents who reported seeing them is staggeringly high.

Table 2, below, sets out the percentages of respondents who reported seeing each act in pornography before they turned 18. Cells shaded in red indicate that the category of pornography is illegal. The figures are sometimes higher than the proportion of all children who have seen pornography as these questions were asked of a subset of all respondents .

Table 2. Percentage of Respondents (aged 18-21) reporting seeing each act depicted before they turned 18.

| Depiction in pornography | % reported viewing |
|--|--------------------|
| Someone pulling another's hair | 69% |
| A man ejaculating on someone's face | 68% |
| Someone being choked, or gagging, during oral sex | 67% |
| Someone being called names such as whore, bitch or slut | 64% |
| Someone receiving anal sex | 65% |
| Someone being slapped | 63% |
| Someone being strangled, with another person's hands around their throat | 58% |
| Someone receiving sex from a step-sibling or step-parent | 57% |
| Someone receiving sex whilst asleep | 44% |
| Someone not consenting to or refusing a sex act | 36% |

The table details a concerning majority of respondents who had reported seeing pornography depicting strangulation – 58%. Other harmful types of pornography were also commonly reported, such as porn depicting step-relation sex (57%) and depictions of sex whilst asleep (44%) – which, if this were an act carried out in real life, would be rape.

2.2.2 Children are not searching for illegal or harmful pornography

This report has already established that the majority of children see pornography accidentally. Table 3 provides further evidence to this point: it sets out what percentage of respondents had searched for pornography depicting this set of acts.

Table 3. Percentage of Respondents (aged 18-21) reporting searching for pornography depicting each act

| Depiction in pornography | % respondents who searched for these acts |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Oral sex | 23% |
| Anal sex | 12% |
| Amateur or user generated video | 12% |
| More than two participants | 12% |
| Slapping, spanking or whipping | 11% |
| 'Consensual non-consent' | 6% |
| Breath-play or strangulation | 6% |
| Forced oral sex | 6% |
| Forced anal sex | 3% |

The percentages are extremely low, meaning that the majority of children and young people are not seeking this type of content out. Without exception, the percentage of respondents searching for each act is lower than the percentage reporting having seen each act. This means that pornography depicting each of them is finding its way to children, rather than children actively seeking it out.

The gulf between the percentages of children who had seen pornography depicting strangulation (58%) and the percentages of children who had actively searched for pornography depicting this act (6%) is staggering. It is concerning because it shows that children are more likely to see violent pornography than they are likely to search for it.

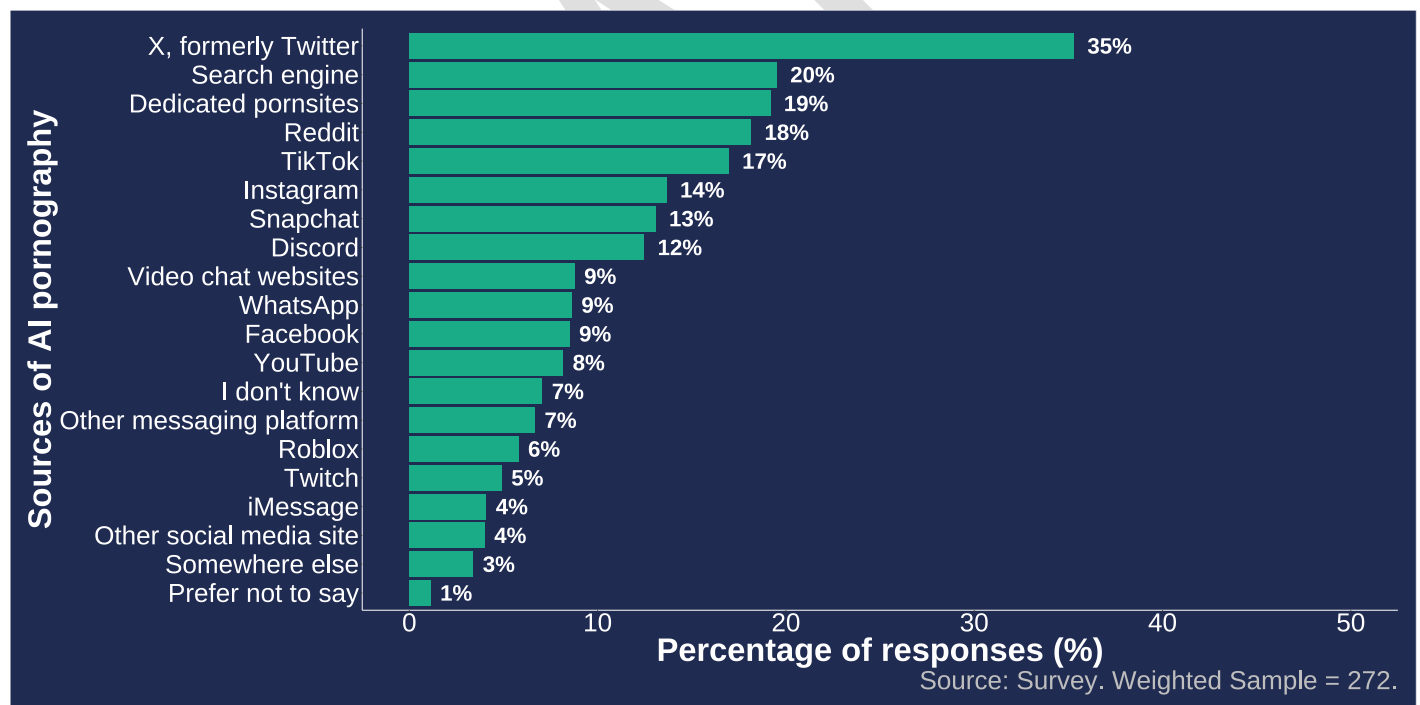
2.3 Deepfake/AI pornography

The nature of pornography has evolved since the CCo’s 2023 report on children and pornography. In this 2025 study, survey participants were also asked whether they had seen online pornography that they believed to be AI-generated.

Of those respondents who had seen online pornography, 39% reported having seen AI-generated content. X (formerly Twitter) was by far the most common source of AI-generated pornography - 35% of those who had seen AI porn saw it on X.

Figure 4 shows the percentages of respondents who reported accessing AI-generated online pornography through different sources.

Figure 4. Online platforms where AI-generated pornography was seen



Exposure to this content also varied by demographics, with young women and those with vulnerable characteristics more likely to see this content:

- A larger proportion of males (42%) than females (34%) reported having seen AI-generated pornography.
- A larger proportion of respondents who had received Free School Meals (FSM) reported having seen AI-generated pornography (46%) than those who has never received FSM (32%).
- A larger proportion of those with a social worker reported having seen AI-generated pornography (52%) than those without a social worker (35%).
- A larger proportion of those with SEN reported having seen AI-generated pornography (52%) than those without a social worker (34%).
- A larger proportion of those with a physical disability (58%), mental disability (41%), or both (48%), reported having seen AI-generated pornography compared to those without any reported disability (35%).

The above demographic breakdowns suggest that certain vulnerability makes children and young people more likely to be exposed to AI-generated pornography.

AI generated pornography is a concerning genre of pornography for the Children's Commissioner, because AI-generated images generally augment real life dynamics. In the case of pornography, this means that the existing power dynamics between men and women and the stereotypes of women which are rife are built on and into AI porn.

The CCo's recent report on sexually explicit deepfakes, *"One day this could happen to me": children, nudification tools and sexually explicit deepfakes*, set out some of the ways the technology which is free, easy to access and increasingly prevalent online, is used.¹⁹ In the focus group carried out for this report, children explained that *"People have created basically fake videos of people having sex... when they're not actually doing it, or you can paste somebody's face onto somebody else's body who is, you know, doing such activities. So that's a bit worrying as well because people can, you know for example create child pornography through that"* - Girl, 16.

3. Impact of pornography

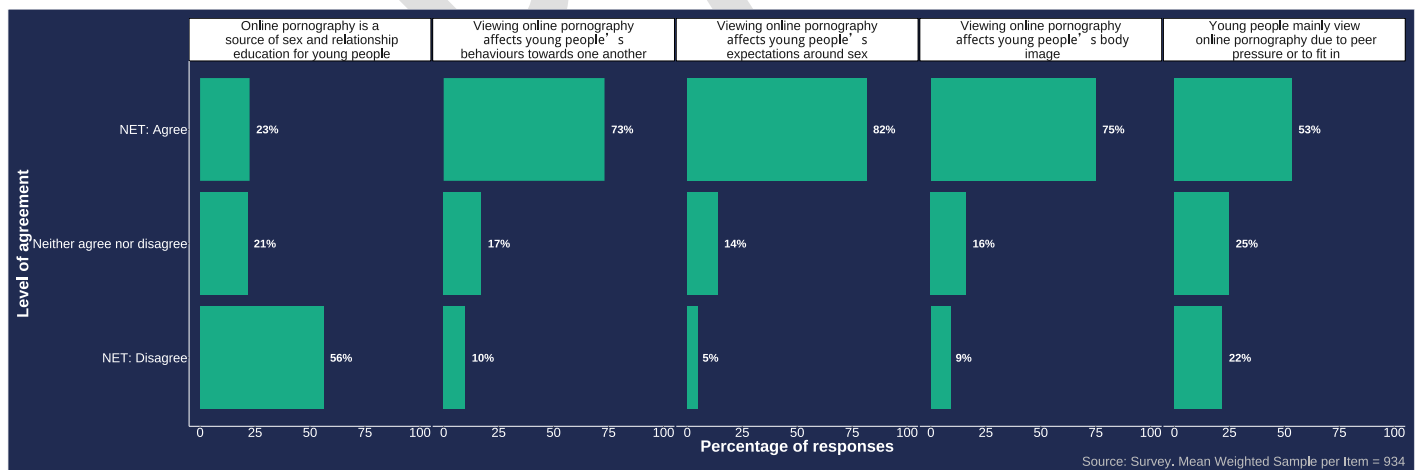
The 2023 report from the CCo on the impact of pornography on children was damning in its analysis of the impact exposure to pornography can have on children’s views of themselves, each other, and their expectations about sex. The refreshed findings for 2025, presented in this report, are no less concerning.

3.1 The role of pornography in children’s lives

Pornography is not for children – it is not designed with the protection or promotion of their rights and interests at its heart. The team asked survey participants a series of questions to get a sense of what role pornography plays in children’s lives.

The themes the team explored were education, socialisation, and body image. Children’s views on the role of pornography across these themes are set out in Figure 5. The statistics represent responses from all respondents to the survey, not just those who had reported seeing pornography.

Figure 5. Level of agreement with education, behaviour, body image, and peer pressure statements



Education

Children do not see pornography as an education tool. Only 23% of respondents agreed that online pornography is a source of sex and relationship education for children and young people. A higher proportion of boys (25%) than girls (20%) agreed with this statement.

Peer pressure

Children feel pressured to watch pornography. 53% of respondents agreed that children and young people mainly view online pornography due to peer pressure or to fit in with their friends. A similar proportion of boys (52%) and girls (54%) agreed with this statement.

Behaviour

Children think that pornography changes their behaviour towards each other. 73% of respondents agreed that viewing online pornography affects young people's behaviours towards one another. A higher proportion of girls (77%) than boys (69%) agreed with this statement.

Expectations

Children also think pornography changes their expectations around sex. 82% of respondents agreed that viewing online pornography affects young people's expectations around sex. A larger proportion of girls (85%) than boys (78%) agreed with the statement that 'viewing online pornography affects young people's expectations around sex'.

Body image

Children think that pornography impacts body image: 75% of respondents agreed that viewing online pornography affects children and young people's body image. A higher proportion of girls (79%) than boys (71%) agreed with this statement.

3.2 The impact of pornography on children's lives

3.2.1 Respect in relationships

"I think persuaded can be like can be interpreted in different ways, because persuasion can be seen as like threatened into having sex." - Girl, 16

In the CCo's 2023 report on children and pornography, children highlighted consent as an element of a healthy romantic relationship. Other elements included trust, boundaries, comfort, honesty and communication. The team therefore set out to interrogate how these aspects of a healthy romantic relationship were impacted by children's exposure to pornography. The survey was designed to assess these questions.

"Girls may say no at first but then can be persuaded to have sex"

44% of respondents agreed with the statement "Girls may say no at first but then can be persuaded to have sex".

Survey respondents who had seen pornography were more likely to agree with this statement than those who hadn't. 54% girls and 41% boys who had seen pornography agreed, whereas 46% girls and 30% boys who had not seen pornography agreed. There appears to be a link between believing this statement and exposure to pornography.

"Some girls are teases and pretend they don't want sex when they really do"

33% of respondents agreed with the statement "Some girls are teases and pretend they don't want sex when they really do". There was a gender difference in the responses to this statement too: a larger proportion of boys (38%) than girls (27%) agreed with this statement. Reflecting on the role pornography plays in shaping children's attitudes towards sex, a focus group respondent said that *"the perception of sex is kind of broken now"* - Girl, 16.

Survey respondents who had seen pornography were more likely to agree with the statement than those who had not. 30% of girls and 41% of boys who had seen pornography agreed with this statement, whereas 21% of girls and 29% of boys who had not seen pornography agreed.

Beyond intimate relationships, the team was also told by children in the focus groups that they were concerned pornography was impacting other types of relationships, for example strangers on the street: *"I definitely think that pornography changes people's outlook on sex, and I think that it can lead to, sex being more violent. I think if anything, my biggest worry is that it also affects people's behaviour in general. I think it can also just make people more violent in general, even if it's not in a sexual setting"* – Girl, 16.

3.2.2 Impact on girls and young women

Noting this government's mission to halve violence against women and girls in a decade,²⁰ and previous research from the CCo on the disproportionate impact of some types of online harms on girls and young women, the team designed the survey to assess how women were presented in pornography, and what children thought about it.

Table 4 shows that depictions of physically aggressive sex acts were most likely to depict women receiving the act. Among female respondents, depictions of women were consistently the highest percentages, with the exception of pornography depicting step-relations (where depictions of both men and women were reported as the most common). Across both genders, women are more commonly depicted receiving sexually aggressive acts than men were.

Table 4. Percentages of respondents, split by gender, who had seen men or women receiving acts in pornography

| | Male Respondents | | | Female Respondents | | |
|--|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Act depicted in pornography | % seen <u>woman</u> receiving | % seen <u>man</u> receiving | % seen <u>both</u> receiving | % seen <u>woman</u> receiving | % seen <u>man</u> receiving | % seen <u>both</u> receiving |
| Someone pulling another's hair | 50% | 8% | 18% | 50% | 6% | 13% |
| A man ejaculating on someone's face | 48% | 8% | 18% | 46% | 3% | 13% |
| Someone being choked, or gagging, during oral sex | 46% | 12% | 13% | 45% | 5% | 11% |
| Someone being called names such as whore, bitch or slut | 40% | 6% | 21% | 50% | 5% | 9% |
| Someone receiving anal sex | 44% | 8% | 24% | 28% | 6% | 20% |
| Someone being slapped | 46% | 5% | 18% | 43% | 3% | 12% |
| Someone being strangled, with another person's hands around their throat | 37% | 7% | 21% | 37% | 2% | 12% |
| Someone receiving sex from a step-sibling or step-parent | 25% | 8% | 30% | 21% | 2% | 26% |
| Someone receiving sex whilst asleep | 29% | 9% | 10% | 26% | 4% | 10% |
| Someone not consenting to or refusing a sex act | 18% | 7% | 14% | 21% | 3% | 10% |

Table 4 shows that depictions of physically aggressive sex acts were most likely to depict women receiving the act. Among female respondents, depictions of women were consistently the highest percentages, with the exception of pornography depicting step-relations (where depictions of both men and women were reported as the most common). Across both genders, women are more commonly depicted receiving sexually aggressive acts than men were.

Respondents to the survey were asked to explain, in their own words how viewing online pornography changes children and young people's behaviour towards one another. Several of these comments focused on the impact on attitudes towards women and girls:

"it's too fake and can be violent which is not good for boys seeing that and thinking that's how they treat girls" – Girl, 16

"I have seen it at school that boys expect girls to look a certain way, or they are worthless, it's horrible" – Boy, 17

"[Porn] makes boys act vile towards girls" – Girl, 17

One young person taking part in a focus group emphasised that this is not just a problem for girls, but that they believed it was impacting both boys and girls in different but reciprocal ways: *"I also think that it's not just affecting the girls [...] because it can also affect the boys on the other side because the boys could have seen that on porn and might be like, 'oh, I'm expected to do that.' And then the girl might not want that and then it creates a whole [...] situation that could have been avoided"* – Girl, 16.

3.2.3 Impact on young people's self esteem

The self-esteem of respondents from both genders appears to be impacted by the age of exposure to pornography:

- Respondents who had seen online pornography by the age of 11 reported a lower mean rating for self-esteem statements (3.52), compared to those who first saw online pornography at a later age (3.81).
- The statement with the largest effect of age of exposure to online pornography was "I feel good about myself". Respondents who had seen online pornography by age 11 had a lower average

score for this statement (3.36) than those who first saw online pornography at a later age (3.80). This was the case for both genders.

- On average, those who had seen self-generated pornography (nudes) had a lower mean rating for self-esteem statements (3.54) than those who had not (3.82).

4. What needs to happen now

"It's something that is affecting young people and children and surely the important thing would be to safeguard those children rather than allowing it."

- Girl, 16

This report has shown that it is normal for children to be exposed to pornography online, it is normal for pornography to be violent or illegal, and that this pornography causes a high level of harm to children's views of themselves and each other.

The Children's Commissioner views pornography as an ongoing and serious threat to childhood, evidenced by children's reporting of the impact it has had on their views and expectations for sex and each other. To prevent that harm, the Commissioner believes that protection of children online needs to go further so that no child is exposed to pornography online.

4.1 What we need now

This report has found that, on the eve of the implementation of the Children's Code, children and young people were still being exposed to extreme online pornography, even when they are not looking for it.

The Children's Commissioner strongly believes that some of this exposure will come to an end on 25th July 2025. The Protection of Children's Code is now in force, alongside other provisions under Part 5 of the Online Safety Act. As a statutory consultee of the Act, the Children's Commissioner has supported Ofcom in developing these rules and is confident that they will go some way to prevent children from accessing pornography websites, and that some measures will reduce the volume of pornography

currently cluttering up social media sites. It is vital that these rules are evaluated and adjusted swiftly if they are not providing children with total protection from this content.

Beyond the robust implementation of the Act, the team has identified a number of areas where further action could improve the protection of children from being exposed to pornography.

4.2 Recommendations:

1) Subject online pornography to the same scrutiny as offline pornography

Problem: Extremely harmful genres of pornography such as incest porn and scenes in which adult performers portray themselves as children, which are illegal to distribute in offline formats like DVDs, are still legal to publish on online platforms like pornography websites. Children are accessing these types of pornography online.

Solution: for the BBFC's powers to classify pornography – and therefore determine whether or not a type of porn is legal to publish and distribute – should be extended to the online world.

Recommendation: amend the Online Safety Act to establish the BBFC as a regulator of online pornographic content. This could be written into a Safer Pornography Code.

2) Monitor and mitigate child-user circumvention of the protections against exposure to pornography provided by the Online Safety Act

Problem: there are ways children will be able to circumvent the new rules that are meant to address the myriad of problems identified in this report, for example by downloading a Virtual Private Network (VPN), which remain legal software in the UK.

Solution: ensure users accessing pornography sites using Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) are still subject to highly effective age assurance.

Recommendation: For the government to commit to exploring what measures could be taken to prevent children from using VPNs to circumvent provisions in the Online Safety Act.

This could be achieved by amending the Online Safety Act to bring in an additional provision which would require VPN providers in the UK to put in place Highly Effective Age Assurance to screen underage users and prevent them from accessing pornographic sites.

3) Outlaw the depiction of strangulation in online pornography

Problem: it is normal for children to see strangulation depicted in pornography. This is despite the commissioning of non-fatal strangulation for the purposes of sexual gratification being a criminal offence.

Solution: Remove all harmful online pornography, regardless of whether or not a child should or should not be accessing it.

Recommendation: for the amendment to the Crime and Policing Bill prohibiting the publication of depictions of non-fatal strangulation in online pornography to be comprehensive and unqualified. This means that there should be no condition for the depiction of strangulation to be non-consensual, for example.

4) Support healthy sexual attitudes

Problem: Pornography is harmfully warping children's views of themselves, of each other, and their perceptions and expectations of sex.

Solution: The pornographic content that is available in the UK must not to depict extreme acts. Ensure that if children are exposed to pornography despite the promising measures under the Online Safety Act, they must be able to access offline support required to help them critically assess and understand what they have seen.

Recommendation:

- A) For schools to implement the recently released Relationships, Health and Sex Education Guidance, and in a manner that is accessible and appropriate to their student demographic.
 - B) For the Department for Education to lead a recruitment drive for specialist teachers of RHSE, to ensure children are getting the best education on these topics possible.
-

4.3 What the Children's Commissioner will do next

This report has set out in detail the scale of the challenge the UK faces to keep children safe online. It has set a benchmark against which evaluations of the effectiveness of the Online Safety Act should be made. This report has, in effect, shown the UK what rock bottom looks like. The only way out is up, and the Commissioner will continue to support Ofcom to implement the Online Safety Act to its full potential.

To do this, the Commissioner has committed to carrying out the following projects:²¹

1. Publish an evaluation of the impact of the Online Safety Act on children's online safety, comparing their experiences before and after measures came into force on 25th July 2025
2. Publish a guide for parents to support their children to be safe and feel confident online
3. Continue to monitor children's experiences of the online world
4. Continue to ensure children's voices are reflected in policy decision-making.

5. Methodology

The research for this report was carried out as follows.

Survey

The team commissioned a survey of young people in May 2025¹. This used the same methodology and most of the same questions as the 2023 survey, to ensure consistency and comparability.

The survey population consisted of:

- 1,020 respondents aged 16-21-years.
- 655 females (64%), 353 males (35%), and 12 individuals who identified as non-binary or 'other'.
- Of these, 42% received Free School Meals, 16% had a social worker, 20% had Special Educational Needs (SEN), and 31% had a physical and/or mental disability.

Responses were weighted to better represent the sex and age ratios of 16-21-year-olds in the general population of England.

Focus groups

The CCo hosted an online focus group with five girls aged 16-17 in July 2025. The group was facilitated by three CCo researchers and was audio-recorded and later transcribed. The questions prepared for the discussion covered their perceptions of how people interacted with pornography, and how people,

¹ This online survey was commissioned by CCo and conducted by market research company OnePoll, in accordance with the Market Research Society's code of conduct. Data was collected between 14 to 30th May 2025. All participants are double-opted in to take part in research and are paid an amount depending on the length and complexity of the survey. This survey was overseen and edited by the OnePoll research team. OnePoll are MRS Company Partners, corporate membership of ESOMAR and Members of the British Polling Council.

particularly women and girls, are treated in online spaces, the impact that pornography has on their online and offline lives.

Notes and transcripts from these discussions were reviewed and analysed to identify common themes, and to bring out illustrative anonymised quotes used throughout this report.

DRAFT

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