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Proven link between pornography and mental-health problems in children

New research by the Burnet Institute has established a link between pornography use, mental-health problems and children becoming sexually active at a younger age.

The study of more than 940 children found that boys are viewing pornography from as young as 13, while girls typically involve pornography in their lives from the age of 16.

As pornography often gives the wrong perspective on relationships, such as normalising violent acts and demonstrating a grey area around consent, study author Dr Megan Lim is concerned that without the right sex education in schools, students will not be equipped with the best knowledge to help them grow into responsible citizens.

Patricia Occelli, CEO of Interrelate, agrees with Dr Lim. “In recent years, we have noticed that while children’s awareness of sex has increased, their knowledge is limited. Thanks to the accessibility of the internet, children are now easily exposed to information that can be beyond their level of understanding. Therefore, it’s more important than ever for us to educate children early about sex and their sexuality, to put what they are exposed to into context and to give them an accurate frame of reference. As responsible parents, we cannot allow pornography to become sex education,” she said.

Relationship experts Interrelate, which has been delivering relationship education to communities and in schools for more than 90 years, has learnt that many parents worry about giving their children information about sex, as they’re concerned it will lead them to become sexually active earlier, when in fact research shows this is not the case.

“Teaching kids sex education doesn’t take away their innocence, but not talking about it does limit their ability to make informed choices,” says Ms Occelli. “While parents may think their children are too young to start learning about sex, it’s important that from a very young age they learn what sort of behaviour is acceptable versus what is inappropriate, as well as the consequences of their behaviour.”

“The key for parents is to keep communication lines with their children open, even if it’s not what they want to hear from them. Parents need to be honest with their children, talk early and talk often, and keep explanations age appropriate but be honest,” she said.

Interrelate believes more also needs to be done at a state and federal level to incorporate school education programs in this area that can assist with early intervention.

“While we acknowledge the great work our teachers are doing, more needs to be done to ensure that sex and healthy relationship education is being addressed in our schools,” says Ms Occelli. “Our own experience in delivering relationship education for more than 90 years has shown that teachers often find it helpful to have providers with specific expertise in this area deliver information that is sensitive and difficult to talk about. It’s about ensuring that we are offering additional layers of support to our teachers and schools to ensure the best outcomes for our children.”

Key facts and figures

- New research by the Burnet Institute has established a link between pornography use, mental-health problems and children becoming sexually active at a younger age.
- “Teaching kids sex education doesn’t take away their innocence, but not talking about it does limit their ability to make informed choices,” says Patricia Occelli, CEO of Interrelate.
- Interrelate has been teaching sexuality and relationship education in NSW schools for more than 90 years. It has a reputation for non-discriminatory and open teaching on sensitive issues such as bullying awareness, healthy relationships, puberty and sexuality support.

About Interrelate

Interrelate has been a not-for-profit provider of relationship services to individuals, couples, families, children, schools and communities for more than 90 years. Our working relationship with almost 1000 schools enables us to deliver programs covering bullying, sexuality, puberty and healthy relationships to more than 70,000 children and families. We were the first family service organisation in Australia to provide sexuality education.

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