

Labor Senators' additional comments

1.1 Labor Senators recognise that the issue of 'harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the internet' is a serious and sensitive one and a cause of significant public concern. We acknowledge the evidence supplied to this inquiry from parents, teachers, health professionals, psychologists, government agencies, industry bodies, advocacy groups, academics, social workers and religious groups, among others, about the potential impact that exposure to sexually explicit material has on children's physical and mental health and psychological development.

1.2 Labor Senators note that the contemporary reach and accessibility of sexually explicit material, including pornography, erotica and sex education material via the internet, is unprecedented. We acknowledge that we live in an era where many children have greater facility with technology than their parents and that a multi-faceted approach to protect children from harmful content, including adult supervision, technological access-prevention measures (including internet filtering) and education/media literacy of children and adults, is of ongoing necessity.

1.3 We acknowledge that access to sexually explicit material is associated with potential harms as well as potential benefits to children. Potential harms include distress for younger children; habitual or compulsive consumption of pornography; greater engagement in risky sexual behaviour such as intercourse without condoms (resulting in adverse sexual and mental health outcomes); body image and self-esteem issues; a negative impact on the development of healthy and respectful relationships (including the rise of problem sexting and 'revenge porn') and sexual offending by children inspired by pornography. Potential benefits include sexual education, including information for young people of non-normative sexualities; and increased awareness of sexual rights and responsibilities.

1.4 Labor Senators note that the term 'children' is broad and that the needs, abilities, interests and behaviours of children are related to their stage of development. We agree that it is instructive to use more variegated categorisations such as 'young children' (0–12 years of age) and adolescents/young people (13–17 years of age) and understand that age/stage may affect whether and the extent to which children are vulnerable to portrayals of sex and sexual activity.

1.5 We note that the term 'pornography' is used to refer to a vast and diverse range of content, from soft-core imagery to graphically violent material which may be Refused Classification in Australia, or images exchanged consensually over mobile phones between people in relationships, for example. We note that the term 'Sexually Explicit Material' (SEM) is preferred by social scientists and more usefully captures the range of issues addressed in this inquiry, given that children may produce, seek out or be exposed to a broad range of sexually explicit material on the internet for a broad range of reasons, including for the purposes of sexual education.

1.6 Labor Senators understand that issues of definition and categorisation complicate efforts to understand potential harms and interventions in this space and that more clearly segmented and focussed approaches to problem identification and response formulation may be useful. For example, in the current inquiry, general concerns about the sexualisation of children of all ages via the mainstream media (including representations of children in advertising) are considered alongside concerns about sexual offending by children who have themselves been subject to child abuse (either by having been exposed to pornography, by having been sexually abused or by having inappropriately witnessed sexual activity in the home environment).

1.7 Labor Senators recognise that various research methods and practices complicate efforts to understand potential harms or to make definitive statements on the effects on online pornography on children. While submissions presented a variety of data on pornography usage, studies differed in terms of the country surveyed, age groups surveyed, how recently the study was undertaken, how the data was collected and whether pornography exposure was accidental or intentional, for example. We note ethical considerations make obtaining evidence on these issues challenging.

1.8 Labor Senators support an evidence-based, best practice approach to policy making and regard quality research as a sound basis for effective interventions. We advocate for more sophisticated and nuanced approaches to inform progress on the important issue of the impact of sexually explicit material on children in Australia. In particular, we advocate for:

- (a) thorough review of research on the issue of the potential harm being done to Australian children and young people through access to sexually explicit material on the internet;
- (b) evaluating the need for both generalised and targeted policy interventions according to characteristics of the viewer (such as age, gender, maturation, etc.) and their care setting (vulnerable or at-risk children), for example;
- (c) research that better assists in understanding what online sources children seek out of curiosity about sex, or for sexual education/information purposes with a view to ensuring the availability of appropriate online sources for children in Australia;
- (d) research that assists individuals employed in roles whose work involves children to recognise indicators of child abuse and to respond appropriately.

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