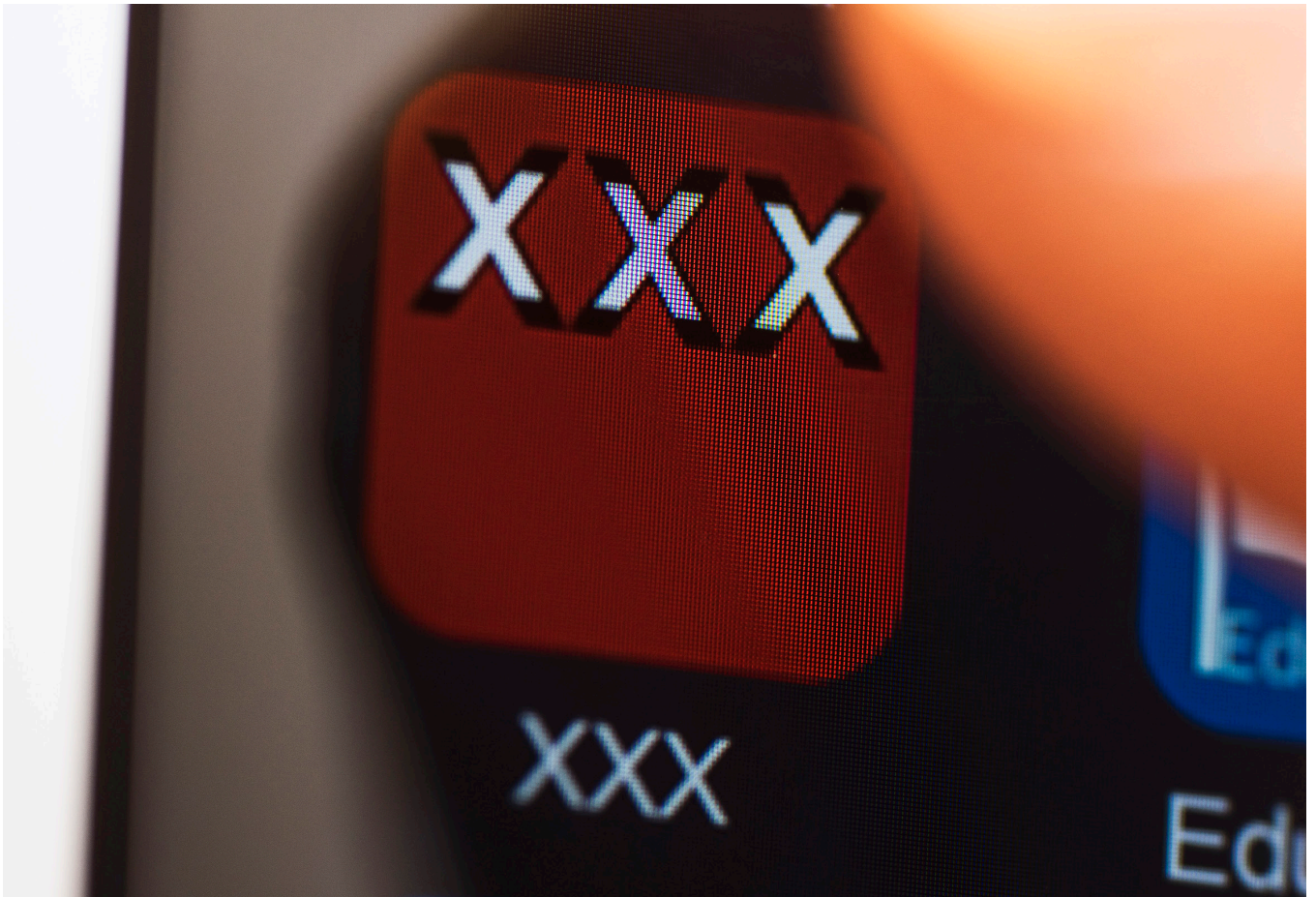


What's porn got to do with it? The link between viewing adult pornography and online sexual offending against children

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Who we are

How we help keep children safe

We work to reach adults and young people to prevent abuse from happening in the first place – and, if it already has, to prevent it from happening again.

Where abuse has already taken place, we work with all those affected, including adult men and women who have abused; young people with harmful sexual behaviour; children with concerning sexual behaviours; and victims of abuse and other family members. But we also work with families and with adults and young people where there has been no abuse, to help them keep themselves and others as safe as possible.

We run the Stop It Now UK and Ireland helpline. A confidential service available to anyone with concerns about child sexual abuse, including adults worried about their own or someone else’s sexual thoughts, feelings or behaviour towards children. And we run Shore, a website that provides a safe space for teenagers worried about their own or a friend’s sexual behaviour.

The Faithfull Papers

We research and evaluate our work to make sure what we do protects children, and we share the evidence with professionals and the public. We want to make best use of our expertise, our data and our insights, independently and in partnerships, to develop new strategies and interventions that help keep children safe.

We advocate for a greater focus on preventing abuse before it happens and for a public health approach to the prevention of child sexual abuse.

The Faithfull Papers are a series of reports showcasing our understanding of what works to protect children to the widest possible audience – to policymakers, journalists, researchers and partner organisations in the UK and overseas.

Around one in 6 children will be sexually abused.

Around one-third of this is carried out by under-18s.

And around 9 in 10 children who are sexually abused know their abuser.

At the Lucy Faithfull Foundation, we work to stop child sexual abuse before it happens.

We’re here for everyone who needs us.

Executive summary

Opinions on online adult pornography are often polarised. Some people claim its use is a self-centred activity that impairs sexuality with a partner and fosters unhealthy sexual attitudes. Others state it is a modern digital way to expand one's sexual repertoire and fulfil sexual needs. In this paper, we consider it in terms of child protection and present the particular concerns that we, as practitioners, hear from the people we work with who have viewed sexual images of children or feel at risk of doing so.

Working with individuals who anonymously access our support, we are in the unique position to hear how adult pornography, despite it being legal, has contributed to problems in their lives, most significantly contributing to them viewing sexual images of children.

We review some of the models to understand the function of pornography use and why individuals can find it so problematic. We also share how we support people to take responsibility for their actions, their pathway towards online sexual offending, and their route away from offending. For some people, in some situations, this means supporting them in their decision to reduce or end their use of legal adult pornography. For others, who have made their own choice to continue their use of adult pornography, we help them consider parameters around their online pornography use to keep safe online, and try to ensure that their behaviour does not escalate to viewing sexual images of children.

“**We are in the unique position to hear how adult pornography, despite it being legal, has contributed to problems in their lives, most significantly contributing to them viewing sexual images of children.**”



Background

At the Lucy Faithfull Foundation, we design, develop and deliver prevention initiatives targeting people who pose a risk to children offline and online, and those in a position to protect children from sexual harm.

This includes:

- our anonymous [Stop It Now helpline](#)
- [direct programmes](#) and anonymous [online self-help](#) for people worried about their own or someone else's online sexual behaviour
- risk and capacity to protect [assessments](#), where our referrals, largely from statutory agencies, ask us to assess people and families for potential risk of sexual harm to children
- bespoke interventions to address a risk of sexual harm and enhance the protective capacity of carers
- our [campaign to deter people from online child sexual abuse](#) including viewing sexual images of children and online sexual communication with children (also known as online grooming); trying to divert those who are offending to seek help instead
- [Project Intercept](#), which uses behavioural science, partnerships and innovation to roll out effective online warnings across the internet

Through our clinical work with people who have viewed sexual images of children online, we have observed an increase in those reporting problematic adult pornography use. People who use our services frequently tell us that adult pornography has caused them difficulty within their intimate and wider relationships, their social and work lives, and their view of themselves. More significantly, we are hearing that adult pornography influences online behaviours and contributes to online sexual offending against children.

Many people who access support through our anonymous Stop It Now helpline report problematic use of legal pornography. Based on a review of helpline calls in April 2022, of those people arrested for online sexual offences against children and where adult pornography use was discussed, almost 80% reported having a legal pornography problem. This case example illustrates the type of difficulties we hear on a daily basis.

Case example

Trevor (49) is married, with no children, and employed full-time in a technical role. Trevor says he has been addicted to adult pornography since around 12 or 13 years of age and believes that his use has been problematic since then.

Trevor started to view bestiality material around two years before calling Stop It Now. He sought previous help for his pornography addiction from another agency around a year ago and said the advice he was given by the professional he spoke to was to just ignore pornography. On the evening of the call to our Stop It Now helpline, Trevor had clicked on a pop-up thumbnail image, which he knew was an image of a child. He described his use of pornography as spiralling out of control, with one image leading to another and then onto "darker" sexual content. He said that the extent of his pornography viewing had become extreme, and that at every opportunity he would access pornography.

Trevor is one of many people who contact us, who feel that their use of adult pornography was a significant factor in their pathway to viewing sexual images of children online. In this paper, we will share our experiences of how adult pornography becomes a problem for the people we work with, how it can be related to their online offending, and how we work with people to help them understand and manage their adult pornography use.

This paper will focus on the use of adult pornography by adult men and its relationship to child protection. Adult women also use pornography and can cause harm to children, but this is not something we will focus on in this paper. Young people's exposure to pornography is an important issue when considering the potential harms of online sexual content, but this is not a topic we will be tackling in this paper.

How pornography has changed: online adult pornography is free, easy to find, and more extreme

The term pornography is used to describe any material showing sexual activity, intended to cause the user sexual arousal or excitement. Over the last few decades, the world of pornography has significantly changed, in both accessibility and content.

Previously pornography was found on VHS tapes and in magazines and purchased in newsagents or from specialist sex shops, but the internet means that pornography is now easily accessible, comes at a limited, or no cost, and provides the consumer with a level of anonymity that was not possible before. Advances in smartphone technology mean people can discreetly view pornography at all times of the day. People who would never have considered going to an adult shop or renting explicit videos are now able to access pornography at the click of a button (1). Pornographic content has become more extreme and it is more widely and easily available, for example, on social media networks (2).



Around 25% of search engine requests are pornography-related (3), with the adult website Pornhub averaging 115 million visits per day worldwide (4).

Technological changes have had a major impact on the role and normalisation of pornography in society.

Pornography obtained on the high street years ago would be considered mild compared to the limitless array of content available online today. Popular mainstream pornography sites portray high levels of sexual violence (5), with 45% of Pornhub scenes being found to include at least one act of physical aggression such as gagging, slapping, hair pulling and choking, most often objectifying and demeaning women (6).

The internet has made it easier to view sexual material depicting harm and illegal content, including sexual images of children. In 2022, the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) reported being made aware of 255,571 webpages containing, linking to, or advertising, sexual images of children (7). Since our Stop It Now helpline opened in 2002, the number of contacts we have received from people concerned about viewing sexual images of children has increased year on year, with a particular increase since the pandemic, going up 36% from 3,944 in 2019/20 to an average of 5,391 contacts a year since the first COVID-19 lockdown.



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How adult pornography impacts on, or contributes to, sexual harm to children

There is an ongoing debate about whether adult pornography contributes to sexual harm to children and the evidence is not clear in one direction or the other. For the majority of people who use our services to help stop viewing sexual images of children, adult pornography appears to be a significant contributing factor in their pathway towards offending.

Adult pornography can affect people differently, at different times and in different contexts. As practitioners we are motivated to identify under what circumstances might viewing pornography increase a particular individual's risk of offending, and how to reduce that risk and thereby protect children.

The type of pornography someone views may indicate their sexual preference; but pornography could have an impact on their preference development as well as their level of sexual interest, appetite or sexual preoccupation. Some pornography is extremely violent in nature and eroticises non-consensual sex acts, which could lead more vulnerable individuals to see this as normal or expected aspects of sex. Some research has demonstrated that viewing violent pornography has a stronger link to someone's likelihood of being sexually aggressive than non-violent pornography (8, 9, 10). Some argue that people's attitudes and behaviours are being influenced by violent pornography, whereas others highlight that those who already have pro-violent attitudes or behaviours may be more interested in accessing violent pornography because it aligns with their existing sexual interests.

Some people might look for more extreme pornography over time – even if it doesn't match their real-world sexual interests

Our interest is focused on the relationship between violent pornography and the potential risk towards children. In our own research (11) and clinical experience, the pathway from 'regular' adult pornography to sexual images of children often crossed through pornography that was more extreme, including pornography that depicted different levels of violence, or harmful sexual activity, for example, Trevor and viewing bestiality images. Viewing pornography where the societal norms and rules of consensual sex are violated could have an impact on a person's perception of what type of pornography or sex is acceptable (12). Once that barrier has been crossed in a person's pornography viewing, additional barriers may become easier to get past, and result in viewing more harmful or illegal sexual material.

“**Viewing pornography where the societal norms and rules of consensual sex are violated could have an impact on a person's perception of what type of pornography or sex is acceptable.**”

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Why do people view more extreme material online?

There are several potential reasons why someone's pornography use might escalate to viewing more extreme material. One is explained by the Coolidge effect (13), a decline in sexual interest when sexual activity is restricted to one stimulus, but then a renewed sexual interest due to the introduction of a new, novel stimulus (for example, a different sexual partner or a different type of sexual material). People have reported needing different types of sexual material to receive that same 'hit'. The search to achieve this greater sexual gratification becomes linked to an escalation in viewing, including seeking out novel (and potentially extreme) material to obtain it (14).

The people we work with speak about their past desire to view novel material even when it did not align with their sexual preference. They tell us that after a long period of time looking at adult pornography, that pornography stopped being as appealing or exciting as it once was: "I got bored with it... (so I started) looking a little bit for variety I guess" (11). As shown with Trevor, their viewing began to shift to different things that would provide the level of gratification they previously experienced. This escalation included more extreme adult pornography and/or viewing sexual images of children. Others report that the heightened physiological and emotional experience of knowing they were engaging in a risky or transgressive act encouraged them to continue with the behaviour. Some men we work with share that because they had negative views of themselves they felt stuck in self-destructive behaviour. This helps us to understand why some individuals who are not sexually attracted to children might start viewing sexual images of them, the novelty of the image being the focus, rather than the image content.

The impact of individual differences

Just as pornography is different, so are its users. Some people who use pornography may do so without experiencing significant negative consequences, but others may develop problems related to their pornography use (15).

Several researchers have found viewing pornography to be a predictor of aggressive attitudes and behaviours towards women (16). Some individuals are at higher risk of engaging in sexual harm than others. Some researchers suggest that those who exhibit particular traits, namely 'hostile masculinity' (where men hold views supporting the domination of women and their superiority to women) and 'impersonal sex' (sex that lacks emotional intimacy or commitment) are more likely to engage in sexual harm; known as the Confluence Model (16). According to this model, these traits may interact with exposure to pornography, increasing the likelihood of a person engaging in sexually harmful behaviours. Although this interaction is found in some studies, for example, frequent use of pornography being found to be associated with higher levels of sexual objectification of females (17,18) and making unwanted sexual advances towards females (19), others have failed to confirm a link between pornography use and reported sexual aggression (20).

The presence of atypical sexual interests (for example, sexual interest in children), excessive sexual preoccupation, and offence-supportive attitudes and beliefs (for example, that children enjoy sexual behaviours or are sexual beings) are risk factors linked to sexual offending (21). These dynamic risk factors may be associated with pornography use and/or viewing sexual images of children. For example, when considering sexual preoccupation, the people we work with often say that they spent hours online looking at pornography and that they frequently experienced sexual thoughts throughout the day, evidencing a sexual preoccupation that interfered with their work, relationships and social or leisure time. This preoccupation may lead to their sexual urges and needs being paramount and to the detriment of other things in their lives, again leading to withdrawal from positive things such as social interaction, pro-social activities or employment.

It is important to consider not only the level of consumption of pornography, but also the individual's engagement with it, the function it has and what level of control they feel they have around their use (see questions in appendix). The frequency and/or quantity of pornography

consumed has been found to be associated with the extent to which pornography has negatively impacted peoples' lives (22). Early exposure to pornography is a common theme for those who have then gone on to view sexual images of children (23), as their level of use increasing over time, just like Trevor. In one study that explored pathways to viewing sexual images of children, one participant discussed how he was using pornography "every night before I went to sleep" (23). The people we work with often tell us that their pornography use increased over time and that they would use pornography over longer and longer durations.

Other risk factors related to sexual offending include how able a person is to initiate, maintain and feel comfortable within intimate relationships (24). For people who struggle with this, pornography can be used as a way to deal with those relationship problems, or an attempt to meet needs that are not being met within a relationship. We regularly hear this from people we work with, and that a lack of intimate relationships, or problems within their relationships, were triggers to their pornography use or their pornography use escalating (see Tim's story). This indicates that there are some people, in some circumstances, who might be more at risk of using pornography as a way to meet needs they feel are not being met elsewhere.

Case example – Tim's story

Tim (31) contacted the Lucy Faithfull Foundation Scotland after he was arrested for viewing sexual images of children online. He described the relief that he felt now that his problems were out in the open and that he could access support. He had been struggling with his online behaviour for over 10 years. Tim had become more and more isolated and found that he would find excuses to get away from work or miss social occasions due to his preoccupation with pornography. He wasn't sure if it was an addiction but felt he had lost control over it and it was significantly impacting many areas of his life. Tim's childhood was unstable due to living with domestic violence in his early years, when his father left the family home his family experienced significant financial difficulties.

Tim explained that when he was in his early twenties he had found out that his girlfriend had cheated on him and found this difficult to cope with. At that point, he was someone who occasionally used porn but after the breakup, this became more frequent. He found that when engaging with porn online,

he would explore sexual fantasy he had not been able to engage in, in the real world and this led to viewing more and more variety of material as he felt he was sexually naïve. Although Tim was working at the time, he felt less connected to his work colleagues and would be embarrassed if they mentioned sexual things or if they asked about his love or sex life. He was embarrassed that he was not able to find a girlfriend and was ashamed of some of the content that he was now frequently accessing online. His self-esteem now reduced, his social circle thinning, and isolating himself meant he was spending less and less time with others or engaging in healthy habits like hobbies or leisure activities. He found even at work he was thinking about pornography and on a couple of occasions looked at some during work meetings. Tim felt annoyed and angry with himself for letting this take up so much of his time and would from time to time manage a few days where he didn't look at pornography. When he returned to use pornography, he felt like he was a failure and had no control.

On one of his returns to pornography, he described clicking on a pop-up of which he wasn't sure of the content; it contained illegal images of children. At this point, Tim was experiencing high levels of shame, and now worried that what he had done was illegal and that if he shared this with anyone he would be reported to the police. He deleted the sexual images of children and promised himself he would never view that kind of content again. Several weeks passed and he continued to view pornography on a daily basis, the content was becoming more extreme and he again found himself returning to sexual images of children. This cycle continued and he would have periods of time when he tried to stop viewing sexual images of children but having no route out of his cycle he felt hopeless and helpless.

We gave Tim information about the arousal continuum and how when individuals are in an aroused state they are less in control of their thinking or behaviours. He was encouraged to pay attention to the situations, thoughts and feelings which often led to him becoming sexually aroused. This can help him to actively divert his attention to an alternative activity. Doing this at the earliest stages of arousal is often easier than when thoughts, feelings and bodily reactions are more sexual in nature. If this arousal occurs when he is online, he would be encouraged to think about the types of sites/activities he is accessing. Due to the nature of the internet, individuals can be on sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and shopping sites, and be intrigued by something, and before they are consciously aware they have moved to sexual content. Think about the number of times you have picked up your phone to do one task and ended up some time later being on an unrelated website, totally forgetting why you picked up your phone.

Tim completed an internet safety plan outlining the internal states (thoughts or mood states) and external states (for example, time of day, location) he would need to avoid particular websites or apps.

Tim was able to spend time thinking about why the internet had become an easier place for him to meet his social/sexual/intimacy needs but that he still felt lonely and isolated. He could see that the rejection he experienced from his relationship breakup had become a barrier to him meeting new people in the real world. He described how he wanted to develop his self-esteem and communication skills and thought about ways he could do this. He was encouraged to consider whether there may be social activities or clubs he could join, and he decided that instead of making excuses when colleagues invited him somewhere he would make himself go even just for half an hour. The Good Lives model (25) can help us communicate the differing needs that each of us have; it allows us to see that our behaviours are motivated by meeting our needs. By using the model people can see what needs are most important for them, and think about what needs they were attempting to meet through their pornography use and eventually their viewing of sexual images of children. This allows them to develop ways to meet these needs in more helpful ways. There may be needs that they had totally forgotten about which would help them feel better, for example, looking after their physical health, or learning a new skill or hobby.

In the meantime, Tim decided to step back from using particular sites/apps on his phone, he realised that he needs to be very mindful of what he is doing online. He is undecided about whether he will return to adult pornography use but feels if he does he will be in a much better place for managing his use and being aware of the signs his use is becoming problematic. Tim has been encouraged to consider whether counselling or looking at his childhood trauma may be helpful to explore the underlying reasons why he found his relationship breakup with his girlfriend so destabilising, and why building friendships and connections has been difficult for him throughout his life.



Why some people view more harmful and illegal content

It is important to identify why pornography use might escalate, and why some individuals might keep returning to online sexual material, including sexual images of children. Research suggests that if the consequences of a behaviour are rewarding (creating positive feelings, or escaping negative emotions or states), the behaviour is more likely to be repeated (26). It is one of the suggested ways that we learn how to behave (and not to behave). When someone views pornography and engages in masturbation and orgasm, in essence, a pleasurable experience that is rewarding, they become more likely to use pornography again in order to achieve that same reward. The pornography viewing is positively reinforced, and therefore increases.

Although sexual gratification is an obvious reward from accessing pornography, there are other rewards, such as the feelings of anticipation and excitement (or putting it neuro-chemically, dopamine and adrenaline release). Here we have the 'slot machine effect' (27); when a person's access to pornography is being somewhat driven by the anticipation and excitement of what they might find next. This is commonly seen in gambling, hence the name, and has also become a familiar explanation for people viewing pornography.

In our own research with 20 men who had been arrested for viewing sexual images of children, adult pornography was discussed frequently as a first step in their journey (11). Viewing adult pornography does not mean it is inevitable that someone will then escalate to illegal sexual images, but for the people we work with the two appear to be significantly linked. The factors around legal pornography use moving towards offending are complex and the evidence is mixed. It does appear pornography's contribution to sexually harmful behaviour is not universal, as there are aspects of the pornography and the person that make a difference. But in our work, adult pornography often serves as a gateway to viewing sexual images of children. This makes pornography an important aspect to explore within our clinical work when it comes to child protection, particularly online.

Problematic pornography use: addiction, habit or compulsion?

The people we work with often talk about their experience of adult pornography use and their view that its use has become a problem. However, some people may not recognise the extent of their pornography use, or do not consider their use problematic, even if adult pornography has played a role in their subsequent online offending behaviour.

Individuals describe their pornography use in different ways. Some people may speak of addiction, others may label their use as a habit, with some people describing what they believe is a compulsion or a dependence. Debate exists around whether problematic pornography use meets the definition of addiction. There is sometimes resistance from both the people we work with and professionals to considering problematic pornography use as an addiction, with some concerned that the label of addiction can be used to justify the behaviour, or consider it uncontrollable (28). Some of the people we work with have felt that their pornography use has been addictive in nature and there are many organisations and researchers who adopt this view, for example, Sex Addicts Anonymous.

Regardless of the noun being used, when people talk about pornography use becoming a problem, they feel that it has negatively impacted them, their lives and perhaps even the people around them. They also report returning to this behaviour on an ongoing basis despite knowing that it has negative impacts on their lives. This same pattern is in other behaviours, including those where it feels easier to label the behaviour as an addiction, for example, alcohol or gambling. Whether or not the label of addiction is used, pornography access can be a significantly negative behaviour for some people, and not recognising or acknowledging their position could become a barrier for those people who wish to seek support and help. These challenges can include not knowing where to go for support, as well as trying to manage significant feelings of

shame due to the nature of the behaviour and the message that this behaviour is not one 'deserving' of the same formal recognition as other difficulties.

When talking to people about their pornography use, many describe experiencing significant difficulties, reflective of what some people might consider with an addiction. This includes the experience of compulsivity and loss of control, wanting to stop and making attempts to stop but being unable to do so. It appears from what the people we work with tell us and from recent research in the area that pornography has the capacity to encourage individuals back to it, returning for a dopamine hit, which then continues to reinforce the behaviour. Some describe an initial interest and curiosity shifting to a need or uncontrollable urge. This return to the behaviour can be further encouraged by technological algorithms and 'cookies', making viewing recommendations to individuals based on their access history, which will include pornography recommendations for those who have viewed sexual material previously. Individuals not only speak of cycles of using, attempting to abstain and using again, but of hours seemingly disappearing as they scroll through online sexual material.

Recent research involving people who wanted to stop using pornography identified a number of problems that they attributed to their pornography use (28). Several reported sexual difficulties, erectile difficulties, and diminished desire for partnered sex, and many were relatively certain that they were suffering from pornography-induced erectile dysfunction (PIED). These individuals also identified perceived psychosocial consequences including increased depression, anxiety and emotional numbness, and decreased energy, motivation, concentration, mental clarity, productivity, and ability to feel pleasure (29). Some people we work with say that pornography also led to their move towards more extreme sexual material online, including sexual images of children.

Pornography as a coping strategy

It is useful to consider the function that pornography can have, for example, numbing emotional pain or escaping difficulties in life.

A large proportion of the individuals who access our services have experienced adverse childhood experiences and/or mental health problems. A significant number have experienced trauma in early life, including being a victim of childhood sexual abuse.

Some people we work with felt that the shame of feeling trapped in the cycle of excessive pornography use exacerbated their mental health problems (most commonly depression). Many people report feeling depressed at the same time as developing a problematic relationship with pornography. Of the 800 individuals who have accessed the Lucy Faithfull Foundation Scotland services, most of whom had been arrested for online sexual offences involving children, in the last 10 years, 48% believed they were depressed during the period of time they were viewing sexual images of children or engaging in sexual communication involving children. Many self-report that despite the added stresses of being in the criminal justice system their mental health has improved after arrest (only 5% reported having experienced the onset of depression after arrest).

Negative beliefs, thoughts and feelings about their online behaviour contributed to higher levels of shame, and negative views of themselves that led to further social isolation. Many of the people we work with tell us that they were actively suicidal at the time of offending. Many of the individuals who have viewed sexual images of children were accessing both legal pornography and sexual images of children as a way to cope with the challenges of life. Trauma and adverse childhood experiences can increase an individual's sensitivity to rejection and reliance on unhealthy coping strategies. We often direct individuals to access support from a therapist, counsellor or support worker who can help them with this if there are deep-rooted issues that need addressing.

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How we help people to understand the reasons for their excessive pornography use

When working directly with a person and discussing their use of pornography, it is important to identify what function the pornography has had. Sometimes the function can start off as one thing and evolve into something else.

For example, some individuals might first view pornography because they want to learn about particular sexual behaviours or activities, or they may generally be curious about what pornography looks like. Others may be introduced to it by a family member, partner or friend, online or offline, sometimes at an age that the individual is not developmentally ready for or would not have sought out themselves, which can set individuals on a premature and unhelpful psychosexual trajectory (30). The function over time may change to one of sexual gratification. For some, motivation may primarily be driven by a desire or need to escape reality, avoid difficult emotions, to feel better, or it may be a mixture of sexual and non-sexual motivation. For some, it may be about meeting sexual needs that are not met through real-life relationships. Some people say that at the beginning of their use, they had a level of control and pleasure from using pornography, but that the level of control decreased over time.

Some people find that meeting needs online is considerably more appealing than in real life. This includes those who use the internet in pro-social ways and find connection, companionship, debate, and interaction more beneficial or rewarding from the comfort of their computer or phone screen. It can also be true of online pornography. Anxiety in social situations and experiences of, or sensitivity to, sexual rejection can lead to individual differences that can influence use of online pornography. Similarly, finding interactions with others challenging,

or being confused by the unwritten rules of dating and sexual interactions may also be relevant factors (particularly relevant for autistic individuals). Many of the people we work with who have viewed sexual images of children have withdrawn from real-world relationships, both socially and sexually, and increasingly spend more and more time online.

Exploring a person's pornography use

One of the first tasks we have in our clinical practice when someone says their adult pornography use is linked to viewing sexual images of children is to ascertain what their use looks like, how they feel about their use and what impact this might be having on their life. Listed in the appendix are some of the questions that are helpful to ask.

By using some of these questions, we can start to develop an understanding of the person's relationship with pornography, both now and over their lifetime. It is important to not make assumptions about a person's use of pornography, but instead, try to understand the person's insight into their own use and the role of pornography for them. This includes any impact the person feels their pornography use is having on different areas of their life, what needs their sexual behaviour has been meeting for them, and what they want their life to look like moving forward, including how they wish to manage their pornography use.

Helping people manage their pornography use

Often people who have been arrested for sexual images of children-related offences report that they no longer want to look at pornography and have limited interest in online sexual material. Many going through the stressful situation of entering the criminal justice system report that their libido is significantly reduced or non-existent and they have the awareness that the behaviour they had been engaging in freely now has significant implications for them, especially if they were to continue. Some people are in a state of shock and say they never want to look at pornography again.

Our approach at this point is that of understanding the current situation and suggesting that as they progress through the criminal justice system they may reassess whether they access legal pornography. If a person's legal pornography use has been significantly linked to viewing sexual

images of children, it is important to explore with them what this means in terms of their future risk to children online. Our focus is child protection and we will discuss with people whether their continued use of pornography is safe, given their escalation to sexual images of children. Some people decide that they wish to cease their pornography use in order to eliminate future risks, whereas others want to continue to use adult pornography but want some help and advice to identify how to use it safely. Many individuals we support develop an internet safety plan which helps them consider the factors at play when they use pornography and what factors might increase their risk of viewing sexual images of children.

We work with the person to understand the function that pornography was playing in their life, and to weigh up the pros (gains) and cons (losses) of further use. Below is a decision grid similar to that found in our [Get Help online self-help modules](#).

Decision grid

	Gains	Losses
Continue to use pornography	No effort needed to change Pornography gives me short-term gains, feel better, etc.	Might lead to offending again Might mean I become pre-occupied with sex again Might lead to me and my partner having arguments about my use.
Make changes to how I use porn	I might feel more in control I will be safer Reducing my time online will mean I can focus time on other things	This will require self-control Change is difficult I'll need to find other coping strategies when I'm experiencing uncomfortable emotions
Give up pornography use	(all of the above) Knowing I will be unlikely to view sexual images of children through this pathway again	(all of the above) I might have real difficulty giving this behaviour up I might need to ask for help I might at times fail

Some individuals report feeling that they are 'safer' not using pornography, and some may be recommended to abstain by law enforcement professionals working with them. Many professionals within the criminal justice system such as police officers, probation officers, prison staff, social workers and psychologists are often left with dilemmas regarding how to direct or enforce guidance regarding legal pornography use for those who have committed online sexual offences. These dilemmas may be influenced by attitudes, views of others in their workplace, training, research, and their own personal views and beliefs about pornography.

For example, when a police officer conducts a web browser check for an individual convicted of sexual images of children offences they need to have a good understanding of their previous pathway to offending to identify a potential increase in risk. Building a shared understanding of the role adult pornography has had within their past behaviour is a key part of this. There may be situations when a service user may have a different view from the professional about the associated risk of adult pornography. For example, a professional may view a person's pornography use as significantly related to their risk of sexual offending, and could either strongly discourage or not permit the person to continue using adult pornography.

Motivational interviewing techniques and work around perspective-taking and consequences of behaviour may be beneficial in such situations. Working on a collaborative plan is ideal, although there can be situations where this is extremely challenging and some scenarios where compulsion and enforcement may be required. Supervision and monitoring of plans also need to be discussed, respecting the imbalance of power that service users may feel in such situations. When a person expresses that they are experiencing urges to look at pornography we can share some strategies which can help, including working through our [self-help module about pornography](#).

Tips for quitting or reducing the use of pornography

- **Get support/accountability – speak to a partner or trusted family or friend**
- **Make sure someone is nearby when you're using personal devices**
- **Leave devices out in common spaces rather than bring them into your bedroom**
- **During the time of day you usually look at pornography, fill that time intentionally or find a way to make it impossible**
- **Try yoga, mindfulness, meditation, distraction, urge surfing**
- **Build on willpower, mind over body**
- **Positive self-talk**
- **Journaling – consider the consequences**
- **Access a professional to try CBT or to address underlying issues**

How to prevent online child sexual abuse

Many people start to view sexual images of children after becoming desensitised to legal pornography and looking for more extreme and transgressive content. To prevent child sexual abuse, there needs to be interventions along this pathway.

This might involve making conversations about pornography less taboo, and being non-judgemental but curious about the potential negative impacts of excessive pornography use. This may also involve creating referral pathways to professionals for individuals who want help to limit, reduce or quit using pornography, as well as encouraging access to self-help resources. Some people report being referred for counselling or CBT but being reluctant to share their reliance on pornography; we need to find ways to help practitioners be more comfortable and competent around this issue.

Intervention or support may be particularly important for people who have a sexual interest in children. Being able to acknowledge their sexual interest and speak to someone about the challenges associated with this can help them

manage it safely. Often people will be aware that viewing images online consistent with this sexual interest is illegal, but some may benefit from exploring the harms to them and others if they were to view sexual images of children.

Education about the potential negative messages promoted by pornography is important, for example, the prevalence and normalisation of sexual violence, the sexualisation of teenagers, the disregard of consent and mutual pleasure, the celebration of power differences, and the blurring of boundaries regarding sexual behaviour within families (for example, step-parent or step-child pornography) and encouraging sexual objectivization. All users of online pornography need to be conscious of their online choices and consider the consequences that a click can have.



Intervention or support may be particularly important for people who have a sexual interest in children. Being able to acknowledge their sexual interest and speak to someone about the challenges associated with this can help them manage it safely.



Conclusions

The people we work with often tell us how their use of adult pornography affects their lives, offending, and is a frequent topic in our clinical practice. Pornography content and availability have changed considerably over time, and there remains a lack of agreement around whether pornography use impacts individuals negatively or can be considered an addiction.

From our experience, there are people for whom pornography use is problematic, and negatively impacts many areas of their life. One of these is that pornography use has been seen as a gateway to some people's online sexual offending against children, including viewing sexual images of children. This makes the use of pornography an important child protection consideration. We need to recognise this risk, open the dialogue and ensure the resources are available to manage problematic adult pornography use.

Education

Preventing offending from happening in the first place must be a greater area of focus for all involved in child protection. Education is a fundamental part of this and pornography, the messages it promotes and the impact it can have, need to be discussed. Not everyone will experience the effects of adult pornography in the same way, but it is still important for people to be made aware of the possible consequences. We need to start talking about the impact of adult pornography more publicly, opening the door for people to consider and evaluate their pornography use. People need to know the legal bounds of pornography and what to do if they see an image which is illegal. Non-judgemental conversation and education need to be part of the prevention focus, so that adults can make informed decisions about their use of sexual material online. Although pornography is often viewed in isolation it is not an isolated issue, it is something which can have

an impact on someone's relationships, health and behaviours (including offending behaviour).

Working together to understand the role pornography plays

For people who have identified that their adult pornography use is problematic, collaborative working is paramount and there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach. It is important to help people explore the function pornography has had for them, and how this then relates to their online sexual offending and risk to children. Within our clinical practice, we explore with people their pornography use, to help us and them better understand its role in their lives.

From here, we can work with people about how they wish to move forward. For some, that will be ceasing their use of adult pornography. For others, who make the decision to continue using pornography, we will work with them to develop strategies to help them regulate their use and ensure that they can manage any potential risks and do not view sexual images of children.

We do this by asking relevant questions and offering both practical and psychological considerations and strategies for their future pornography use. Internet safety plans can help people set boundaries around their online behaviour, highlighting online risks and how these can be managed. The Good Lives Model can help people identify the needs being met by their viewing of adult pornography or sexual images of

children and help them develop a life plan that involves meeting their needs in healthy ways. This sometimes involves helping them manage boredom, loneliness, low self-worth, isolation, difficulties in relationships, sexual thoughts or urges all of which are risk factors associated with sexual offending.

Some people might need additional professional support to address underlying difficulties (for example, mental health problems or trauma). This is not always easy, so part of our role is to help people consider what additional help they need and where they might be able to get it. This could be through individual therapeutic work or through support groups which can play a role in helping individuals move forward. The importance of accountability and support is vital, as this significantly increases the likelihood of success in achieving goals.

The role we can all play

As a society, we need to pay attention to the influence and impact pornography can have, in contrast to what Trevor was encouraged to do, which was ignore pornography. For some people telling them just to ignore pornography or to stop viewing it dismisses the difficulties they are experiencing and the challenges of changing any habitual behaviour.

As an organisation, we want to fully understand the mechanisms at play when someone moves from legal pornography to offending behaviour, and the individual differences that make particular individuals more likely to cross the line from legal to illegal images online. We strive to reach out to those who are beginning to cross this line. We encourage curiosity about the impact that pornography can have, and call for more rigorous research and compelling evidence into identifying the risks around online pornography, especially in relation to child protection.

We also call for the same consideration and resources for people struggling with problematic or excessive pornography use as anyone else with another habitual or addictive behaviour. Stigma and shame can be barriers to asking for help, which in turn can lead to accessing more extreme and transgressive material. Our aim is to prevent child sexual abuse, which means looking for warning signs that behaviours are becoming problematic and acting to reduce the chances of this behaviour escalating.

Returning to the title of this paper - what's porn got to do with it? Shining a light on the potential negative impact of pornography and directing people to support can have a major impact on preventing online child sexual abuse.

Research and action

Since 2015 our [deterrence campaign](#) has worked to reach people who are offending online or who are at risk of doing so. We make them aware of the law, the harm their behaviour causes to children, the consequences of offending, and the anonymous support to stop provided by our helpline and online self-help.

Our next [Faithfull Paper](#) will be about the [evaluation of our chatbot](#), which works to engage with users of adult pornography who might be searching for sexual images of children.

We will continue to research the effect of legal pornography on the offending and lives of the people we work with, so that we and others can understand how best to prevent child sexual abuse.

Appendix

Questions to explore pornography use

- When did pornography use start? How did it start? (First exposure to pornography)
- Has your use of pornography changed over time? (Frequency, quantity, methods of access and the development of use over time)
- How would you describe your pornography use?
- What are your personal feelings about pornography use? Does this differ from your family, friends and wider community view? What has influenced your view of pornography? Religion may be a factor for some individuals, as may political and ethical orientation. Is there some ambiguity, confusion or dissonance in attitudes and values towards pornography?
- What types of pornography have you accessed?
- Have you used pornography during relationships? Would being in a sexual relationship impact the frequency or intensity of your use?
- Who else knows about your use of pornography, including how much pornography you use and when?
- What do you gain from your pornography use? What needs does it meet for you?
- What areas of your life does pornography use impact? Is this a positive or a negative impact? How has it impacted on work, relationships, routine and hobbies/leisure?
- What would you like your pornography use to look like moving forward?
- Have you ever tried to manage your pornography use? How did it go? What strategies have you tried? What has worked for you?
- Are you currently using pornography?
- Do you feel in control of your use of pornography, or does your use feel compulsive and/or out of control?
- What worries you the most about your use of online pornography?

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