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Position Statement: Pornography, Young People and Prevention

The Daniel Morcombe Foundation is committed to preventing harm to children and young people through education and evidence-informed **prevention** strategies.

We recognise that young people are growing up in an increasingly digital world where exposure to pornography can occur easily, often unintentionally, and at increasingly younger ages. Pornography exists within a broader technological, social, and commercial environment shaped by rapid digital change, algorithmic amplification, and profit-driven online platforms.

At the same time, pornography is not a singular or uniform category. Discussions about pornography must acknowledge the diversity of content, contexts, and experiences.

Evidence indicates that the impacts of pornography on children and young people are complex and shaped by a range of influencing factors, including age, developmental stage, education, family and peer relationships, social norms, and broader attitudes toward sex, consent, gender, and relationships.

The Foundation's primary concern is the impact of some forms of pornography - particularly violent, degrading, coercive, or exploitative content - which can normalise harmful power dynamics, distort understandings of consent, relationships and sexuality, and contribute to harmful sexual attitudes and behaviours among children and young people. Such content can present violence, degradation, coercion and inequality as normal or desirable aspects of sexual relationships, creating a skewed understanding of what healthy, respectful relationships look like.

Emerging Australian research, including findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study, highlights concerning increases in child sexual abuse engaged in by adolescents against peers. While no single factor can explain these trends, a growing body of evidence suggests that the widespread accessibility of online pornography, particularly violent pornography, is contributing to harmful sexual scripts, attitudes and behaviours for some young people. Exposure may be particularly harmful for children and young people who have experienced prior victimisation or trauma, including where such content triggers distress, retraumatisation, or reinforces harmful understandings of relationships and sexual behaviour.

These findings reinforce the need for a prevention-focused response grounded in education, critical thinking, and collective responsibility.

The Daniel Morcombe Foundation believes that protecting children and young people requires more than restrictive approaches alone. Regulation and safeguards are important components of harm reduction and prevention, and we support evidence-based efforts to strengthen online safety protections, including the work of the Australian eSafety Commissioner and initiatives aimed at improving industry accountability and reducing children's exposure to harmful content online.

However, regulation alone is insufficient.

Research, practice experience, and the Foundation's ongoing engagement with children and young people consistently highlight the importance of access to developmentally appropriate education that supports:
• respectful relationships;
• consent and communication;
• digital and media literacy;
• critical understanding of online content;
• healthy understandings of sexuality, gender, and power; and
• safe help-seeking behaviours.

Preventative action also requires building the capacity of adults - including parents and carers, educators, professionals, and communities - to engage confidently and effectively with children and young people about pornography, relationships, online experiences, and healthy development.

Adults, schools, governments, industry, and communities all share responsibility for creating safer online environments and equipping young people with the skills and support they need to navigate digital spaces safely and critically. Importantly, children and young people themselves must be included in the design, development, and evaluation of prevention and education responses. Their lived experience and perspectives are essential to ensuring that solutions are relevant, effective, and responsive to the realities of contemporary digital life.

The Foundation advocates for responses that:
• strengthen prevention and early intervention initiatives;
• are evidence-informed and trauma-aware;
• avoid shaming or blaming young people;
• recognise young people's agency while prioritising their safety and wellbeing;
• address harmful gender stereotypes and power imbalances;
• build adults' capacity to support prevention and engage constructively with children and young people;
• incorporate the voices and experiences of children and young people in the development of policy, education and prevention initiatives; and
• promote open, age-appropriate conversations between young people and safe adults.

We believe prevention is most effective when young people are empowered, informed, and supported - not silenced or blamed.

As technology and online environments continue to evolve, ongoing research, collaboration, and respectful, evidence-based public discussion will remain essential to ensuring responses are proportionate, effective, and centred on the wellbeing and safety of children and young people.

Reference

Mathews, B. (Coordinating Author). (2023). The Australian Child Maltreatment Study: National prevalence and associated health outcomes of child abuse and neglect. Medical Journal of Australia, 218(6 Suppl), S1–S51.