

THE IMPACT OF BEING INVOLVED IN CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE MATERIAL (PORNOGRAPHY)

KEY CONCEPTS	
Impact of being used in pornography	Impact of being exposed to pornography
Sentencing in attempted rape	Attempted rape

The majority of children who appear in child pornography have not been abducted or physically forced, but have rather been manipulated to cooperate, which means that in most cases they know the producer of the material (Gewirtz-Meydan et al: 2018). These victims of online child pornography can experience serious physical, social and psychological harm.

In 1989 Silber (1989) interviewed 100 victims of child pornography about the effects of their exploitation at the time when the abuse occurred and years after the abuse. Victims reported the following effects when the abuse occurred:

- Physical pain (around the genitals)
- Somatic complaints (headaches, loss of appetite, insomnia)
- Feelings of psychological distress (emotional isolation, anxiety, fear)
- Pressure to cooperate and non-disclosure

Over the following years, the initial feelings of shame and anxiety intensified to feelings of deep despair, worthlessness and hopelessness.

In another study of 10 young child victims of sex rings that involved pornography, Hunt and Braid (1990) found that being photographed intensified the feelings of shame and humiliation experienced by the victims. These findings were supported by other studies of child pornography cases in Sweden, where the children also described feelings of guilt and shame.

The research shows that child pornography exacerbates the trauma experienced by the child, who has undergone the abuse in addition to being photographed or filmed. One of the most difficult aspects of this form of abuse is the lack of control over the ongoing sharing of the abusive images (Canadian Centre for Child Protection: 2017). Because of the way in which the images are continually distributed, the abuse does not end for the victim. According to Leonard (2010), victims are continually being traumatised when they think about who might be viewing the images online. This makes it difficult for victims to find closure.

Information about the impact of being involved in child pornography is still very limited. Gewirtz-Mayden et al (2018) conducted a study to investigate certain characteristics of child pornography and its impact on the victims. One hundred and thirty three participants took part in the study, 64% were female and 33% male with ages ranging from 18 to 75. For most of the respondents in the study, the child pornography images were part of a long-term sexual abuse and began when they were quite young. Eighty-three percent were 12 or younger when they were photographed and 52% were victimised by family members.

The findings of this study were as follows:

- The images caused specific problems or difficulties that were different from the problems caused by the other aspects of the crime.
- More than half had the following reactions all of the time:
 - shame, guilt and humiliation
 - fear that people who saw the images would think that they had been willing participants
 - felt it was their fault that the images were created
 - worried that people who saw the images would recognise them

- o worried that friends would see the images
- o embarrassed about police, social workers and others seeing the images
- o refusal to talk about the images
- o refusal to be photographed or videoed by family or friends
- From the study. 3 major themes emerged:
 - o Guilt and shame – the images challenged their victim status because it looked as though they were participating voluntarily
 - o Ongoing vulnerability – long term effect the images have on victims
 - o Empowerment dimension – pictures as evidence to validate their stories and assist with convictions.

Guilt and shame

Guilt and shame were the main first emotions that most survivors dealt with. Guilt related to :

- Choosing to participate in the film making
- Engaging in different behaviours during the filming
- Their desire for glory or fame.

For many victims, using the video or the camera was introduced at first as an adventure with the promise that the child would become a celebrity or movie star. These promises made the victims believe they were interested in the filming or enjoying it, which exacerbated the guilt and shame they experienced later in life.

- "I thought the images were a big deal in a positive way, because they were going to make me a movie star...I was good at what I was doing, so they said. I did not feel ashamed about the films at the time of the crime, because I was going to be a movie star...lots of people wanted to see me and I would be famous. I wanted to be recognized in public...".

Feelings of guilt were reinforced when victims saw themselves in the photos and it looked like they were co-operating or looking enthusiastic. Victims were very concerned about how they were viewed in the images and felt that they would not be believed or regarded as victims.

- "We feel terribly guilty even if we logically know we aren't. We are afraid that because we were involved in this, that other people will think we are just as bad as those who took the photos and set it all up..."
- "When I was young I did not realize it was bad, as an adult I understand that both photographs and the internet will last forever".
- "I was aware I was being photographed (age 6-8). In order to survive and reduce violence, I had to pretend to enjoy anal penetration while being photographed. This has caused a lot of problems with standard psychiatric and psychological assessments which all with varying degrees read, "appeared happy, expressive, no signs of depression." Just as in my "happy" child pornographic pictures, looks can be deceiving."
- "As I became an adult and learned that child pornography exists and that that is what the camera(s) had been used for, my sense of being victimized was compounded."

Ongoing vulnerability

The fact that the photographs are in the public domain is devastating for many victims and some describe it as "haunting them." Some have denied their existence while others have lived in constant fear of them surfacing. They are afraid their families will see them or even their children. This makes them feel that they are being revictimized. For them, it feels as if the abuse is constant and continuing, and has no end. This makes it very difficult for them to let go of the past and move on with their lives. They were also concerned that their images could be used to entice other children into abuse or be used by the offender for masturbation.

- “Even after more than 30years I still worry the photos or films will someday return to haunt me or my family.”
- “The molesting or rape eventually stops. But images keep forever and maybe they’ll never stop being circulated.”
- “I keep worrying how long these images remain, who has them, how they use them; feeling like this continues the victimization and I have no control over.”
- “When a man approaches at a grocery store and tells me that he knows me from somewhere or that he recognizes me... I get so scared that he has seen my images. I don’t know how to handle that.”

Some participants have tried to track down their photographs so that they can destroy them while others avoid leaving the house and do shopping online so that they do not have to go out. It also has an impact on their careers and the holding of public office.

- “I can’t run for public office or speak in public beyond a certain level for fear of my photo getting out there.”

Victims in the Gewirtz-Mayden (2018) study also reported suffering from PTSD symptoms related to this specific crime. Many of them were triggered by things that were directly related to cameras and photo-taking, such as the sounds of x-ray machines or just cameras.

- “Fear of cameras, movies, hating to have photos taken of me. My children have almost no pictures of me. I cannot watch any movies with sex or violence without freaking out.”
- “I still have a hard time letting anyone take a picture of me even a family portrait.”
- “I have no idea what has happened to the pictures and it is very disturbing to imagine that those pictures are still out there and people still looking at them.”
- “I am afraid that people have seen them. Thinking strangers recognize me from the images.”

Empowering aspect

Some victims began to recognise the images as empowering, because they validated their stories. The pictures helped them understand what had happened to them and used them as part of the healing with therapists. They also assisted in obtaining convictions in court as the images provided proof of what they were saying.

- “Acceptance and appreciation is what I feel now. All of the evidence provided led to a conviction, so I wouldn’t change how the events unfolded.”
- “I used to think they (the images) were less than other stuff. Now I think they are critically important. They make the abuse undeniable. They prove my experience.”

Further points

Disclosure in these cases is further complicated by the threats, blackmailing or physical abuse commonly used to silence victims and maintain their compliance (Canadian Centre for Child Protection: 2017). The grooming process also contributes to the ambivalent feelings victims often have about what has taken place.

THE IMPACT OF BEING EXPOSED TO PORNOGRAPHY

Pornography is a very common tool used in grooming, and sex offenders share pornography with children to normalise the sexual activities, arouse the children and create a relationship that transcends normal boundaries. As was discussed in the section on grooming and online offenders, it is clear that pornography is an integral component of online grooming. Online groomers share pornography with their victims, and this exposure to pornography has an impact on adolescents.

There is a lot of available evidence that supports the opinion that pornography is at the heart of “the health crisis of the digital age” (Taylor 2018: 3). The normalisation of pornography (and hardcore pornography) has resulted in:

- safety risks to women that result from the eroticisation of violence;
- evidence of the detrimental influence of pornography on the physical, mental and sexual health of adolescents; and
- the danger pornography poses to children through the normalisation of sexual attraction for minors as well as evidence that pornography is implicated in rising levels of child-on-child sexual assault.

Extensive international research has been conducted on the effects of exposure to pornography in adolescence. These findings are summarised here (Taylor 2018):

- Exposure to pornography in adolescence develops attitudes towards sex that regard it as primarily physical and casual as opposed to affectionate and relational.
- It increases sexual uncertainty because adolescents are being given different messages because there is conflict between the sexual attitudes and beliefs communicated through pornography and those instilled by families or schools.
- Exposure to pornography causes adolescents to believe that pornography can contribute to a more stimulating sex life, which results in unreasonable demands placed on partners later when they become involved in relationships.
- A stronger preoccupation with sex develops which leads to high levels of distraction and even addiction.
- Studies have found that adolescents, who are exposed to pornography, have fewer progressive gender role attitudes for both males and females and tend to accept the narrative of male dominance and female submission. Women are seen to be sexual objects and sexual playthings who are eager to fulfil male sexual desires.
- Adolescents develop positive attitudes towards casual or recreational sex, uncommitted sexual exploration and extramarital sexual relations.
- There is an increased likelihood of having casual intercourse with a friend, group sex, oral sex anal sex and the use of drugs or alcohol during sex.
- Adolescents exposed to pornography have earlier reported ages for sexual intercourse.
- Amongst boys, there is increased sexual harassment of female peers.
- Male adolescents experience increased insecurity about their ability to perform sexually while girls have increased insecurity about their body image.

According to Taylor (2018: 23) adolescents who consume or are exposed to pornography are more likely to exhibit some form of social maladjustment, and research has shown that these include violence at school, clinical symptoms of depression, theft, truancy, manipulation of others, arson, to force sexual intercourse and be convicted of criminal sexual behaviour. Where boys are already exhibiting aggressive sexual behaviour as a result of other risk factors, frequent exposure to pornography was found to exacerbate this predisposition, making them four times as likely to exhibit sexual aggression compared with those only infrequently exposed. This aggression includes coerced vaginal penetration, forced sexual acts such as oral or digital penetration, sexually aggressive remarks (obscenities), and an increased propensity to engage in sex with animals.

Exposure to hardcore pornography between the ages of 12 and 18 has been linked to significantly higher rates of sexual paraphilia in later life. In addition, the significant causal link between increased sexual offending and viewing of pornography is well-established.

I am ... witnessing more female adolescents tolerating emotional, physical and sexual abuse in dating relationships, feeling pressure to make out with females as a way to turn boys on, looking at or producing pornography so that their boyfriends will think they are 'open-minded' and 'cool', and normalising sexual abuse done to them because they see the same

acts eroticized in pornography – after all, how bad can it be if the larger culture around you find abusing and demeaning acts a turn on? (Taylor 2018:24)

Research findings show that girls are buying the lie that porn sex is normal. If the women in pornography love it and they do not, then girls assume that their problem lies with them. So exposure to pornography has a huge impact on adolescents, both short-term and long-term, and can affect the way they view partners and their future relationships as well as contributing to aggressive behaviour and offending.

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