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Online porn turns school-aged kids into sexual predators

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Easy access to online pornography is said to be a key factor behind disturbing behaviour.

The bigger boys would lie in wait for a kindergarten kid to wander into the school toilets.

It was only when a six-year-old boy kept soiling himself in class that his mother twigged something was wrong. Two brothers — aged nine and 11, with an alcoholic mother and absent father — had been giving her little boy lollies and molesting him.

When the distraught mother alerted the principal of the Brisbane primary school, she was assured that “everything’s under control”. She removed her son from the school.

Another mother tells *Inquirer* how a nine-year-old boy coerced her five-year-old daughter into oral sex, threatening to “punch her eye out” if she told anyone. NSW Police informed the mother that “technically no crime had occurred” because of the boy’s age.

Online pornography is being blamed for a sickening spate of child-on-child sexual assaults across Australia. A four-year-old boy is being chaperoned at taxpayer expense to prevent him attacking other children in “sex games” at a kindergarten in regional South Australia. At Sydney’s elite Trinity Grammar School, a group of Year 1 boys was found performing sex acts in the school toilets and playground late last year. One boy was removed from the Anglican school and eight were offered counselling.

DOCTORS and child abuse experts are warning that easy and accidental access to violent pornography is turning children into copycat sexual predators, with schools and parents often oblivious to the abuse. In NSW alone, the number of child-on-child sexual assaults grew from 44 in 2005-06 to 80 in 2014-15 while the number of indecent assaults between children more than doubled from 33 to 73. Victoria has recorded 1169 sexual assaults between children in the past five years.

Australian Childhood Foundation chief executive Joe Tucci, who is a psychologist and social worker, says his nonprofit organisation is counselling children as young as six for problematic sexual behaviour. "Some of them are so young, they can't even tie their shoelaces," he says.

Last year his organisation assisted 200 children from Melbourne's eastern suburbs; a decade ago it dealt with 10 to 15 referrals a year. Tucci believes children's exposure to violent pornography is "a public health crisis in the making", and advises parents to start talking to their kids about sex and relationships from the age of seven.

"Not only are we seeing an increase in the number but also the seriousness of behaviour," Tucci tells Inquirer.

"This is due to increased access to dehumanising pornography that is produced in abundance, and technology has enabled every child with a mobile phone to be able to see it.

"Sometimes they're shown (the porn) by adults as part of grooming and sexual abuse, sometimes they're shown by peers and older siblings, and sometimes they're stumbling across it just because it's so available and accessible."

Tucci says much online porn involves violence and men dominating women, sometimes in groups. "It is an exploitation of intimacy," he says. "It isn't careful and cautious and respectful.

"It's making aggression a form of intimacy and young people can't tell the difference. If you did the things you saw, you would open yourself up to different diseases and health problems, and it would hurt."

Doctors are alarmed by the physical injuries — not to mention the mental health issues — resulting from children and teenagers engaging in aggressive sex. Australian Medical Association vice-president Stephen Parnis says doctors are treating more girls in their mid-teens for unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and anal-genital injuries as young men "use and abuse" them.

"There's been an increase in sexually transmitted infections and violent sexual practices which are not the norm, accompanied by the availability of pornography," he says. "It is resulting in physical and mental harm to young Australians." Many of the girls comply, he says, because they think it is normal and want to be a "good girlfriend".

At the Gold Coast Centre Against Sexual Violence, director Di Macleod is dealing with

increasing numbers of young women with stomach-churning sexual injuries. When the service started in 1990, only 2 per cent of women were the victims of sexual violence from an intimate partner; last year it was 18 per cent. The number of women seeking help soared from 113 in 1990 to 3079 last year. “Apart from the nature of the non-consensual sex act, we’re seeing other physical injuries like being held down and choked,” Macleod tells Inquirer. “We’re seeing this behaviour among very young men wanting to act out what they have seen. Young women are not wanting to do that and in many cases are being pressured to do it. I think we are seeing the offline repercussions of online behaviours — young people are using pornography as a sexual educator, in the absence of anything else. But how do we counter something that’s taken over 36 per cent of the internet?”

Smartphones — given to children by parents to protect them — are providing unfettered access to the internet. Eighty per cent of teenagers have a smartphone; in 2011 the figure was 25 per cent. Two-thirds of teens use the internet to stream video and 28 per cent are online between 10pm and midnight.

Susan McLean, who worked for the Victoria Police as a “cyber cop” for 27 years before setting up her Cyber Safety Solutions company, says too many parents are oblivious to the risks of giving children unfiltered and unsupervised access to the internet.

“I’m getting called in to deal with little kids who are engaging in more than ‘doctors and nurses’ exploration,” she tells Inquirer. “There are only two reasons they behave this way: they’re exposed to it through pornography, or it’s been done to them. Pornography is portable, kids are watching it and most parents don’t have a clue. Schools are not being proactive.”

National Children’s Commissioner Megan Mitchell warns that many children “come across pornography by accident”. “This is the only education some children are getting about sex and sexuality,” she says. “They are not learning that sexuality is also about relationships and intimacy.”

Mitchell says parents must be more vigilant about their kids’ use of the internet, but “schools and others have to step into the space” too. “We can’t continue to pretend this is going to go away,” she says. “We have to get on top of this stuff. The solution has got to be a combination of using (internet) safety filters and good sex education that is about relationships.”

Easy and accidental access to pornography is panicking parents who are struggling to monitor their tech-savvy children’s online activities at home and at school. The government-funded Safe Schools Coalition — an anti-bullying program for gay and transgender students — recommends that students seek information from another taxpayer-subsidised website, Minus 18, which provides sex information for gay teens.

Minus 18’s list of “useful websites” included a link to a sex shop, The Tool Shed, and Scarleteen, a website aimed at teenagers offering “sex ed for the real world”. The links were removed after *The Australian* revealed their existence last week. The Minus 18

website also included an article titled “Cover your tracks”, which gave detailed instructions on erasing internet search histories.

The federal government’s Children’s eSafety Commissioner, Alastair MacGibbon, a former Australian Federal Police officer specialising in online crime, says pornography is contagious. He counsels parents to “talk about sex” with their children before they are exposed to porn at home, at school or at friends’ houses.

“The reality is that once one child in a peer group has access to this type of material, it will be shared,” he says.

“The most important issue is really for parents and trusted adults to be talking to kids about what is a respectful relationship, because if they don’t, Google is going to teach their kids about sex — and that’s not healthy.”

Tucci says most of the children referred to the Australian Childhood Foundation for counselling are vulnerable, having been exposed to family violence, sexual abuse, chronic stress or bullying.

“Pornography is jet fuel to vulnerable children,” he says. “Some kids are doing it as a form of comfort-seeking. For a seven or eight-year-old it’s a way for them to get some physical contact and some attention, or to feel they’re in control of a situation.”

In therapy, children are taught about respectful sex. “We show them it’s not true, it’s unrealistic, it hurts, and that force and coercion aren’t part of what sexual activity will be like,” Tucci says.

Among the children who molest other kids, three out of four are boys, but Tucci never refers to them as perpetrators. “They’re still children and what they need from us and the community isn’t shame,” he says. “What they need is compassion and understanding and effective treatment.”

University of South Australia emeritus professor Freda Briggs, who has advised federal and state governments, police and church groups on child safety for 30 years, says sexual abuse between children remains “a taboo” among educators. Often the victims are removed from schools while their attackers stay, their behaviour dismissed as “normal sexual experimentation” or “boys will be boys”.

“The problem is that neither teachers, police nor social workers appear to be trained to take these behaviours seriously and respond appropriately,” Briggs told the Senate inquiry into the impact of pornography on children. “Failure to handle child-on-child abuse satisfactorily usually means that the problems increase as victims become copycats. The behaviour increases and can become habitual when they enjoy the power that accompanies it.”

Briggs — a member of the Order of Australia who holds the foundation chair of child development at UniSA — says the South Australian kindergarten case is “typical of what

is happening elsewhere”. “Schools try to shove the problem under the carpet to avoid facing parents and avoid a reduction in enrolments,” she told the inquiry.

Her submission lists some of the heartbreaking attacks on children by classmates — including a six-year-old boy who forced oral sex on kindergarten boys in the school cubbyhouse, and a group of boys who followed a five-year-old girl into the toilets, held her down and urinated in a “golden shower”.

In her interviews with more than 700 children for an Australian Research Council study, Briggs asked them what they did with their parents for fun. Shockingly, some boys aged six to eight told her they watched pornography online with their dads — because “that’s what guys do”.

“Parents are not aware of the risks because they think only about protecting their children from deviant adults,” Briggs tells Inquirer. “Teaching professionals do not appear to have been adequately trained in their pre-service university courses and it is a massive job for education departments to train staff.”

MacGibbon, the eSafety Commissioner, wants parents to “step up” and supervise their children’s internet usage, and install filters on devices such as iPods, iPads, computers and smartphones. He insists, though that this is “not a technical issue but a social issue”.

“It means us having awkward conversations as a society,” he says. “If we don’t talk about it, we’re letting our children down.”