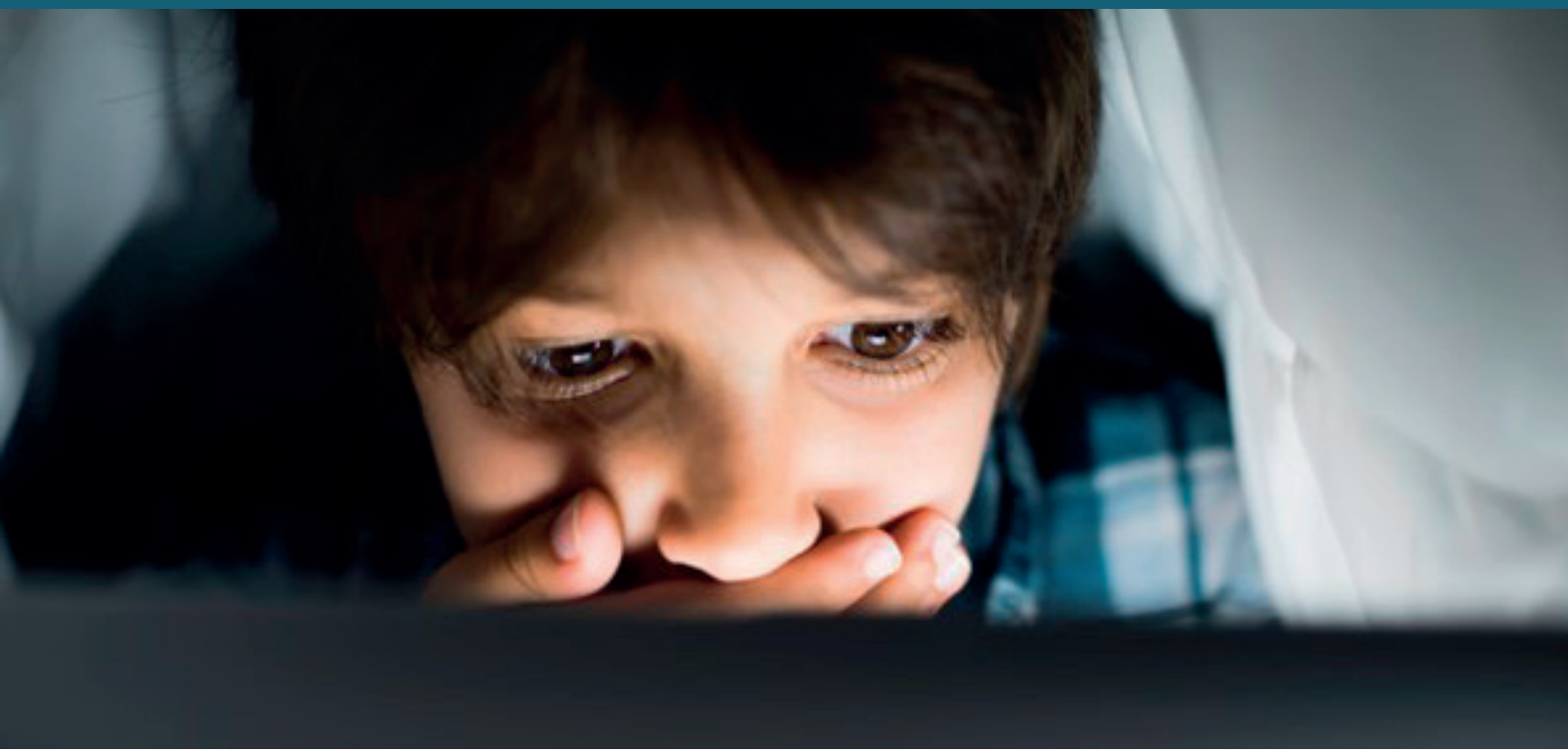
# SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN FROM THE RISKS OF ACCESSING ONLINE PORNOGRAPHIC CONTENT

## Thematic guidance note



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# SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN FROM THE RISKS OF ACCESSING ONLINE PORNOGRAPHIC CONTENT

## Thematic guidance note

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**French edition:**
*Note d'orientation thématique*
*Protéger les enfants des risques liés*
*à l'accès à des contenus pornographiques en ligne*

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# I. Introduction

## 1. SCOPE AND PURPOSE OF THE GUIDANCE NOTE

During its 9th Plenary meeting, the Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child (CDENF) held a thematic exchange on the theme of 'Safeguarding children from the risks associated with accessing pornographic content online'. The exchange[1] provided participants with an insight on the impact and associated risks of children's exposure to mainstream pornography.

As a result of this thematic exchange, the CDENF instructed the Secretariat to prepare, in cooperation with an expert, a thematic Guidance Note, primarily aimed at member states to:

- enhance understanding of the harms associated with children's exposure and access to online pornographic content. In doing so, it outlines the extent and means of exposure, the nature of the pornographic content that is freely and easily accessible to children online, and how ubiquitous access to that content is impacting on children.
- provide guidance on key measures that can be taken to safeguard children from the risks associated with exposure to online pornographic content.
- provide an overview of the relevant legal, regulatory and policy context that can inform and support efforts to safeguard children from the risks associated with exposure to online pornography (compiled in an annex).

This note can also inform anyone in contact with children on what can be done to better protect children from the risks associated with accessing pornographic content online.

[1] *Note to reader: The documents or websites in hyperlink are in English insofar as they are available in English. Where they are only available in the original language, they are highlighted by an asterisk (*) throughout this note.*

## 2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Children are exposed to online pornographic content, both intentionally and unintentionally, enabled by the rise in digital and online technologies.

These same technologies have facilitated a shift in the nature of the content of mainstream pornography. The free, mainstream online pornographic content to which most children are exposed commonly depicts gender stereotypes and gender-based violence, including sexual violence.

For many children, and in the absence or relative silence of alternative voices, pornography has become the most significant source of sexuality education. Rather than learning about consent, mutuality, and respect as the basis for healthy relationships, the algorithms and bots of the online pornography ecosystem push aggressive, often violent, and stereotypically gendered portrayals of sex and relationships on children. These impacts are gendered, in the sense that the violence depicted in pornography is most prevalently perpetrated against women and girls.[2]

Viewing online pornography has a range of negative impacts, including an increase in aggressive attitudes and behaviours, especially towards women and girls, a possible impact on mental health and self-esteem, and a risk towards developing compulsive use. There is a growing body of evidence that online pornography is also associated with the perpetration of harmful sexual behaviours among children and teenagers resulting in serious harm to victims and in them getting into conflict with the law.

There is an urgent need to safeguard children from exposure to such content and to educate and support them, their families and caregivers, and their communities, including schools and other community and civil-society services, to develop positive relationships and sexuality in the face of the global pornography juggernaut. While each of these stakeholders can play important roles, the ubiquity of the online pornography ecosystem means that responses must be collective, led by states and intergovernmental structures.

This Guidance Note highlights good practices and suggests measures that member states can take to protect children from the harms of online pornography in six areas: 1. Provide proactive, coordinated, considered leadership; 2. Establish an appropriate legislative and regulatory framework; 3. Educate and equip parents and caregivers; 4. Educate and equip professionals; 5. Educate and support children; 6. Support research and innovation.

[2] While sexual imagery of children (child sexual abuse material) is outside of the scope of this Guidance Note, the term ‘girls’ is included here because, despite its illegality, such material can be found on mainstream pornography sites (discussed further in paragraph 23) and because ‘girls’ is frequently used within the pornography industry to refer to women of any age.

## 3. DEFINITION OF PORNOGRAPHY

For this Guidance Note, "pornography" or "pornographic content" is defined as referring to any material depicting a person engaged in sexually explicit conduct, whether real or simulated, which typically includes portrayals of nudity and/or various sexual acts. This definition does not include child sexual abuse material, which is always illegal[3] and the production of sexual imagery of children is outside of the scope of this Guidance Note.

Consistent with its purpose of addressing the risks to children of accessing online pornographic content, this Guidance Note will focus particularly on the kind of pornography to which most children are exposed: free, widely available "mainstream" online content, the vast majority of which is targeted at a male heterosexual audience (see Part II below).

## 4. A NOTE ON THE SENSITIVITY OF THE ISSUES DISCUSSED IN THIS GUIDANCE NOTE

Pornography involves portrayals of sexuality, and matters pertaining to sexuality can be sensitive, challenging to discuss, and subject to divergent views – all of which can make it difficult to develop a shared approach. But pornography also intersects with a range of other sensitive issues about which individuals, communities and cultural groups may hold strong and diverse views. For example, pornography intersects with questions about gender, power, stereotypes, violence (including violence against women), ethnicity, economics, regulation, freedom of expression, morality, and exploitation.

These challenges are important to acknowledge but it is critical that they do not prevent or limit efforts to prevent pornography's harms. If anything, the sensitivity of the issues makes the role of considered guidance even more important.

While its use often occurs in private, pornography is not just about individual sexual exploration or expression; it is the product of a very lucrative global industry which, following its rapid expansion since the development of digital and online technologies, now has unprecedented economic, social and political power and influence.

[3] Article 20 of the Lanzarote Convention requires States to criminalise "child pornography" the Lanzarote Committee has recommended that the term "child sexual abuse material" be used in line with the Luxembourg Terminology Guidelines.

# II. General context: why is there a need to safeguard children from pornography?

## 1. CHILDREN'S EXPOSURE TO ONLINE PORNOGRAPHIC CONTENT

Pornography is not appropriate for children. However, the development of digital and online technologies has had enormous impacts on children's exposure to pornographic content. Pornography has never been so prevalent or accessible. It is produced and distributed by a multi-billion-dollar global industry with a substantial online presence. Pornography sites now account for 3 of the 14 most viewed websites[4] and attract hundreds of millions of unique visitors every day.[5]

Online pornographic content can be easily, freely and anonymously accessed through highly compact and mobile technology commonly used by children. The most common context for seeing pornography is alone and at home.[6]

Most children are exposed to pornographic content by the age of 15, with many first seeing it when they are considerably younger. In a UK study, 10 per cent of children reported seeing pornography by the age of 9, over a quarter (27 per cent) reported seeing it by the age of 11, and half (50 per cent) reported seeing it by the age of 13.[7] A large study with Polish university students found that nearly 80 per cent had seen pornography and 14 years was the median age of first exposure.[8] In a 2020 study about their online experiences with children aged 9-16 years from 19 countries in the European Union, among the countries where questions about sexual images were included, 15 per cent of children aged 9-11 reported seeing sexual images in the previous 12 months, as did 39 per cent of children aged 12-14 and 61 per cent of children aged 15-16.[9]

Children may see pornographic content deliberately or unintentionally. Several studies indicate that most children's first exposure to pornography is unintentional: through an accidental encounter, including via social media or pop up advertisements,[10] or when they are shown or sent pornography without their permission.[11] Children are more likely to actively seek out pornography as they grow into adolescence for example, because they are curious, for

[4] SimilarWeb. Top Websites Ranking New Yorl: SimilarWeb LTD; 2024
[5] Pornhub. The 2019 Year in Review: Pornhub; 2019 [Available from: https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2019-year-in-review].
[6] See for example eSafety Commissioner. Accidental, unsolicited and in your face. Young people's encounters with online pornography: a matter of platform responsibility, education and choice. Canberra: Office of the eSafety Commissioner; 2023.
[7] De Souza R. 'A lot of it is actually just abuse': Young people and pornography. London: Children's Commissioner for England; 2023.
[8] Dwulit AD, Rzymski P. Prevalence, patterns and self-perceived effects of pornography consumption in polish university students: A cross-sectional study. International journal of environmental research and public health. 2019;16(10):1861.
[9] Smahel D, Machackova H, Mascheroni G, Dedkova L, Staksrud E, Ólafsson K, et al. EU Kids Online 2020: Survey results from 19 countries. 2020.
[10] De Souza R. 'A lot of it is actually just abuse': Young people and pornography. London: Children's Commissioner for England; 2023.
[11] Martellozzo E, Monaghan A, Adler JR, Davidson J, Leyva R, Horvath MA. "I wasn't sure it was normal to watch it…" A quantitative and qualitative examination of the impact of online pornography on the values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of children and young people. London: National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and the Children's Commissioner for England; 2016.

sexual arousal, to learn about what may be expected of them during sex, due to pressure from peers, for entertainment, to address boredom, and for sexual exploration.[12]

Children may be exposed to pornographic content through a dedicated pornography site – including any of the highly-ranking pornography sites that provide access to a plethora of free sexually explicit content with ineffective or no warnings or barriers designed to limit or prevent children's access. Children may also be exposed to pornography through the feed or messaging functions of social media platforms, via a search engine, video chat website, gaming site or text message,[13] including possibly through tasks set in online challenges that go viral.[14]

Children's experiences of pornography tend to be highly gendered. Boys and young men are more likely than girls and young women to see pornography both intentionally and accidentally, and to view it more often. Significant numbers of young men in particular report viewing pornography frequently, facilitated by the ease of access enabled by online technologies.[15] In a UK study, a third (34 per cent) of boys reported seeking out pornography in the preceding two weeks compared to 17 per cent of girls, and 21 per cent of boys reported viewing it daily or more often compared with seven per cent of girls.[16]

Children's perceptions of pornography also tend to be highly gendered, with boys and young men much more likely than girls and young women to report feeling positive about pornography. Although children of any gender or age may find pornographic content upsetting, confusing or distressing, girls and younger children are more likely than boys and older children to report feeling upset by the pornography they have seen.[17]

**Most children are exposed to online pornographic content, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Children's experiences of pornography tend to be highly gendered. Boys are more likely than girls to view pornography and to perceive it positively. Many adolescent males view pornography frequently. Girls and younger children are more likely than boys and older children to feel upset by pornography.**

[12] Horvath MA, Alys L, Massey K, Pina A, Scally M, Adler JR. "Basically...porn is everywhere": A rapid evidence assessment on the effects that access and exposure to pornography have on children and young people. London: Office of the Children's Commissioner, UK; 2013.

[13] When this Guidance Note was prepared, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Facebook or X (formerly Twitter) were among the most commonly used social media platforms and WhatsApp was a popular messaging application. See also de Souza R. 'A lot of it is actually just abuse': Young people and pornography. London: Children's Commissioner for England; 2023.

[14] For more information regarding online challenges, see Leote de Carvalho, Maria João (2022). Social Media in Juvenile Delinquency Practices: Uses and Unlawful Acts Recorded in Youth Justice in Portugal, Comunicação e Sociedade [Online], 42 | 2022, Online since 16 December 2022. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/cs/8403 and Haza, Marion & Rohmer, Thomas (2020). Challenges numériques sur les réseaux sociaux. Bruxelles : Frédéric Delcor – Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles de Belgique. Available at: https://www.yapaka.be/sites/yapaka.be/files/publication/ta-117-haza-web.pdf

[15] Crabbe M, Flood M, Adams K. Pornography exposure and access among young Australians: a cross-sectional study. Australian and New Zealand journal of public health. 2024:100135.

[16] De Souza R. 'A lot of it is actually just abuse': Young people and pornography. London: Children's Commissioner for England; 2023

[17] See for ex Flood M. Young men using pornography. In: Boyle K, editor. Everyday pornography. Oxon: Routledge; 2010. p. 164-78.

## 2. THE NATURE OF CONTEMPORARY PORNOGRAPHY

Understanding the nature of the pornographic content to which children are exposed is critical for understanding its impacts on them.

The same digital and online technologies that have enabled the increased prevalence of pornographic content and of children's exposure to it have also facilitated a shift in the nature of the pornographic content to which children are exposed. Mainstream, contemporary pornography is no longer naked or semi-naked images in the magazines that marked the advent of the modern commercial pornography industry, nor the moving pictures on a video tape or DVD that followed them. Today, pornographic content is a vast array of graphic, moving imagery, often depicting extreme close-ups of breasts, genitals and sexual activity. While most pornography is filmed using digital camera technologies, it also includes cartoons, images and videos digitally produced, created and/or modified using artificial intelligence. Its distribution is overwhelmingly via online formats. It may be pre-recorded or live-streamed.[18] It may also be delivered via immersive technologies such as virtual reality, which both increase the viewer's perception that they are participants in the scene they are viewing and heighten their sensory experience of it.

The vastness of the content delivers what can appear to be a smorgasbord catering to any sexual taste, curiosity, or proclivity, with almost instant access.[19] However, despite the diversity of content available, the most popular, free, online pornography to which children are most likely to be exposed tends repeatedly to depict a range of concerning themes, including:

- **Gender-based violence**: various content analyses have found significant levels of aggression – such as spanking, gagging, choking, slapping, spitting, hair-pulling and verbal abuse – in the most popular pornography[20]. This aggression is overwhelmingly directed towards women who are almost always depicted as enjoying or being indifferent to the aggression. For example, an analysis of 3 435 scenes from one of the most popular pornography sites found that 35 per cent included physical aggression and 97 per cent of that aggression was directed towards women who responded with either a neutral or pleasured response in 93 per cent of incidents.[21]

- **Gender stereotypes and inequality:** pornography that portrays both men and women commonly depicts men as dominant, in control, and aggressive while women are depicted as subservient to men's desires.[22] Often inequalities between men and women are reflected and reinforced by age differences, with women much more likely than their male counterparts to be young.[23] This gender stereotyping and inequality is replicated in gay male pornography through depictions of a dominant, hypermasculine character with a more feminized, submissive character, who, like women, is often also a target of aggression.[24]

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[18] See Séguin LJ, Rodrigue C, Lavigne J. Consuming ecstasy: Representations of male and female orgasm in mainstream pornography. The Journal of Sex Research. 2018;55(3):348-56; and Tarrant S. The pornography industry: What everyone needs to know: Oxford University Press; 2016.
[19] Ogas O, Gaddam S. A billion wicked thoughts: What the world's largest experiment reveals about human desire: Dutton/Penguin Books; 2011.
[20] Klaassen MJE, Peter J. Gender (In)equality in Internet Pornography: A Content Analysis of Popular Pornographic Internet Videos. The Journal of Sex Research. 2015;52(7):721-35.
[21] Fritz N, Malic V, Paul B, Zhou Y. A Descriptive Analysis of the Types, Targets, and Relative Frequency of Aggression in Mainstream Pornography. Archives of Sexual Behavior. 2020:1-13.
[22] Gorman S, Monk-Turner E, Fish JN. Free adult Internet web sites: How prevalent are degrading acts? Gender Issues. 2010;27(3-4):131-45.
[23] Willis M, Canan SN, Jozkowski KN, Bridges AJ. Sexual consent communication in best-selling pornography films: A content analysis. The Journal of Sex Research. 2020;57(1):52-63.
[24] Seida K, Shor E. Aggression and pleasure in opposite-sex and same-sex mainstream online pornography: A comparative content analysis of dyadic scenes. The Journal of Sex Research. 2021;58(3):292-304.

- **Rape/absence of consent**: not only does pornography regularly fail to portray any negotiation of sexual consent, it also commonly depicts overtly non-consensual behaviours.[25] Sometimes, a lack of consent is a key theme. A UK study which analysed over 131 000 titles from the home pages of the most popular pornography websites found that 1 in 8 titles described behaviours that constitute sexual violence: for example, rape, including forced sex, hidden camera, raping someone who is asleep or drunk, and incest themes.[26]

- **Incest or 'family' themes**: the most popular, mainstream pornographic content often includes scenarios depicting sex between family members, including between parents and children, and siblings.[27] For example, one study found incest or 'family' themes in 46 per cent of the most popular pornography videos.[28]

- **Childlike themes**: mainstream pornography often includes content depicting sex with someone who is, or appears to be, very young. This may be content produced with young adult performers who have been dressed or groomed to appear young, for example, by wearing school uniforms or children's pyjamas, or by playing roles that emphasise their youthfulness, such as a youthful babysitter or schoolgirl.[29] The language used in pornography also highlights the prevalence and popularity of content featuring young performers. For example, "teen" is the most common word in pornography titles[30], and is routinely listed as among the most searched terms.[31] It can be very difficult for viewers to assess accurately the age of those depicted in online pornographic content and it is important to note that despite its illegality, in addition to childlike portrayals of young adults, child sexual abuse material may also be found on mainstream pornography sites.[32]

- **Racism**: most performers in pornography are white, and those who are not are often referred to by their ethnicity and depicted as adhering to racist stereotypes such as an aggressive Black man or a submissive Asian woman.[33]

The prevalence of these themes is not random or accidental. The industry behind the production and distribution of pornographic content is focused on profit, and acquiring, maintaining and directing viewers' attention is central to the business model of its online economy. The industry employs sophisticated bots and algorithms to manage and curate its content in ways that maximise viewer retention.[34] The result is the production and promotion of content that reflects and reinforces gender and other inequalities and, often, violence.[35]

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[25] Willis M, Canan SN, Jozkowski KN, Bridges AJ. Sexual consent communication in best-selling pornography films: A content analysis. The Journal of Sex Research. 2020;57(1):52-63.
[26] Vera-Gray F, McGlynn C, Kureshi I, Butterby K. Sexual violence as a sexual script in mainstream online pornography. The British Journal of Criminology. 2021;61(5):1243-60.
[27] While some content may be the documentation of incest, most content depicting these themes is produced with performers pretending to be related.
[28] Talbot H. Breaking Down Porn: A Classification Office Analysis of Commonly Viewed Pornography in NZ. 2019.
[29] Jensen RE. A content analysis of youth sexualized language and imagery in adult film packaging, 1995–2007. Journal of Children and Media. 2010;4(4):371-86.
[30] Vera-Gray F, McGlynn C, Kureshi I, Butterby K. Sexual violence as a sexual script in mainstream online pornography. The British Journal of Criminology. 2021;61(5):1243-60.
[31] Miller DJ, McBain KA. The content of contemporary, mainstream pornography: A literature review of content analytic studies. American Journal of Sexuality Education. 2022;17(2):219-56.
[32] Kristof N. The children of Pornhub: Why does Canada allow this company to profit off videos of exploitation and assault? The New York Times. 2020 4 December.
[33] Zhou Y, Paul B. Lotus blossom or dragon lady: A content analysis of "Asian women" online pornography. Sexuality & Culture. 2016;20(4):1083-100.
[34] Johnson JA. Digital Pornography and Everyday Life. In: Rohlinger DA, Sobeiraj S, editors. The Oxford Handbook of Digital Media Sociology. Oxford Handbooks: Oxford University Press; 2020. p. 269-90.
[35] Bridges AJ. Pornography and sexual assault. Handbook of sexual assault and sexual assault prevention. 2019:129-49.

Keeping in mind that the purpose of this Guidance Note is to safeguard children from the risks associated with exposure to pornography, it is important to consider that much of what is conveyed through mainstream contemporary pornographic content is contrary to the principles to be taught to children about healthy sexuality and relationships such as respect, equality, including gender equality, safety, consent and feelings.

**Mainstream online pornographic content frequently depicts gender-based violence, gender stereotypes, non-consensual behaviours, racism and other forms of inequality, discrimination and violence that are the antithesis of what children need to learn to develop healthy, respectful relationships and sexuality.**

## 3. PORNOGRAPHY IS HARMING CHILDREN

It can be difficult to disentangle pornography's potential impacts on children from other influences shaping children's understandings and experiences, including the influence of families, peers, cultural context and broader society, and of other forms of media such as social media, television, films, video games and advertising.[36] However, there is evidence that pornography is impacting on children in a range of ways.

### Children are also learning from pornography

Children may learn about sexuality from a wide range of sources – including their families, peers, school and popular culture. But for many children and young people, pornography has become a key source of information and education about sexuality. In research from around the world, young people report that pornography has impacted on their and others' sexual attitudes and behaviours.[37] Children and young people often report mixed effects. For example, in a survey of 14–17-year-old New Zealanders, half (49%) thought pornography's influence was both positive and negative, 3 per cent thought it was only positive, and 37 per cent thought it was only negative.[38]

Young persons often report that for them, pornography is a significant source of information about their diverse sexual orientation and gender identity,[39] but also express concerns about the unrealistic nature of pornography's depictions, the expectations these can create, and also that it often does not reflect their sexual experiences and practices.[40]

Children often convey an awareness that pornography's depictions are unrealistic or unhealthy and express some concerns about how it might shape some people's expectations of bodies, gender roles and sexuality.[41] Users' accounts of pornography's impacts on them provide important insights into their perceptions and experiences, but they cannot settle the question of pornography's effects. For that, we must also look to broader research approaches.

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[36] eSafety Commissioner. Roadmap for age verification and complementary measures to prevent and mitigate harms to children from online pornography. eSafety Commissioner; 2023 March.
[37] Doornwaard SM, den Boer F, Vanwesenbeeck I, van Nijnatten CH, Ter Bogt TF, van den Eijnden RJ. Dutch adolescents' motives, perceptions, and reflections toward sex-related internet use: Results of a web-based focus-group study. The Journal of Sex Research. 2017;54(8):1038-50.
[38] Office of Film and Literature Classification. NZ and Porn: Research findings of a survey on how and why young New Zealanders view online pornography. Wellington, NZ: Office of Film and Literature Classification; 2018.
[39] Arrington-Sanders R, Harper GW, Morgan A, Ogunbajo A, Trent M, Fortenberry JD. The role of sexually explicit material in the sexual development of same-sex-attracted Black adolescent males. Archives of sexual behavior. 2015;44(3):597-608.
[40] Harvey P. Let's talk about porn: The perceived effect of online mainstream pornography on LGBTQ youth. Gender, sexuality and race in the digital age. 2020:31-52.
[41] Smith M. Youth viewing sexually explicit material online: Addressing the elephant on the screen. Sexuality Research and Social Policy. 2013;10:62-75.

## Pornography and harms

Research shows that pornography use is predictive of more sexualized, sexually objectifying and stereotypic gender views of women and girls[42] and associated with risky sexual behaviours[43], including sexual strangulation.[44] Pornography use is also associated with a range of violence-supportive attitudes and behaviours, including teen dating violence, sexual solicitation perpetration, sexual harassment, and sexual violence.[45] Pornography use is also associated with dating violence victimization.[46] And children report that pornography is an important contributor to girls' and young women's experiences of painful, unpleasant or coerced sex.[47] Exposure to pornography and to promotions by the pornography industry across other platforms, such as social media, may also contribute to inducing children to self-produce sexual imagery or consider participation in the industry.

A wide range of factors can impact on the ways and the extent to which pornography affects different children.[48] According to a survey carried out by the Swedish Ombudsman for Children[49], research underlines that there is still a need for more research on how other factors (social, environmental, and individual factors) contribute to some to children and young people being more affected than others by their pornography consumption resulting in engaging in sexual violence.

While not all children exposed to pornography will react in sexually abusive ways, boys and young men who use pornography more frequently, and particularly those who view violent content, are more likely than other boys and young men to engage in sexually aggressive and coercive behaviours.[50] Importantly, children's own accounts of the influences that contributed to their engagement in sexual harm indicate that pornography can play a key role.[51]

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[42] Brown JD, L'Engle KL. X-rated: Sexual attitudes and behaviors associated with US early adolescents' exposure to sexually explicit media. Communication Research. 2009;36(1):129-51.

[43] Lim MS, Agius PA, Carrotte ER, Vella AM, Hellard ME. Young Australians' use of pornography and associations with sexual risk behaviours. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health. 2017;41(4):438-43.

[44] Wright PJ, Herbenick D, Tokunaga RS. Pornography consumption and sexual choking: An evaluation of theoretical mechanisms. Health Communication. 2021:1-12.

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[46] Rothman EF, Adhia A. Adolescent pornography use and dating violence among a sample of primarily black and Hispanic, urban-residing, underage youth. Journal of Behavioural Sciences. 2016;6(1).

[47] Marston C, Lewis R. Anal heterosex among young people and implications for health promotion: a qualitative study in the UK. BMJ open. 2014;4(8):e004996; Rothman EFC, Kaczmarsky C, Burke N, Jansen E and Baughman A. "Without porn… I wouldn't know half the things I know now": A qualitative study of pornography use among a sample of urban, low-income, black and Hispanic youth. The Journal of Sex Research. 2015;52(7):736-746.

[48] Flood, M. (2010). Young men using pornography. In K. Boyle (Ed.), Everyday pornography (pp. 164-178). Oxon: Routledge and Wright, P. J. (2011). Mass media effects on youth sexual behavior assessing the claim for causality. Annals of the International Communication Association, 35(1), 343-385.

[49] Swedish Ombudsman for Children, 2020-2021 (A2020/00346)

[50] Hackett S. Sexual violence and harmful sexual behaviour displayed by children: Nature, causes, consequences and responses. 2020, revised 2024. See also de Souza R. Evidence on pornography's influence on harmful sexual behaviour among children. London: Children's Commissioner for England; 2023.

[51] McKibbin G, Humphreys C, Hamilton B. "Talking about child sexual abuse would have helped me": Young people who sexually abused reflect on preventing harmful sexual behavior. Child Abuse & Neglect. 2017; 70:210-21.

Pornography use can have a range of physical, psychological, social, and emotional impacts on children. For example, it can cause confusion and distress, particularly among young children.[52] It is associated with unprotected sex[53] and can lead to viewing themselves as sexual objects, body dissatisfaction and anxiety.[54] It may also contribute to a risk of developing compulsive pornography use. It perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes, especially impacting young women and girls by reinforcing subservient roles and the idea that women's primary role is to please men.[55] It may also reinforce an unhealthy dominant idea that young men and boys are sexually superior, and that they are entitled to sexually abuse others. Research shows that repeated exposure to pornography can contribute to viewing women and girls as sex objects, a trend that also affects relations among adolescents.[56]

The new thematic evaluation report on Austria of the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO)[57] states that "*the consumption of (violent) pornography by children and young adults is increasingly being linked to the growing rates of sexual violence against girls and young women*". It further underlines "*the worrisome decrease in age among sexual violence perpetrators which can be traced to their exposure to violent pornography online"*. Watching and sharing pornography, which often depicts violence against women without being able to contextualize or comprehend what is seen, is a phenomenon that GREVIO has been observing in other Parties to the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, also known as "the Istanbul Convention". The report, focusing on Austria, confirms that violent pornography can have "*devastating effects on children's minds*" and a "*detrimental impact on their ability to establish healthy and consent-based sexual relations*" and recommends targeted awareness-raising activities among parents and children as well as preventive action. These include the teaching in the school curriculum, in an age-appropriate manner, about the notion of freely given consent in sexual relations, the harmful effects of violent pornography and the implications of sharing of intimate images of oneself and others. Some positive examples exist to address this according to the Austrian authorities, for example a counselling programme for young offenders with harmful sexual behaviours.[58]

**Pornography has become a key source of information and education about sexuality for many children. Children's exposure to pornography is associated with a range of harms, including an increase in violence-supportive attitudes and harmful sexual behaviours, mostly against women and girls. The current situation – in which graphic and often violent and degrading pornographic content is freely, widely, and easily accessible with little to no regulation to prevent exposure to children – is not safe for children.**

[52] De Souza R. 'A lot of it is actually just abuse': Young people and pornography. London: Children's Commissioner for England; 2023 ; Horvath MA, Alys L, Massey K, Pina A, Scally M, Adler JR. "Basically...porn is everywhere": A rapid evidence assessment on the effects that access and exposure to pornography have on children and young people. London: Office of the Children's Commissioner, UK; 2013.
[53] Tokunaga RS, Wright PJ, Vangeel L. Is pornography consumption a risk factor for condomless sex? Human Communication Research. 2020;46(2-3):273-99.
[54] Tylka TL, Van Diest AMK. You looking at her "hot" body may not be "cool" for me: Integrating male partners' pornography use into objectification theory for women. Psychology of Women Quarterly. 2015;39(1):67-84.
[55] Tholander M, Johansson S, Thunell K, Dahlström Ö. Traces of pornography: Shame, scripted action, and agency in narratives of young Swedish women. Sexuality & Culture. 2022;26(5):1819-39.
[56] Omori K, Zhang YB, Allen M, Ota H, Imamura M. Japanese college students' media exposure to sexually explicit materials, perceptions of women, and sexually permissive attitudes. Journal of Intercultural Communication Research. 2011;40(2):93-110.
[57] First thematic evaluation report on Austria, Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, 10 September 2024. The issue of violent pornography is addressed in various parts of the report - as an issue requiring comprehensive and coordinated action: under «trends» paragraph 6, General Obligations paragraph 43, Education, paragraphs 52 and 56 and under perpetrator programmes, para 79.
[58] See also: Hackett S. Sexual violence and harmful sexual behaviour displayed by children: Nature, causes, consequences and responses. 2020, revised 2024. See also de Souza R. Evidence on pornography's influence on harmful sexual behaviour among children. London: Children's Commissioner for England; 2023.

# III. Guidance to member states to safeguard children from the risks of accessing online pornographic content

There is an urgent need to prevent pornography's harms to children and states have critical roles to play in this safeguarding. As also underlined in Recommendation CM/Rec(2009)10 on Council of Europe Policy guidelines on integrated national strategies for the protection of children from violence, states bear the primary responsibility for the protection of children against harmful online content. Member states have critical roles to play in the safeguarding of children from the risks of pornography through the provision of leadership, establishing appropriate legislative and regulatory frameworks, meaningful enforcement of those legislative and regulatory frameworks, and supporting other stakeholders.

## 1. THE IMPORTANCE OF MULTIPLE, COMPLEMENTARY MEASURES

No single measure can safeguard children successfully from the risks of exposure to online pornographic content. Rather, an effective approach to safeguarding requires multiple complementary measures implemented by a range of stakeholders across various settings. These measures can be categorised into two important and complementary approaches:

- preventing and reducing children's exposure to pornographic content, and
- minimising the risks and harms to children when exposure occurs.

### 1.1 PREVENTING AND REDUCING CHILDREN'S EXPOSURE TO PORNOGRAPHIC CONTENT

Preventing and reducing children's exposure to pornographic content is crucial to avoid associated risks and harms. Although there is currently no effective way to completely prevent children's exposure, this challenge highlights the need for innovative and collaborative strategies. These strategies should aim to delay initial exposure and minimise its frequency, ultimately reducing the risks linked to early and frequent encounters with pornography. There are opportunities for interventions to prevent and reduce children's exposure to online pornography at a broad, systemic level as well as through more direct prevention activity with individual children.[59]

### 1.2 MINIMISING THE RISKS AND HARMS OF EXPOSURE

In recognition that even the most robust efforts to avert children's exposure to pornographic content cannot completely prevent it, safeguarding efforts should also include strategies to minimise the risks and harms to children when exposure occurs. Education and awareness-raising play a significant role in such strategies.

[59] eSafety Commissioner. Roadmap for age verification and complementary measures to prevent and mitigate harms to children from online pornography. eSafety Commissioner; 2023 March

## 2. SIX KEY MEASURES FOR IMPACTFUL ACTION

Bringing together the two broad approaches outlined above and the various complementary and sometimes overlapping strategies that can be used to implement them, the **six key measures suggested for action by member states** are:

### 2.1 PROVIDE PROACTIVE, COORDINATED, CONSIDERED LEADERSHIP

The effectiveness of efforts to safeguard children from the risks of exposure to online pornographic content will be greatly enhanced when member states provide clear leadership through the development and implementation of a coordinated, carefully considered approach that:

- is underpinned by sound principles, including non-discrimination and gender equality,
- includes a suite of complementary measures,
- is informed by evidence and the experiences of efforts in other jurisdictions,
- is connected to and coordinates with other relevant plans, policies, frameworks, strategies and legislative proposals at state, regional and international levels,
- is collaborative with other member states and the broader international community (including the private sector and the civil society),
- identifies and addresses the relevant challenges,
- engages the various relevant stakeholders, including the general public and children and youth,
- is adaptive and responsive to emerging issues,
- is appropriately resourced.

**Example: France's "Five pillar" approach**

In its effort to safeguard children from the risks of exposure to online pornographic content, the French government has developed an approach focuses on action across five pillars:

- Widespread use of parental control systems and enhanced parental control tools
- Reinforcement of age verification systems
- Raising awareness and supporting parents
- Raising awareness and educating children
- Strengthening coordination and information exchange between relevant stakeholders.

**Example: Australian "Roadmap"**

In 2023, Australia's Office of the eSafety Commissioner published a detailed "Roadmap for age verification and complementary measures to prevent and mitigate harms to children from online pornography" to inform Australian government action. The report outlines six key recommendations to government and includes a series of guiding principles derived from extensive stakeholder consultations:

- Take a proportionate approach based on risk and harm
- Respect and promote human rights
- Propose a holistic response that recognises the roles of different stakeholders and supports those most at risk
- Ensure any technical measures minimise data and preserve privacy
- Consider the broader domestic and international regulatory context

## 2.2 ESTABLISH AN APPROPRIATE LEGISLATIVE AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

States and intergovernmental organisations are the only stakeholders that can establish and enforce regulations to prevent or reduce children's exposure to online pornographic content. The importance of establishing an appropriate legislative and regulatory framework for protecting children's safety online, including through preventing their exposure to online pornography, is increasingly recognised, as evidenced through the development of such efforts in countries around the world, including France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK, and in Australia.

A legislative and regulatory system that aims to prevent children's exposure to online pornographic content requires two components. It should:

- establish expectations and requirements for businesses and service providers within the online industry to prevent children's exposure to online pornography, and
- establish a regulatory scheme for managing compliance and enforcement.

These efforts may form part of a broader safeguarding approach to preventing children's exposure and access to a variety of potentially harmful online content, such as content promoting self-harm, disordered eating or violence.

**Safety by design**

By establishing expectations and requirements of stakeholders within the online industry to protect children from risks in the online environment, states can mandate the implementation of the principle of 'Safety by Design' – an initiative that puts user safety and rights at the centre of the design, development and deployment of online products and services.[60] Safety by design involves taking a proactive and preventive approach to minimising online threats "by anticipating, detecting and eliminating online harms before they occur".[61]

[60] eSafety Commissioner. Safety by Design Overview. Office of the eSafety Commissioner; May 2019.
[61] esafety Commissioner. Safety by Design: Office of the eSafety Commissioner; 2024 [updated 22/04/2024. Available from: https://www.esafety.gov.au/industry/safety-by-design.

### Age assurance

Age assurance involves methods used to verify or estimate a person's age to control access to age-restricted content online. These measures range from basic self-declaration to more sophisticated verification methods, such as using government-issued identity documents or biometric tools like facial scanning or voice recording.[62]

Age assurance is a key strategy for preventing children's access to pornographic content. There is broad support, including among parents, adults in the general public and from children themselves, for the implementation of age assurance measures to protect children from pornography and other potentially harmful content. At the same time, these groups hold concerns related to privacy, security, child autonomy, and effectiveness of age assurance measures.[63]

It is important to note that there is not universal support for age assurance. In particular, the pornography industry, which has benefited for years from a largely unregulated online environment, has initiated legal actions to stymie several states' efforts to require age assurance measures (for example, in France). But protecting children from online harms must take precedence over commercial interests.[64]

Regulators should work closely with device manufacturers, internet service providers, social media companies, pornography sites and other businesses and online service providers that facilitate access to online pornography to put in place robust and effective verification mechanisms that prevent children's exposure to pornography and safeguard privacy and security. By addressing these issues in an integrated way, stakeholders can better protect children and young people and foster a safer and healthier online environment.

### Examples of legislative and regulatory actions

Establishing an appropriate legislative and regulatory framework may include:

- promoting and providing incentives to business enterprises to implement safety by design, privacy by design, and privacy by default as guiding principles for products and services' features and functionalities addressed to or used by children, as stated by the Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)7 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on guidelines to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child in the digital environment,

- requiring that websites, search engines, social media platforms, video sharing platforms, game developers, app stores, pornography sites and other relevant stakeholders from the online industry apply effective age assurance technologies to ensure children are protected from products, services and content in the digital environment which are legally restricted with reference to specific ages, using methods that are consistent with the principles as explained in the above mentioned Guidelines.

- establishing a regulatory scheme for the accreditation and oversight of age assurance providers, notably through the development of technical standards,

- establishing obligations about reporting mechanisms, proactive content detection and moderation tools,

[62] UK Information Commissioner's Office, Ofcom. Families' attitudes towards age assurance. Revealing Reality; 2022.
[63] Ibid
[64] See in particular the Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)7 on Guidelines to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child in the digital environment of the Committee of Ministers.

- providing practical guidance to industry regarding what is required of them and how this can be achieved,
- establishing enforcement processes and mechanisms and determining appropriate consequences for non-compliant services.

**Research: European Commission research report on age assurance**

The European Commission has published a research report about age assurance. The report outlines the legal and practical aspects of age assurance, detailing its necessity, methods, and associated challenges. It considers ten main methods of age assurance and their advantages and disadvantages. It also identifies and discusses ten requirements that should be present while assessing the necessity of age assurance and determining the most appropriate method of age assurance for implementation:

- Proportionality
- Privacy
- Security
- Accuracy and effectiveness
- Functionality and ease of use
- Inclusivity and non-discrimination
- Furthering participation and access
- Transparency and accountability
- Notification, challenge, and redressal mechanisms
- Hearing the views of children.

**Example: UK Online Safety Act**

The UK is progressing efforts to protect children from age-inappropriate and harmful content online through its Online Safety Act. The Act establishes what is required from online services to ensure they are taking appropriate action to protect children online, and requires the regulating body, Ofcom, to provide industry stakeholders with guidance on how these requirements can be met. Phase 2 of the Act's three-phase implementation plan focuses particularly on protecting children from exposure to pornographic content.

**Example:** French age verification

For decades, French criminal law has prohibited minors from being exposed to pornography; and, since 2020, in line with established case law, it has explicitly stated that disclaimers are not appropriate tools to protect minors online. A recent law of 21 May 2024 instructs the French regulator – the Regulatory Authority for Audiovisual and Digital Communication known as Arcom – to define minimum technical requirements with regard to age verification systems to prevent children from being exposed to pornography. This led to the publication by Arcom of a technical reference framework in October 2024. Online services that do not comply with these requirements are subject to heavy fines. Arcom also has the possibility to order Internet service providers to block non-compliant services and remove them from search engines (without prior authorization from the judge, as was previously the case).

**Example: Portuguese Charter on Human Rights in the Digital Era**

The Portuguese Charter on Human Rights in the Digital Era integrated provisions increasing children's protection in the digital context:

"Article 20 n. 1 - Children have the right to special protection and the care necessary for their well-being and safety in cyberspace."
"Article 15 -n.1 - Everyone has the right to security in cyberspace, and it is the state's responsibility to define public policies that guarantee the protection of citizens and information networks and systems, and to create mechanisms that increase security in the use of the Internet, especially for children and young people."

**Example: Irish Online Safety Code**

Published by the Coimisiún na Meán (An Coimisiún) on 21 October 2024, the Irish Online Safety Code sets binding rules applying to video-sharing platforms (VSPS) who have their EU headquarters in Ireland. It provides for a range of measures to mitigate against children's exposure to harmful and adult-only content on VSPS, including pornography. These measures include age assurance, content rating, parental controls, reporting and flagging, complaints, and media literacy.

Alongside the Code, An Coimisiún published corresponding Online Safety Guidance Materials to assist service providers in their implementation of appropriate measures, pursuant to the Code, to provide the required protections for children and the general public.

**Example: The Caivano Decree**

In Italy, a 2023 law known as the "Caivano Decree", aims to ensure appropriate interventions for children, whether they are perpetrators or victims of crimes, while placing special emphasis on their safety in the digital space. The law requires website operators and video-sharing platform providers that distribute pornographic images and videos in Italy to verify the age of users to prevent underage children from accessing such contents. It also mandates that service providers make parental control applications available, enabling parents or those with parental responsibility to monitor and restrict children's access to potentially harmful or age-inappropriate online contents and services, and provides for the implementation of specific initiatives for children's digital and media literacy and awareness-raising campaigns on the topic.

## 2.3 EDUCATE AND EQUIP PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

Parents and other primary caregivers can play an important role in safeguarding children from the risks of exposure to online pornography by seeking to prevent or reduce exposure and building children's resilience to its impacts through education and support. However, many parents and caregivers have limited understanding of pornography's risks to children, and even those who do understand often do not feel well equipped to take actions that can reduce these risks.

### Examples of actions to educate and equip parents and other caregivers

Member states can support parents and other primary caregivers in their safeguarding roles by educating and equipping them, including through support to civil-society initiatives where appropriate, through measures such as:

- raising awareness and providing education and resources to support parents and caregivers to understand pornography's prevalence, nature and gendered impacts on children and the critical role that parents and caregivers can play to prevent or reduce pornography's harms to their children,

- providing education and resources to support parents and caregivers to understand how they can monitor and manage their children's online activities in age-appropriate ways, including through:
  - supervision,
  - the use of filters, safety settings and parental controls, and
  - conversations about online participation, behaviour and safety,

- supporting parents to understand the importance of age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education which also addresses issues related to children's exposure to pornography,

- developing and distributing information about how parents and caregivers can foster open communication about internet use and its potential dangers, including tips for how parents can raise and respond to questions about challenging issues such as exposure to pornographic content,

- providing evidence-based recommendations for setting age-appropriate boundaries on children's technology use,

- ensuring that parental control tools and software that restrict access to pornographic and other inappropriate content are easily accessible, free or affordable, and include clear, manageable instructions for use, and are recommended for use as part of a broader approach to parents' safeguarding of children[65]. These tools should cover a wide range of functionalities: for example, they should also allow interactions with restrictions imposed on other users,

- foster better tools for parents that are interoperable and easy to use,

- establishing a dedicated free helpline to support parents and caregivers to install and use technologies such as filters and parental controls to protect their children online,

- piloting and establishing initiatives to support parents and caregivers to install and use technologies such as filters and parental controls to protect their children online,

- developing public campaigns to help parents and caregivers to recognise the need to safeguard children from the risks of online pornography and direct them towards resources to support them to act.

[65] Stoilova, M., Bulger, M., & Livingstone, S. (2023). Do parental control tools fulfil family expectations for child protection? A rapid evidence review of the contexts and outcomes of use. Journal of Children and Media, 18(1), 29–49. https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2023.2265512

**Example: French campaign and parent education website**

France has developed a national awareness and prevention campaign about children's exposure to online pornography and a website to support parents and caregivers with tools, advice and practical resources. These resources are part of a broader framework of protection of children from the risks associated with exposure to screens.

**Example: New Zealand campaign and website**

New Zealand's "Keep It Real Online" campaign offers a website with resources for parents, educators, and youth on online safety topics like grooming, pornography, and bullying. The initiative features a series of videos which use humour to encourage parents to discuss online risks with their children.

**Example: Canadian website with parent education**

The website of Canada's Centre for Digital Media Literacy, Media Smarts, provides education about pornography for parents and caregivers and information and resources to support them to talk with their children about pornography.

## 2.4 EDUCATE AND EQUIP PROFESSIONALS

Professionals from across a range of sectors can play critical roles in safeguarding children from the risks of exposure to pornographic content.

### Schools and education authorities

Schools are uniquely positioned to support broad populations of children to develop the knowledge, attitudes and skills that can help reduce pornography's harms to them, for example, through education about online safety, media literacy, gender equality, sexuality and relationships.[66]

Schools have a responsibility to take measures to prevent students from exposure to online pornographic content in school settings, for example, through the implementation of filters. Schools also often are required to respond to incidents related to pornographic content, for example, when students view pornography on school-issued devices, access or share pornographic content at school, or disclose pornography-related experiences of sexual harm. School staff may address some incidents themselves. They can also help connect children who need additional support to specialist health and counselling services.

Schools also have a role to play in supporting and equipping parents to navigate the challenges of parenting in a digital age, including the risks associated with children's exposure to online pornography.

### Other professionals

Other professionals who work with children and their families – such as youth workers, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, pediatricians, sexual and reproductive health

[66] Crabbe M, Flood M. School-Based Education to Address Pornography's Influence on Young People: A Proposed Practice Framework. American Journal of Sexuality Education. 2021:1-46. See also § 52 of GREVIO's Thematic report on Austria.

professionals and other relevant health professionals and personnel – can also play important roles, including through:

- providing counselling services for children who:
  - have engaged in harmful sexual behaviour following their exposure to pornography,
  - have been victimised by a child or adult who has been influenced by pornography, or
  - feel traumatised by the pornographic content they have seen,
  - have developed compulsive use of pornography.

- providing health care to children, in particular girls, who have been hurt or injured by pornography's influence, for example, if they have been strangled during sex, sustained an injury from aggressive sex, or developed a painful sexual condition as a result of sex with a partner who has been influenced by pornography's sexual scripts,

- educating and supporting children who are at increased risk of harm, for example due to homelessness, disability, migratory status, or other factors.

- educating and supporting parents and other caregivers, including tailored approaches to meet the needs of parents from various cultural and/or religious backgrounds,

- educating and supporting school staff to address pornography's influence as part of a whole of school approach.

To effectively support children and their families in these ways, professionals need a sophisticated, gender-sensitive understanding of the issues and what can be done to address them, self-awareness, and the skills, the comfort and the confidence required to undertake their respective roles. Developing a workforce that is capable of undertaking these roles requires a strategic, coordinated and sensitive approach.

**Examples of actions to educate and equip professionals**

Member states can support school staff and other relevant professionals to safeguard children from the risks of exposure to pornographic content by:

- developing a workforce development strategy that:
  - identifies the range of professional sectors that require access to education on these issues,
  - identifies how the professional learning should be tailored for different audiences (for example, a whole school staff community may require an overview of the issues whereas school staff delivering relevant curricular will require more comprehensive professional learning tailored to their role, as will sexual assault and sexual health service staff),
  - includes a model for delivery of professional learning with relevant sectors.

- supporting the implementation of the workforce development strategy by providing professional learning that supports participants to understand pornography's prevalence, nature and gendered impacts on children and what they can do to prevent or reduce pornography's harms to children,

- supporting the development of practical resources that help professionals address these issues effectively with children and their families,

- providing clear guidance on the roles and responsibilities of professionals from various relevant sectors, for example, through:
  - clearly articulating relevant competencies in curriculum standards,

- developing and promoting best practice frameworks, policies and approaches for different sectors, for example, by offering guidance to school leaders on how to develop a whole of school approach to addressing pornography's influence,
- developing guidance for educators, social workers and healthcare professionals on recognising signs of exposure to online pornography or harms associated with pornography's influence and providing appropriate care and support,

- supporting cross-sector collaboration to strengthen capacity, for example, by facilitating opportunities for schools and specialist services to learn together, share their insights, and work collaboratively.

**Example: Australian education and support for professionals**

Australia has several initiatives to help professionals address pornography's impact on children and families. Among these initiatives, the eSafety Commissioner, Our Watch, and "*It's time we talked*" by Maree Crabbe provide resources and training for educators and others. These programmes have been widely adopted and supported across Australia, enhancing the capacity of schools and other sectors over time.

## 2.5 EDUCATE AND SUPPORT CHILDREN

Children should not have to manage the risks associated with exposure to online pornography, which is inherently age inappropriate. The significant levels of exposure among children highlight a societal failure to protect children through preventive measures. To address this issue effectively, it is crucial to establish and enforce legislative and regulatory frameworks and to provide education and resources for parents, caregivers and professionals involved in children's care and education. These steps offer the best chance to safeguard children. However, given the likelihood of exposure, it is also vital to educate and support children directly. This helps them develop critical thinking skills and provides support to minimise the impacts of exposure.

Addressing these risks raises ethical concerns, especially regarding how to involve children and communicate about the issues in a gender sensitive and age-appropriate manner to ensure its effectiveness. This underscores the need for a careful, sequential approach to educate and support children.

### Educating children

Education can support children to build competencies that can assist in the mitigation of pornography's harms. For example, there is a small emerging body of evidence that the development of critical literacy about pornography among young people can reduce pornography's influence on them.[67] These competencies can be developed gradually, through sequential delivery of age-appropriate education. Among younger children, a foundational learning approach – in which there is no overt reference to pornography – can support the development of general, related competencies in the areas of critical thinking, digital literacy, media literacy, respectful relating, gender equality, sexuality, online safety and help-seeking.[68] Then, among older children and adolescents, education can support the application of these

[67] Rothman EF, Adhia A, Christensen TT, Paruk J, Alder J, Daley N. A Pornography Literacy Class for Youth: Results of a Feasibility and Efficacy Pilot Study. American Journal of Sexuality Education. 2018;13(1):1-17.
[68] Crabbe M, Flood M. School-Based Education to Address Pornography's Influence on Young People: A Proposed Practice Framework. American Journal of Sexuality Education. 2021:1-46.

foundational competencies to the influence of sexualized media and pornographic content. Importantly, such education does not involve exposing children to pornography.[69] Rather, it involves conversations and discussion-based activities designed to support children to apply foundational competencies – such as critical thinking and digital literacy – to the influence of pornography and other forms of sexual media.

Education to address pornography's influence should occur in a range of government and civil-society settings, including homes, schools, community and therapeutic contexts.

### School-based education to safeguard children

The need for school-based education to address pornography's influence is increasingly recognized in policy, academic, educational and mainstream media contexts, and in research with parents, educators, service providers, and children themselves. Pornography's influence should be addressed as an integrated component of age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education and supported through education in other relevant curriculum areas such as digital technology, humanities and social sciences.[70] International guidance on sexuality education and sexuality education curriculum standards from a range of countries now include references to core knowledge and skills related to the impacts of children's exposure to sexually explicit media.[71]

Education addressing pornography's influence should occur as part of a whole of school approach, where curriculum delivery is supported by formal school policies and practices, a supportive school culture and ethos, and the relationships between school, home and the community.[72] Resources and support must be inclusive, accessible, and sufficient, ensuring the provision of necessary education and specialized assistance at no cost for children and their families.

Schools-based education should be responsive to the diverse needs of students, including in relation to factors such as students' gender, culture, language, sexual orientation and disability. It should also be sensitive to the likelihood that students will have varying levels of knowledge of pornography and diverse experiences of pornography's influence and of relationships, sex, and violence, including sexual violence.

### Education in other settings

School-based education on pornography can be enhanced by additional education from parents, caregivers, and other professionals. This non-school-based education enables tailored support and guidance and is especially crucial for children who do not attend school, those in out-of-home care, juvenile justice facilities, or those who have experienced sexual trauma.

The technologies through which many children are exposed to pornography can also be effective for providing information, education and resources. For example, information to support critical thinking about pornography's depictions and influence can be provided through mediums such as websites and social media.

### Supporting children

In addition to education designed to build relevant competencies, children also need care and support to prevent and minimise pornography's harms to them. This support may be provided by parents and other primary caregivers, who provide day-to-day support to children and, with access to education and support, can provide care on this issue. For example, parents and

[69] Ibid
[70] Ibid
[71] U.K. Department for Education. Relationships education, relationships and sex education (RSE) and health education statutory guidance for governing bodies, proprietors, head teachers, principals, senior leadership teams, teachers. London, United Kingdom: U.K. Department for Education; 2019.
[72] Crabbe M, Flood M. School-Based Education to Address Pornography's Influence on Young People: A Proposed Practice Framework. American Journal of Sexuality Education. 2021:1-46.

caregivers can encourage children to talk with them about anything they see online that concerns or upsets them and depending on the child's age may specifically mention the potential for unintentional exposure to content that is "not suitable for children" or includes "private" or "sexual photos or videos" or overtly refer to "pornography".

Some children require access to specialist support from professionals who can help mitigate pornography's harms to them – such as psychologists, social workers, doctors, and other health professionals. Children who require specialist support include, for example:

- children who feel distressed or confused by the pornography to which they have been exposed,
- children who have sustained injuries from sex that has been influenced by pornography's depictions,
- children who are suffering from compulsive use of pornography,
- children who are victims of sexual abuse in which pornography has played a role, and
- children who display problematic or harmful sexual behaviours as a consequence of their exposure to pornography.

**Examples of actions to educate and support children**

Member states can contribute to safeguarding children from the risks of exposure to online pornographic content through the education and support of children, including through support to civil-society initiatives where appropriate, for example, by:

- supporting delivery of age and developmentally appropriate education that supports children to develop foundational competencies, for example, through sequential education about critical thinking, media literacy, digital literacy, online safety, responsible digital citizenship, gender equality, relationships and sexuality, and help-seeking,
- supporting delivery of gender-sensitive, age and developmentally appropriate education that supports children to apply these foundational competencies to pornography's influence,
- developing age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education to be provided to children in formal, non-formal and informal educational, bearing in mind the hallmarks of a human-rights based gender-sensitive, approach to comprehensive sexuality education as set out by the Council of Europe[73],
- supporting the development of evidence-based, age and developmentally appropriate education resources that support practical delivery of education on these themes, including resources that address the diverse needs of children.
- developing age-appropriate online information and resources to support children to develop foundational competencies, to critically analyse pornography's influence, and to seek support,
- developing age-appropriate, gender sensitive public campaigns directed at children to support critical thinking about pornography's influence and other related themes,

[73] Campbell M, Nolan A, Sullivan C, *Feasibility study on age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education to strengthen responses for – inter alia – preventing and combating violence, including risky or harmful sexual behaviour by children*, July 2024

- supporting the provision of specialist support services with expertise in supporting children who have been negatively impacted by pornography, including in relation to sexual abuse victimisation or perpetration, physical injuries, and compulsive pornography use,

- establishing helplines/hotlines and other pathways for children to seek support, including support about adverse online experiences, including exposure to pornography, or experiences of sexual harm or violence, including experiences in which pornography has played a role in those harms.

**Example: Promising practices in the Council of Europe member states**

In **Italy**, the Department for Family Policies and the Ministry of Enterprises and Made in Italy will launch annual awareness campaigns on the safe and conscious use of the internet. These campaigns aim to educate the public, including children, about the risks associated with digital content and promote safe online practices. (Under the Decree-Law No. 123/2023*)

In **Portugal**, in order to "Prevent and fight the violence against children and young people" and among other tools, the Ministry of Education is currently increasing the number of schools honored with the Digital Security Seal*. This signet aims rewarding schools that are educating children to the safe use of internet at school including preventing risks of viewing pornographic content.

In **Ireland**, the website (webwise.ie) promotes the autonomous, effective and safe use of the internet by young people through a sustained information and awareness strategy targeting a plurality of actors such as school leaders, teachers, parents and children themselves with consistent and relevant messages.

In **Sweden**, the sexuality curricula in schools was updated in 2022 to "Sexuality, consent and relationships" and now, includes content to develop students' critical approach to the representations of relationships and sexuality in various media and contexts, including in pornography. The websites UMO.se and Youmo* also are examples of safe, reliable places for young people to get information, advice and support in matters of sexuality, including on pornography.

In **Luxembourg,** BEE SECURE, acting as the Luxembourgish Safer Internet Center, offers an online training concerning the encounter and handling of young people with sexual representations on the Internet, as well as background information and an overview of the consumption of pornography among children and young people.

Other promising practices of voluntary instruments at Member States level also include the Irish Fundamentals for a Child-Oriented Approach to Data Processing, the Dutch Children's Code*; the Swedish guide on the rights of children and young people on digital platforms, the *French Commission nationale de l'informatique et des libertés* (CNIL) Recommendations, UK's *Information Commissioner's Office* (ICO) Children's Code, or the concept of personal integrity of minors in the German Youth Protection Act.

**Example: Civil-society initiatives to support children to critically analyse pornography**

Civil-society initiatives have developed websites and other educational material with information to support young people to critically analyse pornography. Useful examples are *In the Know* in New Zealand and *It's time we talked* in Australia.

In Europe, *Da o clique** is a non-religious and non-profit project in Portugal working both preventively, with awareness-raising and educational projects (including promotion of research, contacts with the industry, seminars and workshops in schools…) as well as to support individuals from all ages struggling to leave their pornography consumption habits (through a clinical team).

## 2.6 SUPPORT RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

Research that supports an accurate, nuanced and gender sensitive understanding of children's exposure to online pornography and its consequences, and of how children may be safeguarded from pornography's harms, is critical for informing member states' safeguarding actions.

There is a substantial evidence base concerning children's exposure to and access of online pornographic content and its associated harms, yet there are still significant gaps in knowledge on these issues. There is very little existing research into the effectiveness of interventions to prevent pornography's harms to children.

In the context of the existing gaps, and of ever-evolving technologies and an increasing appetite on the part of states and intergovernmental bodies to prevent and reduce online pornography's harms to children, there is a need for further research and innovation to better understand and mitigate the risks to children.

**Examples of research and innovation actions**

Member states can play a key role in supporting and incentivising research and innovation to inform and contribute to efforts to safeguard children from the risks of exposure to online pornographic content. For example, member states can:

- Build the evidence base of children's exposure and access to pornography and the harms associated with it, including research into patterns of exposure and access, the changing means by which children are exposed, and the connections between the different actors within the online pornography ecosystem that allows children access. This should include sex-disaggregated data from the online companies that deliver pornography to young people, such as the number of young/child users, their age, the age assurance measures in place, access and exposure patterns, and how algorithms and bots impact and shape children's viewing patterns.

- Support research that focuses on understanding pornography's harms to boys, girls and to groups of children in vulnerable situations, and effective measures for preventing and reducing these harms. Such research might focus, for example, on the experiences of children who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, living in out-of-home care, who are neurodivergent, disabled, non-binary, Indigenous, and/or from migrant/refugee backgrounds.

- Support the development of technologies for effective age assurance and other safety mechanisms. This may include direct support, for example, by commissioning companies to develop technologies – such as apps – to achieve particular safety outcomes. Alternatively, state support may occur through the development of regulatory environments that incentivise industries and service providers in the online ecosystem to develop and test innovative technologies that help to protect children from online pornography's harms.

- Evaluate the effectiveness, and any negative unintended consequences, associated with any interventions designed to prevent pornography's harms to children. For example, research into the effectiveness of age assurance measures might include an assessment of whether the measures steer children away from compliant sites and services but inadvertently have the effect of pushing them towards those that are non-compliant (and potentially contain particularly egregious content).

- Evaluate the effectiveness of campaigns and education programmes directed at children, parents and caregivers, schools and other professionals and use the findings to improve and enhance future campaigns and programmes.

- Evaluate the effectiveness of the professional learning and support offered to school staff and other professionals who work with children to equip them to provide safeguarding education and support for children. For example, research to assess the extent to which access to relevant professional learning and resources supports teachers to deliver content addressing pornography's influence as part of age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education and to identify any challenges and opportunities for improvement.

- Support future-focused research, including around new and emerging technologies, to ensure that regulatory environments and enforcement mechanisms, as well as campaigns and education programmes, remain relevant and responsive to the latest developments.

- Support research for a better knowledge on how artificial intelligence can bring new challenges facilitating the access of children to pornography, but also how it can bring improvements to support the protection of children from pornography's harms.

**Example: Spanish development of "Digital Wallet" age assurance app**

As part of its efforts to support the implementation of effective age verification, the Spanish government released a technical solution* designed to enable a user to prove their age of majority to adult content providers while maintaining their anonymity. The Spanish government's support for this innovation has helped to advance practical solutions to addressing challenges such as how to implement robust age verification measures while protecting user privacy and security.

## Conclusion:

Children are exposed to online pornographic content intentionally and accidentally. The content to which they are exposed commonly depicts gendered stereotypes, gendered aggression and sexual violence. Pornography use among children is associated with a range of harms, including violent attitudes and harmful sexual behaviours. There is an urgent need to prevent pornography's harms to children.

There is no single solution to safeguard children from pornography's harms. An effective approach requires multiple, complementary strategies with input from a range of stakeholders.

States have critical roles to play in safeguarding children from the risks of exposure to online pornographic content. Measures that member states can take include:

- Providing proactive, coordinated considered leadership.
- Establishing an appropriate legislative and regulatory framework.
- Educating and equipping parents and other caregivers.
- Educating and equipping professionals and any other relevant stakeholders who work with children.
- Educating, supporting and protecting children.
- Supporting civil society organisations.
- Supporting research and innovation.
- Establishing collaborative partnerships involving international, national and local organisations and stakeholders to develop and share online protection resources and tools.

Many member states, other states and intergovernmental organisations are already engaged in safeguarding actions consistent with the recommendations made in this Guidance Note. There are many opportunities to extend existing efforts, including through shared learning and collaboration between states.

# Appendix I: Key norms and standards relevant to the issue

## 1. UNITED NATIONS NORMS

All member states of the Council of Europe are parties to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and are bound to implement its provisions and to act in accordance with its principles. In addition, the General Comments of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child are important references for Member-States to respect the Convention's principles, and in particular the General comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment. Even though a few of them have not yet ratified the Optional Protocols to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, a majority of member states of the Council of Europe is required to consider implementing the Protocol on the sale of children, the child prostitution and child pornography (2000) and communications procedure Protocol (2011). These can be useful as benchmarks and can encourage further the development of an effective legislative framework.

## 2. COUNCIL OF EUROPE STANDARDS

The Council of Europe's Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the cornerstone of all the Council of Europe standards and activities, protects children's right to be free from violence through its Articles 2, 3 and 8, among others, enforced and complemented by the case law of the European Court of Human Rights. Other conventions relevant to the issue are the Convention on Cybercrime or Budapest Convention (ETS No. 185), the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence or Istanbul Convention (CETS No. 210) and the Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse or Lanzarote Convention (CETS No. 201).

Article 22 of the Lanzarote Convention provides that each state party to the Convention shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to criminalise the intentional causing, for sexual purposes, of a child, who has not reached the minimum legal age for sexual activities to witness sexual abuse or sexual activities. The Lanzarote Committee also adopted Opinions, such as on the Solicitation of children for sexual purposes through information and communication technologies (Opinion on Article 23 of the Lanzarote Convention); on the applicability of the Lanzarote Convention to sexual offences against children facilitated through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Interpretative Opinion); on child sexually suggestive or explicit images and/or videos generated, shared and received by children (Opinion adopted on 6 June 2019) and an Implementation Report in the context of the 2nd monitoring round, adopted on 30 March 2022, on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse facilitated by information and communication technologies (ICTs): Addressing the challenges raised by child self-generated sexual images and/or videos. In the Interpretative Opinion on the applicability of the Lanzarote Convention to sexual offences against children facilitated through the use of ICTs, in particular, the Lanzarote Committee held that the offences remain criminalised irrespective of the means used to commit them, including through information and communication technologies. This means that causing a child to witness online sexual activities should also be criminalised.

The Istanbul Convention's aim is notably to protect women against all forms of violence and to contribute to the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, promoting substantive equality between women and men. More specifically, articles 35 and 36 criminalise physical violence and sexual violence, including rape - based on the lack of freely given consent. Article 13 call on awareness raising campaigns or programmes to increase awareness on the different manifestations of all forms of violence against women, their consequences on children and the need to prevent such violence. Article 14 focuses on education, whereby state parties must include teaching material on issues such as equality between women and men, non-stereotypes gender roles, mutual respect, non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships, gender-based violence against women and the right to personal integrity.

The Council of Europe has produced a non-binding legal instrument with the aim of setting minimum standards in terms of child protection to safeguard children's rights in the digital sphere. This is Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)7 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on guidelines for respecting, protecting and fulfilling children's rights in the digital environment.

Other standards refer to pornography and the risks for children, namely the Committee of Ministers' Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)1 on Preventing and Combating Sexism and the guidelines on the place of men and boys in gender equality policies and in policies to combat violence against women. They underline the need to develop critical thinking to counter sexism, including in pornography and to introduce measures and tools enhancing the skills of parents to deal with cyber sexism and internet pornography.

Recommendation CM/Rec(2009)10 on Council of Europe Policy guidelines on integrated national strategies for the protection of children from violence gives guidance to all relevant national stakeholders to devise, within the national framework for child protection, a comprehensive protection and safety policy. This includes the protection of children against harmful media content and the portrayal of violence (§4.3). Additional resources include Recommendations of the Committee of Ministers CM/Rec(2009)5 on measures to protect children against harmful content and behaviour and to promote their active participation in the new information and communications environment and CM/Rec(2008)6 on measures to promote the respect for freedom of expression and information with regard to Internet filters.

The issues raised by children's viewing of pornographic content online are linked to several strategic objectives of the Council of Europe's Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027). The exposure of children to pornography is counter to objective 1 of the Strategy, which is to ensure a violence-free life for all children. In addition, objective 3 of the Strategy, aimed at ensuring the safe use of technologies, calls to put in place measures to ensure a safe online environment and protect children from early and unsupervised exposure to this type of content.

The Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) also identified the risks of pornography for children in a report adopted in 2021 on Gender aspects and human rights implications of pornography. In its resolution, PACE is calling for comprehensive sexuality education in schools to become "*the main source of information on sexuality for young people*", thus helping prevent the spread of unreliable and potentially harmful information via pornography. A report adopted on 19 April 2024 on the protection of children against online violence further highlights that "*Pornography must be understood as a public health issue, for which States are responsible for taking appropriate measures, including education and*

*awareness-raising measures. The minimum standard to protect children should be age verification obligations on websites*".

Finally, the European Audiovisual Observatory issued a mapping report on "the protection of minors on video sharing platforms: age verification and parental control" which highlights the challenges of protecting minors on video-sharing platforms through a comparative analysis of some thirty European countries. On the basis of the report and additional research, the European Audiovisual Observatory issued the publication "Safe screens: protecting minors online", which presents a condensed overview of the situation, in September 2024

## 3. THE EU FRAMEWORK APPLICABLE TO EU MEMBER STATES

The Audiovisual Media Services Directive (Directive (EU) 2018/1808 of the European Parliament and of the EU Council) of 14 November 2018 states that Video Sharing Platforms must protect children from material that may impair their physical, mental or moral development. It has significantly impacted the regulation of audiovisual media services across EU member States, even though it is currently difficult for them to put in place and implement an instrument aimed specifically at regulating content and tackling the issue of age verification. National legislation that implement the directive and/or seek to put into effect its obligations, including with regard to access of children to pornography, include instruments like the French law no. 2024-449 of 21 May 2024 aimed at securing and regulating the digital space[74] or the Irish Online Safety Code, which provide for age verification requirements.

The EU Digital Services Act ("DSA", Regulation (EU) 2022/2065) lists as one of its main objectives the protection of minors. It provides *inter alia* that "online platforms accessible to minors shall put in place appropriate and proportionate measures to ensure a high level of privacy, safety, and security of minors" (Art. 28.1). The DSA also lists age verification as one of the possible mitigation measures that very large online platforms can put in place to mitigate the risks their services pose to the rights of the child (Art. 35.1(j)) and provides that technical standards should be developed for targeted measures to protect minors online (Art. 44.1(j)).

The European Commission is currently developing guidelines to further define specific measures to protect minors online, considering positions and suggestions of civil society organizations with the European Parliament's Intergroup on Children's Rights, based on existing best practices and voluntary instruments at Member States level,[75] as well the highest available standards like the CEN-CENELEC Workshop Agreement 18016 Age appropriate digital services framework. The Commission also published a research report on technical solutions for age verification: Mapping age assurance typologies and requirements | Shaping Europe's digital future.

The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, Regulation (EU) 2016/679) also requires the use of verification with regard to age and parental consent, and further requirements on the need for age verification to protect children from the risk of abuse they experience due to online services and products are under discussion in the framework of the negotiation of an EU Regulation laying down rules to prevent and combat child sexual abuse.

[74] *Loi n° 2024-449 du 21 mai 2024 visant à sécuriser et à réguler l'espace numérique (available in french only)*
[75] For example, the Irish Fundamentals for a Child-Oriented Approach to Data Processing, the Dutch Children's Code (https://codevoorkinderrechten.nl/), the Swedish guide on the rights of children and young people on digital platforms, the French CNIL Recommendations, the UK ICO's Children's Code, or the concept of personal integrity of minors in the German Youth Protection Act.

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