

TESTIMONY OF HEIDI OLSON, MSN, RN, CPN, SANE-P

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I am a pediatric sexual assault nurse examiner. Over the last decade, I have provided medical care and collected evidence on hundreds of children who have experienced sexual assault, exploitation, and sex trafficking.

Last year, I submitted an Amicus Brief to the U.S. Supreme Court for the Paxton vs. Free Speech Coalition case, which discussed age verification. Much of the data I referred to came from trends that are happening to kids in the Midwest. The situation we find ourselves in is dire.

We are seeing a disturbing trend, which is that an increasing number of children are sexually assaulting other children. Data shows that anywhere from 1/3 to almost 1/2 of those committing sexual assaults against children are minors themselves. In fact, the age range most likely to commit sexual assaults are 11–15-year-old-males,¹ with 14-year males being the highest risk to engage in this behavior.²

There are multiple factors that contribute to a child sexually harming another child³, but an increasingly common theme we hear from offenders is that pornography has influenced them to sexually act out on another child. Research backs this up with multiple studies showing the correlational and causational relationship between porn use and sexual violence.⁴

Let me give you a real-life example of what this looks like, we took care of a traumatized 13-year-old female who told us that her 16-year-old brother came into her room in the middle of the night and stated, “I was looking at porn in my room and can’t stop thinking about it” as he proceeded to sexually assault her.

Children are very susceptible to what they see in pornography. The more they view pornography, the more they want to perform the acts they are seeing.⁵ Research shows that early exposure to pornography gives rise to sexual misconduct, leads to violent sex, including strangulation, puts girls at risk for being victimized, is linked to substance use, impairs relationship skills, physically harms the brain, leads to erectile dysfunction, contributes to depression, teaches kids that objectification and exploitation are normal, and is linked with poor body image and self-esteem.⁶⁻¹⁷

Most kids stumble upon pornography accidentally the first time they see it, which is why age verification is so crucial.¹⁸

As if all of this isn’t overwhelming enough, pornography is teaching kids that self-exploitation is desirable. We’ve taken care of teenagers who are being sex trafficked through sites like OnlyFans, and we’ve seen kids who have sent hundreds of nude photos in exchange for things like gaming tokens or gift cards. The most devastating part is that these precious kids don’t recognize they are being exploited or harmed, because they are watching young influencers make millions of dollars in the porn industry, without anyone talking about the trauma, coercion and abuse that occurs when bodies are commodified.

I am barely scraping the surface when it comes to the numerous harms children are experiencing related to pornography. I've talked to countless teens whose sexual abuse has been filmed and shared online among their peers. Can you imagine having to go to school when everyone has viewed your rape on Snapchat like it's nothing?

As technology is changing, the stakes are getting higher. I recently talked to a therapist who was working with a teenage boy, who had downloaded an AI chatbot that was teaching him how to rape young girls.

Age verification isn't a fix all to every single issue online, but it's a strong and proven way to mitigate some of the harm that is deeply impacting our kids and I am in support of this legislation.

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