



Implications of Social Media Use and Exposure to Pornography and Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM): The Role of the Medical Provider

Background

With the advent of the internet and its exponential proliferation, children and teens now have access to material that was previously either nonexistent or simply unavailable to them. As they are increasingly connected to the world by cellphones, computers, streaming devices, and other tools and platforms (even toddlers can use smartphones and tablets), many become exposed to inappropriate material as a consequence.¹ Some may inadvertently stumble upon this material, whereas others may seek it out due to curiosity.^{2,3,4} Thus, from a very young age, children and teens are bombarded with sexualized images; this ultimately impacts their daily activities and may result in risky behavior for some.

Medical providers are in a unique position to help educate children, teens, and their caregivers about the risks to youth online. Whether they're using social media applications, messaging platforms, online games, YouTube, or many other online services, there are many ways that youth can be exposed to unwanted or damaging material online. This exposure can result in social, emotional, cognitive, and health challenges, including issues related to bullying, popularity and status, depression and social anxiety, risk-taking, and sexual development.^{5,6} Providers can help caregivers understand that what happens online is "an extension of these underlying issues," and that they can best help their kids by understanding "the core issues and [having] strategies for dealing with them, whether they take place online, offline, or, increasingly, both."⁵

While it is essential to educate children about sexuality and healthy relationships, it is imperative that it is done in a developmentally-appropriate manner to avoid causing potential harm and shame. Exposure to this material can lead to victimization by online perpetrators; increasingly, children and teens are being targeted and groomed by adults that (manipulate) encourage them to create sexually explicit images and videos.⁷

Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM)

Until recently, the term "child pornography" was commonly used to refer to images of minors who are nude, posed in sexually suggestive positions, or involved in sexual situations. Since minors cannot give consent to having these images distributed for general consumption, it has been reframed as "child sexual abuse material" (CSAM) to reflect the abusive nature of this practice.⁸

To understand how widespread this issue is, it is helpful to examine the impact that exposure to sexualized images and videos and/or becoming a victim of online grooming and CSAM has on children and adolescents.

- Prepubertal children are at the highest risk of being represented in CSAM.^{9, 10}
- While cisgender girls appear in a large majority of CSAM,^{11, 12} studies also indicate that cisgender boys are depicted in up to a third of CSAM cases.^{9, 10, 13}
- When cisgender boys are victimized, they are much more likely than cisgender girls to be subjected to very explicit or egregious abuse.⁹
- On average, cisgender boys represented in CSAM are younger than cisgender girls and more likely to have not yet reached puberty.⁹

The production of CSAM often begins with grooming, where someone builds an online relationship with a child or teen before encouraging, pressuring, or tricking them into performing sexual behaviors, such as sexting, sending nude photos, and/or performing sexual acts on camera. In a recent study of a nationally-representative online panel, cases of being threatened, forced, or pressured into sharing sexual images were reported by about 10% of participants.¹⁴ Offenders often use grooming techniques to normalize sexual contact and encourage secrecy.⁸ While grooming often paves the way for the production of CSAM, it is also frequently responsible for subsequent violence, including further sexual abuse material, sextortion, and contact sexual offending, among others.

After the grooming process, sextortion can often occur – this is a process by which the online predator extorts the child or teen by threatening them with distribution of their sexual images/material. This blackmail serves to harass, embarrass, and control them, often spiraling into further abuse, including:

- Acquiring increasingly explicit CSAM.
- Obtaining money, property, or other tangible items.
- Arranging an in-person meeting for contact sexual offense.^{15, 16}

Between 2019 and 2021, the number of reports to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children involving the sextortion of children or teens more than doubled; more than 560,000 reports of CSAM are made on a weekly basis.¹⁷ Identified instances of these cases are rising, and teenage boys have been the most common targets of sextortion.¹⁸ In reports from early 2022, 79% of offenders were seeking money from the victim.¹⁹

Points About the Hypersexualization of Media

Children are being exposed to sexualized images from the time they are very young: on TV, social media, billboards, music videos, movies, gaming, etc. – it has been normalized. Girls from a very early age are portrayed as being sexualized, in skimpy clothes and sexual poses.²⁰

In addition to the global exposure to these sexualized images, pornographic sites are readily available and easy for kids to access. Porn sites receive more visits each month than Netflix, Amazon and Twitter combined.²¹ In 2020, the top three global porn sites – Pornhub, xVideos, Xnxx – together received more monthly hits than Netflix, Twitter, Amazon, eBay, or PayPal.²² An April 2021 "Tech Review" from Pornhub, the self-described "world's leading free porn site," reported 130 million daily visits, which totals 47.45 billion that year.²³ It is no wonder that approximately one-third of all web-download are porn-related in the United States.¹⁹

Social Media's Impact on Children Exposed to CSAM and Sexualized Materials From a Young Age

What We Have Learned About the Victims

Cisgender Girls^{9, 24}

- Girls appear in the overwhelming majority of CSAM.
- Girls are impacted not only by their own use of CSAM, but also by boys' use.
- Our culture is saturated with "hypersexualized media," which results in reducing girls to sex objects.
- Girls feel that they need to engage in activities to make themselves more sexually appealing (known as "self-sexualization"), which can lead to being objectified by themselves and others.

Based upon extensive research, girls exposed to hypersexualized pop-culture images from a young age are more likely to exhibit higher levels of anxiety and depression, have lower self-esteem, and may develop a negative body image and self-objectify. In addition to how they view themselves, they also have a higher likelihood of sexting, of becoming a sexual assault victim, of drug and alcohol abuse, of engaging in risky sexual behavior and of developing eating behaviors and/or engaging in self-harm.²⁵

Cisgender Boys

- As noted earlier, when victimized, boys are much more likely than girls to be subjected to very explicit or egregious abuse.⁹
- On average, boys represented in CSAM are younger than girls and more likely to have not yet reached puberty.⁹
- In 2022, the FBI received thousands of reports related to the financial sextortion of minors, primarily boys, representing an exponential increase from previous years; unfortunately, the FBI is also aware of more than a dozen suicides following these incidents.²⁶

Based upon extensive research, it has been found that boys who are exposed to porn beginning at a young age are more likely to exhibit negative attitudes and behavior towards women.^{27, 28, 29} Examples of this are believing that rape is a justified act (i.e., they are 'asking for it') as well as little empathy towards victims of rape, supportive attitudes towards sexual harassment and violence against women, poor academic performance and increased aggressive behavioral tendencies.^{28, 30} In addition, exposure to porn at a young age can lead to difficulties in developing intimate relationships (including erectile dysfunction, anxiety, depression, loss of intimacy), sexual preoccupation, pressuring intimate partners to engage in porn-style sex and compulsive internet use.^{22, 31, 32, 41}

Tips for Health Care Providers in Supporting Families

Medical providers are in a unique position to be able to talk with children and teens in their care about safety issues. Just as it is necessary to inquire about health issues, it is similarly important to inquire about safety issues, including home safety, exposure to gun violence,

risk of sexually transmitted infections, exposure to pornography, and the dangers of sexting. Providers can also educate about the cautionary steps to take and how to handle situations where children and teens are bullied, harassed, involved in sextortion, or otherwise victimized online.

Furthermore, the AAP encourages all pediatricians to increase their knowledge of digital technology to have a more educated frame of reference regarding the tools their patients and families are using. One way this can be accomplished is through continuing education programs. This will further aid in providing timely anticipatory media guidance as well as diagnosing media-related issues should they arise.^{33, 34}

Because medical providers have a special insight into the patient and family, there are three important screening questions they should be asking all patients and families:

1. Aside from schoolwork, how much recreational screen time does your child or adolescent participate in on a daily basis?
2. Does your child or adolescent have a television and/or internet connected device in their bedroom (ex: cell phone, iPad, computer)?
3. Does your child frequent social media/gaming platforms such as Snapchat, Tiktok, Instagram, and/or Discord?

Research has shown that there is evidence that internet connected screen time in the bedroom negatively corresponds to the risk of obesity, substance use and sexual content exposure.²⁵ Research also finds lack of sleep to be an indicator of excessive use of social media and/or pornography.^{3, 35}

In addition to the necessity of educating children and teens on comprehensive sex education, it is also important for caregivers to have conversations about sexting once their child is old enough to have a cell phone or tablet. When working with families and caregivers, medical providers have an opportunity for early intervention in supporting healthy trajectories.

The following are several suggestions that can help to minimize the risk of victimization by assisting caregivers in establishing a culture of communication and safety with their children and teens.^{33, 36, 37} Encourage caregivers to:

- Set agreed-upon ground rules with their child/teen, including age limits, device-specific settings and controls, and privacy restrictions. For instance, work with children on developing a [social media contract](#).
- Talk about positive uses of technology and encourage critical thinking. The Culture Reframed [Parents Courses for Tweens and Teens](#) will assist caregivers in developing the knowledge and skills to do scaffold critical thinking among their children.
- Supervise online activities via active participation and communication, rather than remote monitoring with an app or software.
- Know what internet-enabled devices their child/teen has access to.
- Familiarize themselves and become more proficient with the technology and platforms their child/teen is using.
- Monitor what games their child/teen is playing and the devices they use for gaming.
- Respond to any inappropriate usage calmly and with compassion; the emphasis should be on building trust with their children to report any potentially harmful online interactions or

images. Where possible, avoid punitive action as this is more likely to close down communication with children. For example, see Culture Reframed's [Compose Yourself! Model](#).

- Know who they are interacting with online. Caregivers should know their children's online friends as well as they know their offline friends.
- Talk openly about how to handle harassing and threatening online messages.
- Caregivers should tell children that they must immediately close their device and report to them any image or message that makes them feel uncomfortable.

Additionally, remind caregivers that it is also their responsibility to be mindfully cautious. Encourage them to be mindful of what they post and to steer clear of including identifying information when posting – as a caregiver, just as with their child or teen, images and content they post will also remain available on the internet indefinitely. Research shows that when parents and caregivers talk to youth about the negative effects of porn, young people tend to express more negative attitudes about porn, which translates into less pornography use.³⁸

It is important to emphasize to caregivers that today, most kids socialize through the internet, and they don't consider their online friends to be strangers. Many kids consider online chatting and flirting with adults to be normal and don't realize that what seems innocent can quickly become more serious. By understanding the implications of social media platforms and the potential for exposure to CSAM and mainstream pornographic material, medical providers can help to mitigate harm that is increasingly affecting the children, teens, and families with whom they work.

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