

## Call for inputs on the solutions to promote digital education for young people and to ensure their protection from online threats

One of the main challenges we would like to bring your attention to is the plague of online access of children to pornography, also seen as a form of online abuse. **Most children, and at an earlier age, use their online devices on an almost constant basis. However, online activity can expose children to risks** such as cyberbullying, access to age-inappropriate content, “self-generated” sexually explicit content (sexting), solicitation for the purposes of sexual exploitation (grooming), and child sexual abuse and exploitation. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these trends, as it led to a further increase in use of online devices by children. **Current regulations are non exhaustive, more research is needed and further measures need to be developed**, starting from recognising that children’s exposure to pornography is already a form of online sexual abuse. Therefore, the fact that online pornographic content is accessible to minors is itself a breach of human rights.

Furthermore, pornography represents an issue of public health: not only it has a damaging impact on young people’s brains, as it may lead to addiction, and has serious consequences in the construction of sexuality in the pivotal period of young people's psychosexual development, but also encourages gender stereotypes by objectifying women and is linked to violent behaviours and sexual dysfunction caused by cerebral habituation to pornographic content.

With the widespread use of mobile devices it becomes increasingly difficult for parents, teachers and educators to protect children from the exposure to pornography. The average age for the first use of the internet among European children is 7 years. 75% of 15-16 years old people use the internet daily<sup>1</sup>. A UK study found that, on average, **children aged 5-16 spend 6.5 hours a day on screens**<sup>2</sup>.

**Exposure of minors to pornography is widespread in Europe.** In Italy, a survey found that 67% of boys aged 14-19 and 15% of girls have watched pornographic material. In Sweden, 92% of boys and 57% of girls of 15-18 years of age have watched pornography<sup>3</sup>. Exposure to

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<sup>1</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/europadiary/uk/health/time\\_online\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/europadiary/uk/health/time_online_en.htm)

<sup>2</sup> (<http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-32067158>)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.brushfiresfoundation.org/youth-are-exposed-to-pornography-worldwide/>

pornography can happen even earlier: in the UK, a survey of children aged 11-16 found that more than half of them were exposed to such contents<sup>4</sup>.

In the context of preventing the exposure of children to pornography parents and educators need tools that enable them to protect children. The constantly increasing access to screens, especially through mobile devices, induces a need for protective instruments that are up to date. Legislators have a duty to search for ways to guarantee the protection of minors from harmful contents on the internet and TV.

**At the European level, the European Parliament approved an extension to the current rules that allow for the detection of Child Sexual Abuse Material online<sup>5</sup>.** While the temporary extension is necessary, *the detection and prevention of abuse material needs long-term solutions*, with the backing of civil society and families' organisations. While this is an urgent issue that cannot be solved only by extending temporary measures, we welcomed this extension and reiterate our calls for the inclusion of age verification systems, and parental controls.

FAFCE urges the High Commissioner for Human Rights to consider the following steps: (i) promote more research on the consequences of exposure to pornography, as an issue of public health; (ii) further analyse the links between pornography consumption and child sexual abuse; (iii) raise awareness of the fight against the oversexualisation of children; (iv) explore the feasibility of an international ban on pornography.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/blog/impact-online-pornography-children>

<sup>5</sup> European Parliament, Child sexual abuse online: MEPs endorse one-off extension of current rules <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20240129IPR17212/child-sexual-abuse-online-meps-endorse-one-off-extension-of-current-rules>