

1 in 3 boys heavy porn users, study shows

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Boys aged 13 and 14 living in rural areas, are the most likely of their age group to access pornography, and parents need to be more aware of how to monitor their children's viewing habits, according to a new University of Alberta study.

A total of 429 students aged 13 and 14 from 17 urban and rural schools across Alberta, Canada, were surveyed anonymously about if, how and how often they accessed sexually explicit media content on digital or satellite television, video and DVD and the Internet. Ninety per cent of males and 70 per cent of females reported accessing sexually explicit media content at least once. More than one-third of the boys reported viewing pornographic DVDs or videos "too many times to count", compared to eight per cent of the girls surveyed.

A majority of the students, 74 per cent, reported viewing pornography on the Internet. Forty-one per cent saw it on video or DVD and 57 per cent reported seeing it on a specialty TV channel. Nine per cent of the tens reported they accessed pornography because someone over 18 had rented it; six per cent had rented it themselves and 20 per cent viewed it at a friend's house.

The study also revealed different patterns of use between males and females, with boys doing the majority of deliberate viewing, and a significant minority planning social time around viewing porn with male friends. Girls reported more accidental or unwanted exposure online and tend to view porn in same-gender pairs or with mixed groups.

Though being curious about sexually explicit media may seem a ‘natural’ part of early adolescence, porn is a major presence in the lives of youth. The media environment in Alberta homes makes access to porn easy for teens and viewing pornography at a young age can set children up for problems later on, said Sonya Thompson, a masters graduate student at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada, and author of the study. “We don’t know how we are changing sexual behaviours, attitudes, values and beliefs by enabling this kind of exposure and not talking with kids about it in any meaningful way,” Thompson said.

Thompson, formerly a sex education teacher, is concerned about the health and social messages pornography sends. Excessive early exposure to pornography may be harmful in terms of expectations going into relationships. “What kinds of expectations will these young people have going into their first sexual relationships? It may be setting up a big disconnect between boys and girls and may be normalizing risky sex practices.”

Almost half of rural youths in the survey reported seeing pornographic videos or DVDs at least once, compared to one-third of the urban participants. Thompson is unsure why rural teens access porn more on video and DVD, but suggests that parents may think distance acts as a buffer. “Maybe they have a false sense of thinking they are far away from unhealthy influences.” Rural boys also reported a lower incidence of parents talking with them about sexual media content. Urban girls were most likely to have had discussions with their parents.

And while the majority of teens surveyed said their parents expressed concern about sexual content, that concern hasn’t led to discussion or supervision, and few parents are using available technology to block sexual content.

“It indicates there is plenty of room for better parenting around

pornography use. Parents need to improve dialogue with their children and their own awareness level. They have to be educated enough to be the ones setting the boundaries in the house,” Thompson said. “Families using media together is no longer the norm, so parents need to know what their kids have access to in their alone time,” Thompson said.

Teachers also need to tackle the issue in sex education classes, she added. “Obviously it’s a huge influence on kids and it needs to be talked about. There’s a whole subculture we are not addressing.”

Retailers, government and the media industry regulators also need to work with parents to ensure they are educated about limiting their children’s access to sexually explicit material, have strategies to talk with their teens, and that laws around the sale of porn to minors are enforced, Thompson said.

Source: University of Alberta

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