

# Parental controls do not stop teens from seeing pornography, new research finds

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The struggle to shape the experiences young people have online is now part of modern parenthood. As children and teenagers spend increasing amounts of time online, a significant share of parents and guardians now

use Internet filtering tools (such as parental controls) to protect their children from accessing sexual material online. However, new research from the Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford has found that Internet filtering tools are ineffective and in most cases, were an insignificant factor in whether young people had seen explicit sexual content.

Though the use of Internet filtering tools is widespread, there has been no conclusive evidence on their effectiveness until now. "It's important to consider the efficacy of Internet filtering," says Dr. Victoria Nash, co-author on the study. "Internet filtering tools are expensive to develop and maintain, and can easily 'underblock' due to the constant development of new ways of sharing content.

Additionally, there are concerns about human rights violations—filtering can lead to 'overblocking', where [young people](#) are not able to access legitimate health and relationship information."

The research used data from a large-scale study looking at pairs of children and caregivers in Europe, comparing self-reported information on whether children had viewed online sexual content despite the use of Internet filtering tools in their household. A second preregistered study was then conducted looking at teenagers in the UK.

Results of the research indicate that Internet filtering is ineffective and insignificant to whether a young person has viewed sexually explicit content. More than 99.5 percent of whether a young person encountered online sexual material had to do with factors beside their caregiver's use of Internet filtering technology.

"We were also interested to find out how many households would need to use filtering technologies in order to stop one adolescent from seeing online pornography," says co-author Professor Andrew Przybylski. "The

findings from our preliminary study indicated that somewhere between 17 and 77 households would need to use Internet filtering tools in order to prevent a single [young person](#) from accessing sexual [content](#). Results from our follow-up study showed no statistically or practically significant protective effects for filtering."

"We hope this leads to a re-think in effectiveness targets for new technologies, before they are rolled out to the population," says Nash. "From a policy perspective, we need to focus on evidence-based interventions to protect [children](#). While Internet filtering may seem to be an intuitively good solution, it's disappointing that the evidence does not back that up."

The researchers agree that there should be more research done to solidify these findings. "More studies need to be done to test Internet filtering in an experimental setting, done in accordance to Open Science principles," says Przybylski. "New technologies should always be tested for effectiveness in a transparent and accessible way."

**More information:** Andrew K. Przybylski et al, Internet Filtering and Adolescent Exposure to Online Sexual Material, *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* (2018). [DOI: 10.1089/cyber.2017.0466](https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2017.0466)

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