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# A Brief Background of Pornography and its Effects on Physical, Psychological, and Emotional Health in Youth

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## **Abstract:**

The prevalence of pornography has been on the rise for several decades and the effects are becoming more prominent every day due to the accessibility, affordability, and lack of accountability associated with pornography use. It has, thereby, become more available to people of all ages, especially children and adolescents. This paper attempts to show that the viewing of pornography by children and adolescents is harmful to their development, both physically and emotionally. Group and individual therapy, as well as more parental control over what is viewed on the Internet, will be suggested as a way of overcoming or preventing pornography addiction in youth.

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It is common knowledge that pornography has been around for many years and that use has increased as pornography has become more accessible. According to Kraus and Rosenberg (2014) pornography is any media that describes or depicts sexual content and is viewed with the intent of heightening sexual pleasure or arousal. Access to this kind of material has only increased with the invention of the Internet. According to Cooper, Delmonico, and Burg (2000) in the year 1998, about nine million Internet users viewed one of the top five adult (pornographic or mature) sites. About two-thirds of young men and one-half of young women reported watching pornography is acceptable, and 87% of young men and 31% of young women said that they use pornography (Carroll et al., 2008). This means that it is highly likely that everyone knows at least one person who has viewed pornography at some point in their lives.

In conjunction with prevalence, the casual attitude towards pornography and its unrestricted use is problematic. Even though it seems to have become the social norm, pornography-use can have catastrophic consequences in social situations and can dramatically impact an individual's behavior and thoughts. For example, men who watched erotic

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material with a woman in the room, were more likely to inflict painful shocks on her in a competitive reaction-time test, if the woman seemed like she was accepting of the pornography viewing (Leonard & Taylor, 1983). This suggests that viewing pornography can influence people to be more aggressive with others. Such aggression could have a major impact on our society and how individuals function within that society. Pornography may have such an overarching grasp that it leads to many violent crimes such as rape and kidnapping. These implications become even more worrisome when placed in the context of children and young adult viewers; because youth are influenced by what they see, they are likely to mirror the behavior that they see (Bandura, Ross, and Ross, 1963).

Additionally, in a recent study by Kühn and Gallinat (2014), they discovered that pornography consumption is linked with reward-seeking behavior and that it can even affect the volume of gray matter in specific areas of the brain as well as decreased connectivity between portions of the brain. Therefore, not only are there behavioral aspects associated with pornography use, but it might cause problems with brain function as well. Fortunately, therapists have been able to solve the problems that pornography creates because they understand

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what part of the brain it affects.

Pornography's impact on society can create major emotional and psychological problems for those who use it; these problems might be solved by treating pornography as an addiction and by creating awareness about the effects of the use of pornography. There are several ways that pornography addiction could be treated. Emphasis will be placed on treating pornography addiction in a group setting, as well as an individual setting. In these two groups, pornography will be treated as an addictive substance and the suggested treatment will be Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). According to Twohig and Crosby (2010), ACT therapy appears to be promising in curing the maladaptive behavior in those addicted to pornography. Furthermore, another form of treatment that will be discussed is more focused on society and the role that society and parents should play in ending the acceptance of this habit. Society should become aware of the impact that sexually explicit material has and that it should not be viewed as normal or acceptable. Pornography has become even more acceptable because of the invention of the Internet. Many children are exposed to pornography, and most of them are exposed involuntarily (Twohig & Crosby,

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2010). The abundance of pornography in our culture has created a desensitization to it and it needs to be changed. Pornography is a harmful and addictive substance to those who use it, especially to youth and our culture. The psychological community needs to take action to prevent youth from viewing this media.

### **The Rise of Modern Pornography**

Pornography production in America primarily began during the Civil War. Two companies, G.S. Hoskins and Co. and Richards & Roche, sold pornographic pictures that could be easily concealed in items that the soldiers had on their person (Sarracino & Scott, 2008). Pornography later became compared to the norm in 2004 when photographer Timothy Greenfield-Sanders released his XXX exhibit. In this exhibit, he photographed pornographic films stars in clothing and set it next to an image of the same pornographic films star, only in the second image the star was completely naked. This set up allowed for the formation of an idea- the idea that pornography is not far from normal and is seen in everyday life. It created the idea that what is abnormal, like a completely naked person, is actually normal like a completely clothed person (Sarracino

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& Scott, 2008). However, pornography has recently become more enticing with the invention of the Internet. According to Cooper (1998) there are three particular aspects of Internet pornography that make it so enticing: the accessibility, affordability, and the anonymity. Prior to the Internet, these three facets of pornography consumption were often difficult to overcome. The Internet has revolutionized the way that people access pornography and has made it more available to people of all ages.

The three A's of Internet pornography not only make pornography more enticing, they also make it more dangerous. The accessibility aspect of the three A's particularly affects children because never before has it been so easy for people to get their hands on pornography. According to Cooper (1998), the Internet made it so that people could access millions of pornography sites 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This sort of unlimited and unrestricted access has never existed before. It has made it easier for children and adolescents to obtain pornography because the ability to find pornography is on nearly every modern electronic device in America. Before the invention of the Internet, an individual would have to go into a store that sold magazines or rent pornographic videos;

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this is no longer the case. Currently the individual simply has to type the word porn into a search engine, and they will get millions of results that will show them sexually explicit material. Furthermore, there are no longer strict age restrictions on viewing pornography. All that is required now is the click of a button verifying that the viewer is 18 or older. Any child or young adult can click a button on a computer and thereby gain access to any sexual content that the Internet has to give them. According to Ybarra and Mitchell (2005), from a survey of young adults in a school in the Midwest, 21% of the adolescents surveyed had viewed a pornographic site for at least three minutes, if not longer. This information is alarming and one of the primary causes of this phenomenon is the accessibility to pornography that is created by the Internet and the ease of access to the Internet.

Affordability is another incredibly important point when it comes to children and adolescents being able to access pornography. Before the invention of the Internet, free pornography was essentially non-existent. Similarly, not many children or adolescents had the money to spend buying playboy magazines and renting pornographic videos. The Internet, on the other hand, has provided young adults with the opportunity

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to view adult content material without having to spend any money. Many pornographic sites offer free pornography as a way of hooking their audience into paying for it.

In conjunction with accessibility and affordability, anonymity makes it easier for youth to view pornography. Because there is no accountability involved, it is more tempting for young adults and children to experiment with pornography. It is easier for youths to explore the world of explicit content that is housed online more freely because they can hide behind a computer screen and no one is around to judge them. Their name is not associated with their actions; therefore, they believe there are no consequences tied to their actions. The anonymity justifies their behavior. Along with not being accountable, the Internet makes it easier for children and teens to gain access to adult context by pretending that they are older than they really are. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation (2005), 31% of teens have lied about their age to gain access into an adult website. Considering this survey was done in 2005, it can be assumed that this percentage has increased in the last several years, seeing as the Internet has only become more prominent in society. The average age for a first viewing of sexually explicit material is approximately 11 years old (Family Safe Media,

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2006). Thus, the increase in use of sexually explicit material amongst children and adolescents can be at least partially blamed on the accessibility, affordability, and anonymity of Internet pornography.

Because many children and adolescents can easily access pornography, society needs to be more aware of the effects that it can have. According to Freeman-Longo (2000), children and teens often frequent sites that show pornographic images. The study continued by giving a few examples of how some teens were affected by viewing these sites. One example was of a 14-year-old male who had frequently accessed pornographic material online including the Playboy website, as well as several others. He viewed videos of women stripping as well as images of nude women. He was later convicted of sexually abusing his stepsister. Pornography was not necessarily the only influence that made this 14-year-old boy sexually abuse someone; however, it can be assumed that it was a contributing factor in the cause of the incident. Of course, not all boys who view pornography end up being sexual abusers, however, it does introduce a topic into their lives a visual experience, which might have been portrayed as enticing, that may have been avoided otherwise. Children and teens often emulate

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the behavior seen in pornography because they believe it is reality like in this particular case. Another example was of a 13-year-old boy is given. He went to the library at his school and accessed pornography on the Internet. About a month later, he logged on and discovered that the school had password protected the computers, making it so that people could no longer access pornography on them. However, this young man figured out the password and proceeded to enter a chat room and asked a woman about her body (Freeman-Longo, 2000). These examples, though they may seem extreme, are fairly common among children and teens. Therefore, because of the easy accessibility of pornography, many youth are being influenced in a negative way by pornography.

### **Negative Effects of Pornography on Children and Adolescents**

Pornography is an ever-increasing addiction that is influencing many individuals today with its impactful images and messages. It is a rapidly growing industry with an even larger audience. While a very small portion of research shows that there are no negative effects to viewing pornography or that these negative effects are very small, a majority of the research shows that

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pornography has at least some adverse effect on those that use it (Tsaliki, 2011). Children, pre-teens, and teenagers can have adverse effects from viewing pornography, even if they do not understand exactly what these effects are and what they can do to people. When children are exposed to pornography, they are introduced to a sexual experience that can be disturbing, and they do not know how to respond to what they have seen. Viewing pornography at such a young age can cause children to seek out sexual gratification before they are psychologically ready to handle such powerful emotions. If children repeatedly experience overwhelming explicit sexual impulses too soon, it can affect their social development in a way that can cause personality and impulse disorders (Hunt & Kraus, 2009). In terms of youth sexuality and viewing of pornography, those who viewed pornography could develop an unrealistic view of sexual behavior and beliefs, become more promiscuous, think about sexual behavior more often, and begin experimenting sexually earlier than those who do not watch pornography (Owens, Behun, Manning, & Reid, 2012). Watching sexually explicit material at a young age can have lasting emotional, developmental, and social effects on the viewer.

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### **The Physical Effects of Viewing Pornography as a Youth**

While there are various consequences to viewing pornography, there are several effects that show up in nearly all cases.

These are primarily physical and psychological effects. These complications arise even more often and more glaringly in children and young adults. Moreover, the physical aspect is probably the less prevalent of the two types of responses to viewing pornography; however, it is incredibly troubling. The physical response can be measured much more easily than the psychological effect because it is easier to see. Therefore, the physical response is studied more. One of the most dramatic effects is that watching pornography can actually affect the measurable amount of material in your brain. According to Kühn and Gallinat (2014), there is a negative correlation between the number of hours of pornography consumed and the volume of gray matter in the right caudate of the brain. This means that the more pornography an individual consumes, the less gray matter he or she has in their brain. The implications of this discovery are tragic, as this could reflect a change in neural plasticity because of intense stimulation of the reward center of the brain.

Another physical effect that can take place doesn't

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become obvious until later in life. While some researchers disagree, there has been research in the area of sexual dysfunction as an adult as a result of consuming excessive amounts of pornographic material. In a study done by Park, et. al (2016) the researchers found compelling evidence that suggests that individuals who relied heavily on pornography use in their youth are unable to achieve sexual satisfaction as adults. This could be detrimental to marriages or any committed relationship as well as to the individual's self-esteem. This consequence of viewing pornography should be studied more and seeing as how it could have a major effect on an individual's ability to be confident in courtship settings.

The impact of pornography can also have physical manifestations in external behavior. This manifestation can be found most commonly in aggressive behavior towards others. College-aged females that were exposed to erotic material were significantly more likely to behave aggressively towards a provoker than those that were exposed to neutral or aggressive material (Cantor, Zillman, & Einsiedel, 1978). An increase in aggressive behavior in a child can create social problems. Children are still developing their social skills and if they are overly aggressive with their peers, this can create major social

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anxiety later in life. Both of these types of physical reactions could have catastrophic consequences on children and young adults. Because youth are still developing and their brains are still growing, watching pornography could have an even larger impact on them than it would an adult. Not only would it reduce the amount of dark matter that their brains have already developed, it could also possibly inhibit the proper development of the brain. The physical effects of viewing pornography are damaging to a child's growth and healthy development.

### **The Psychological Effects of Viewing Pornography as a Youth**

In conjunction with the physical consequences of viewing erotic material, there are also psychological effects that should be of great concern. Though the psychological effects are less obvious than the physical affects, the impact that they can have on a young child or teenager are just as dangerous. According to Alexy, Burgess, and Prentky (2009), concerning children and adolescents that had a history as a juvenile sexual offender as well a history of pornography, 83% of them had a history of verbal bullying, 80% had a history of lying, and 79% had a history of theft. Additionally, 78% had a history of physical

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bullying, 70% had a history of conning, 65% had committed arson, 54% had run away from home, and 49% were truants. Though these results are for previously troubled children and teens, they are still significant. This shows that there is a correlation between viewing pornography and committing delinquent behavior. Following this further, youth that view pornography are more likely to have had sex, including same-sex sex, masturbated, and have had a one-night stand (Johansson and Hammarén, 2007). These psychological effects are incredibly important because they drive the interactions that people have with each other. If pornography really does have such an immense impact on an individual's psychological state and the actions that follow this state of mind, viewing pornography can effect society and how people relate to and interact with each other.

The implications of pornography use are dramatic, and it is important that people understand just how devastating pornography use can be. In addition to behavioral problems, pornography use can also cause emotional trauma for children and young adults. According to Aisbett (2001) 53% of Australian young people between the ages of 11 and 17 had experienced something they found to be offensive

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on the Internet. They reported that they felt sick, shocked, embarrassed, repulsed, and upset. Reports such as this are common. According to Benedek and Brown (1999), children who view pornography are at risk for emotional disturbance. This disturbance can be displayed in nightmares, anxiety, modeling behavior, and problematic attitude changes. These physical and psychological effects of pornography can have lasting consequences for the viewer even into adulthood (Benedek and Brown, 1999).

When children view pornography at a young age, it can have an extremely damaging effect on their life and personality. One individual shared their specific experience of what viewing pornography as a child did to him as an adult. He was supposedly a drifter and an adventurer obsessed with the lust that pornography had created. He lived a selfish life and this led him to get a divorce and leave his children without a father in the home (Paasonen et al., 2015). The effects can also be seen in the attitudes and ideals that long-time pornography users have. Benedek and Brown (1999) stated that pornography use over an extended period of time can cause the consumer to believe that less common sexual practices are more common than they really are. Also, they are less repulsed by extreme

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forms of pornography and are, thereby, more accepting of such practices. This has the potential to greatly affect society because as individuals become more accepting of objectionable material the more common it becomes. An example of this is rape. Rape is a semi-common theme amongst pornographic videos and the more acceptable rape is to watch, the more acceptable it becomes to actually rape someone. This could be catastrophic for society. Pornography addiction has become a part of our culture and if we do not stop it, pornography could overrun our society.

### **Discussion**

Pornography should be considered a destructive force in society today. It is influencing the lives of many and creating problems for people of all ages; however, one of the most distressing groups that it is taking hold of is youth. Never before in the history of mankind has pornography been able to impact the lives of so many young people. According to Twohig and Crosby (2010), 12% of the Internet is made up of pornography. This abundance of material is what makes it so easy for pornography to sneak into the life of a child or young adult and according to Ayres and Haddock (2009), the

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amount of material continues to grow by 9.2% every year.

Taking this statistic into consideration, the lasting damage that pornography does is even more concerning. As for how to treat the effects of pornography and pornography addiction, there are several schools of thought. This discussion will focus primarily on how to use group and individual therapy as a treatment source; however, it is better to prevent than to treat. Methods of preventing children and teens from ever viewing pornography will also be suggested so that the potential damage of pornography can be avoided.

### **Possibilities for the Treatment of Pornography Addiction in Youth**

The DSM-5 does not include pornography as a disorder; however, it is reasonable to conclude that it should be classified as a disorder just by looking at the effects that pornography has on people. Group therapy and individual therapy, with a specific focus on ACT therapy, are two of many of the suggested possibilities given to treat pornography addiction.

Group therapy has been effective in the areas where it has been tried because of the accountability that is involved in a group setting. According to Woods (2013), group members use the

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12-step program, and progress is made because the members help each other manage their compulsion. Additionally, the group provides intimacy for each of the participants, without that intimacy being sexual. The setup of the group allows for a kind of closeness that can rarely be found outside of a therapeutic group setting. This helps foster trust and real relationships.

The closeness between group members helps them overcome their shame because they feel like they can rely on each other for support and that they have nothing to fear. This concept can easily be applied to children and young adults. Many youths in today's world simply want to fit in with those around them. By seeing that they have a place where they belong, they would most likely be more inclined to share their thoughts and feelings with those around them. Woods (2013) continues by mentioning the role the therapist plays. The therapist provides the attendees with the ability to see the abuse that pornography portrays and helps them to see reality in their relationships with others. The therapist teaches the attendees what is normal and acceptable sexual behavior and what is not. This, too, can be applied to children and young adults. After having viewed pornography, youths will not have a realistic grasp of what sexuality really is and the therapist can provide them with

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the clarification of what is acceptable behavior in a sexual relationship and what is not.

Another type of therapy that could be incredibly effective is individual therapy with a strict focus on ACT therapy. Individual therapy is currently used to treat pornography addiction and focuses on discovering what is causing the patient to have a pornography addiction and then dealing with that underlying problem. ACT therapy is a slightly different approach to the traditional therapy. According to Twohig and Crosby (2010), ACT therapy holds promise as a treatment to pornography addiction because its main focus is on the processes that are believed to cause the maladaptive behavior. In ACT therapy, the patient and the therapist set goals together for the patient to work on throughout a specified period of time. Through the use of ACT therapy, a group of 6 men had an 83% recovery rate from their pornography addiction (Twohig & Crosby, 2010). This recovery rate is astounding and though the sample size is fairly small, the results are still significant. If ACT therapy could have the same recovery rate across multiple spans of people, the impact would be dramatic.

A case study using ACT therapy. According to Collins

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and Adleman (2010), a patient named Bob was able to use a type of ACT therapy to overcome his pornography addiction. Bob was viewing pornography and masturbating when his young daughter happened to walk in on him. His wife divorced him and he was only allowed to see his daughter in the presence of a Child Protection Services employee. He then became a patient of Collins, the author, and began to set goals to become better. He found a woman and began a real, intimate relationship. Every morning and night, Bob reported to Collins about his day, what he did, and how he felt. He accepted that he had a problem with pornography and committed to work on it personally while receiving help and encouragement from Collins. This is just another example of how ACT therapy helped someone improve their life and heal from their pornography addiction. This approach can also easily be applied to children and young adults. It is easy to set goals and work on those goals with a child and see the progress that is being made as long as the child is willing to change. These two approaches could revolutionize the treatment of pornography addiction in our society.

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### **Preventing Pornography Addiction in Children and Young Adults**

As great as it is to help someone overcome an addiction, it is even better to prevent the person from struggling with that addiction in the first place. In order to prevent pornography addiction in children and young adults, society should consider changing its perspective on pornography and its effects, and parents have to be more involved in their children's Internet activity. According to Mitchell, Finkelhor, and Wolak (2003), filtering and blocking software is one of the most effective ways to prevent pornographic images from appearing on the computer for children and teenagers to see. They work by either looking for specific words or terms and filtering them out or by not allowing access to preset, specific sites. This involves the parents because the parents have the responsibility of setting up the software, making sure that it works properly, and checking their child's history on the computer frequently. Another suggestion given by Williams (2005) is that warning systems be put in place to warn the viewer that they are about to enter a page that contains pornographic material, thereby allowing the viewer to close the page without the possibility of viewing the explicit content. A concern that Williams expresses

BACKGROUND AND EFFECTS OF PORNOGRAPHY is that this may cause children and teenagers to feel that the site is “forbidden” and that creates more curiosity and more of a likelihood of the individual viewing the page. All of these variables should be taken into consideration when trying to prevent pornography addiction. More research is still needed in order to know the best possible route to take when trying to prevent pornography addiction and when trying to cure it.

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