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We Need More Answers on Teens And Pornography

Good American research on the causes and consequences of children's exposure to internet pornography is hard to come by, says Melvin Konner



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By **MELVIN KONNER**

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We all worry about how internet pornography and other sexualizing influences affect children. But good research on the causes and consequences of that exposure is hard to come by.

One reason has been American squeamishness. Thirty years ago, I asked a psychologist running what was then the largest study of young adolescents ever, "What are you learning about sex and violence?" She replied, "Oh, we can't ask about that." Now the research situation has improved, although state and local school authorities still have a patchwork of rules covering permitted research, and parents often won't consent.

One recent exception is "High Heels, Low Grades," an article in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, describing two studies. In one, 91 girls aged 10 to 14 were given a 40-item Internalized Sexualization Scale, or ISS, to measure how important sexual attractiveness was to their identity. After controlling for age, higher scores on the ISS predicted lower grades in English, science and social studies.

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In the second study, 95 girls aged 11 to 15 completed a brief mock video newscast about new animal species in Indonesia. They got a 433-word transcript and had

five minutes to prepare, in a room with beauty products available. The girls also took the ISS. A high score predicted less time reading the transcript and more applying makeup.

While studies have lagged in America, it has been easier to do research in Europe on how common hard-core pornography exposure is, at what ages and with what consequences. One Belgian study found that more than 4 in 10 boys age 12 to 15 have viewed explicit porn. In a large Danish study of people 15 to 25 (about 80% of them under 21), 88% of 1,400 males and 45% of 3,200 females had viewed sexually explicit materials the year

before.

These and other studies confirm that such exposure predicts lower grades in school and earlier initiation into sex. Still, these are almost all correlational findings—which suggest a relationship but do not prove that one thing causes another. However, one 2015 study in Belgium was a true experiment, focused on the impact of videogames.

In that study, Karolien Driesmans of the University of Leuven and two colleagues randomly assigned 12- to 15-year-olds to play a videogame that either featured a sexualized female or a neutral character in loose-fitting clothing. The boys, girls and their control groups then answered questions on tests.

Fifteen minutes with the former game made a difference in results. Both boys and girls scored higher than control individuals on two well-established measures. One, the Rape Myth Scale, asks if subjects agree with statements like, “If a girl goes to a room alone with a guy at a party, it is her own fault if she is raped.” The other, Tolerance for Sexual Harassment Inventory, asks if “most girls who are sexually insulted by a boy provoke his behavior by the way they talk, act or dress.”

If a 15-minute videogame could have such effects, what happens when children play them hours a week for years? We don’t know. As Ms. Driesmans and her colleagues wrote, “Play for many hours spread over a period of several weeks or even months” could have stronger negative effects, but we need further work “to test this assumption.”

An American Psychological Association task force warned in 2007 that sexualization messages were widespread and directed at younger and younger girls, from preschool-age beauty pageants to bikinis for toddlers. The task force urged more research.

In an article published in May in the *Journal of Sex Research*, L. Monique Ward of the University of Michigan reviewed 135 studies of the effects of sexualization of women in media. Of those, 84% were published since the task force report. But only five of the studies looked at children under 13 and only 19 at adolescents; just 11 concerned videogames, and of those, only the study by the Driesmans team looked at children younger than college age. The Ward survey points up the need for us to learn more.

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