

Content warning: This article discusses sexual violence

Children showing other children pornography, making sexual noises, choking, simulating sex on other children from as young as 4: Australian survey reveals widespread harmful sexual behaviours in schools

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The findings of a ground-breaking national survey of Australian school teachers reveal widespread, entrenched and normalised harmful sexual behaviours in schools. Schools have become sites of abuse.

The survey results are analysed in the report 'Sexual Harassment of Teachers' (SHoT, 2025 <https://www.collectiveshout.org/shot-report>) and published by Australian campaign movement Collective Shout in partnership with parenting author and expert Maggie Dent.

The survey was prompted by anecdotal accounts of sexual harassment Maggie Dent and I were hearing in our engagement with schools. Its aim was to gain understanding of the prevalence of sexual harassment in Australian schools. More than 1000 teachers responded.

Some of the harmful sexual behaviours were exhibited by children from as young as Kindergarten to Year 3 (typically 8 to 9 years old).

Almost 80 per cent of survey respondents were seeing more sexualised behaviour in schools. Peer-to-peer sexual harassment was found to be on the rise, with two-thirds of respondents reporting having witnessed the sexual harassment of a student by another student. As well, more than half reported having received at least one disclosure from a student about being sexually harassed.

Most of the survey responses reported incidents of male students engaging in inappropriate sexualised behaviours towards female students

Problematic sexualised behaviours were being observed even in primary school-aged children. The survey found 12.7 percent of reported sexual harassment incidents were perpetrated by students in Years 4 to 6 (9 to 12 years old), and 3.2 percent were perpetrated by students in kindergarten to Year 3 (typically 8 to 9 years old).

Behaviours included the use of sexually explicit language and imitating sex acts seen online. One survey respondent described Years 5 and 6 (10 to 12 years old) students sending nudes after being continually asked to do so by their male peers, with the photos then being passed around to other boys.

One respondent noted incidents of children showing other children pornography, making sexual noises, choking other children in the playground, and simulating sex on other children from as young as the age of 4.

Survey data revealed that sexual moaning and groaning was common. Teachers reported this behaviour as one of the most frequently occurring forms of sexual harassment witnessed in their classrooms. "The sexualised noises are the worst because nobody seems to take it seriously! Yet my classes are constantly interrupted by moaning, groaning, choking, gagging noises," one teacher said.

The teachers surveyed reported instances of children as young as Year 2 (typically 7 to 8 years old) accessing and sharing pornographic content through personal devices or social media. Girls in Years 5 and 6 (10 to 12 years old) were coerced into sending sexual images.

Survey respondents reported seeing more victims of Image Based Sexual Abuse (IBSA,) with a growing number of incidents involving deepfake image-based sexual abuse in which faces of female students were scraped from social media or even official school group photos and morphed into porn using readily available AI tools and nudifying and undressing apps and platforms. (Collective Shout has a global campaign to ban nudifying and undressing apps and has carried out unique research into their ubiquity. See: 'Turning Women and Girls into Porn: Our groundbreaking new research' <https://www.collectiveshout.org/new-research-nudifying-apps>).

AI is being weaponised against women and girls and acting as an accelerant for sexual harassment, intimidation and control. Sex crimes are being monetised, with boys even selling these deepfake sexual forgeries to other boys.

Teachers were alarmed by the predatory and threatening attitudes expressed by a growing number of boys: "Girls in year 7 are being told by boys that they will be raped", and "older boys [state] they intend to rape their future partners when they grow up."

Teachers expressed despair about the rapid rise of harmful sexual behaviours which they attributed to early exposure to pornography, the malign influence of social media influencers, and broader societal sexist attitudes.

A significant number of teachers attributed increased incidents of Harmful Sexual Behaviour to students' exposure to explicit imagery online. Survey respondents reported that students were accessing Pornhub to 'learn about sex', and that children were accessing pornography on social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Twitter - even from their school iPad.

The 2023 report *A Lot of it is Actually Just Abuse*, by the UK Children's Commissioner <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/a-lot-of-it-is-actually-just-abuse-young-people-and-pornography/>, found social media was a significant site of exposure to pornography for young people, with Twitter the most likely platform followed by Instagram and Snapchat. The average age of first exposure was 13. By age 18, 79 per cent had encountered violent pornography online.

The Wall Street Journal found content from adult sex content creators was being pushed to 13-year-olds after just three minutes of creating test accounts with an age restriction of 13. <https://www.wsj.com/tech/instagram-recommends-sexual-videos-to-accounts-for-13-year-olds-tests-show-b6123c65> The feeds were dominated by sexualised content within 20 minutes if the sexually suggestive content was watched to the end. The study demonstrated that Instagram continues to provide children with inappropriate adult-oriented content.

The independent review 2025 *Creating a Safer World: the Challenge of Regulating Online Pornography*, undertaken for the UK government and led by Baroness Bertin <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/creating-a-safer-world-the-challenge-of-regulating-online-pornography> made a number of recommendations to deal with tech-facilitated harms including increasing accountability and onus on platforms for harmful pornographic content, protecting those most vulnerable to exploitation and harms and strengthening enforcement of pornography offences.

In this porn-flooded ecosystem the developing sexual templates of young people are particularly vulnerable, with growing concern regarding the impacts of viewing porn on brain structure and function and, consequently, behaviour.

There is a perceived lack of safeguarding of students most at risk, as well as a lack of appropriate response and redress. Children and young people subjected to Harmful Sexual Behaviours are vulnerable to having their social and emotional development disrupted.

It is believed that the increased in Harmful Sexual Behaviours in schools is contributing to a rise in school refusal and absenteeism. For example, UK's Agenda Alliance reported girls frequently self-exclude to escape pervasive peer sexual violence, harassment, digital misconduct, and misogynistic influencer culture in hostile school environments.

<https://www.agendaalliance.org/news/agendaalliance-analysis-girlsabsenteeism-2025/>

Teachers reported major gaps in policies, procedures and codes of conduct. As a result, their safety, and the safety of mostly female students, is significantly compromised.

Only a fraction of the many public and private schools I have engaged with over a long period have developed sexual harassment policies which apply peer-to-peer and peer-teacher. This is a significant gap in safeguarding response. As well, many victims tell me they are afraid to report, fearing recrimination, gossip and reprisal, or that reporting pathways are not easily accessible or that they fear a lack of confidentiality in making a report.

The situation is at crisis point. Duty of care obligations are frequently not being met. It calls for radical intervention, and a strong, clear, uniform response.

The SHoT report contains six recommendations for addressing the issue in schools.

Without urgent redress, we will see an escalating culture of misogyny and harmful sexual socialisation and behaviours in our schools.

Melinda Tankard Reist is an Australian author, speaker, media commentator and co-founder of Collective Shout: for a world free of sexexploitation. She is co-editor of the ShoT report cited in this article.

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