

CONNECTING TO PROTECT.

A Global Summit: “Connecting to Protect” Children in the Digital Age – an initiative to address the mental health consequences of children, accessing legal online pornography, taking a public health approach to addressing this issue.

THE PROBLEM

Children having access to pornography is essentially child sexual abuse, via digital images.¹

The Internet is the largest ever social experiment in human history, providing a direct portal to the Internet pornography industry. Mental health professionals could not imagine or anticipate the rapid acceleration and complexity of problematic sexual behaviors that have arisen from children’s exposure to legal online pornography.

All communities have an obligation to support the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child to protect children.²

OUR RESPONSE

A small Global Working Group was formed in 2017 to address the harms to children and young people from accessing legal online pornography by initiating plans, with membership advising from Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom (U.K.) and the United States.

An internationally recognized best practice approach was devised based on research and investigation into initiatives from around the world. Out of the global investigation, it was found that successful campaigns addressing global public health issues often begin with a Summit, which then brings together key stakeholders to build a Global coalition to implement a strategic response.

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In the coming months, “Connecting to Protect” is to be hosted in partnership with the University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work³, along with other partners (to be announced) at the very beautiful Banff Centre in the Canadian Rockies just west of Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

¹ https://www.echildhood.org/report_2017

² <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

³ <https://fsw.ucalgary.ca/>

As a prerequisite of attending the Summit, delegates are required to sign a memorandum of understanding and provide an overview of their countries current approaches to addressing the issue. Inquiries for potential involvement are welcome.

Activities in the U.K. may provide us with a road map for future initiatives or at least a useful model as to how to pursue this issue in other countries. The U.K. is currently engaged in a two-year process of rolling out a number of initiatives, including age verification and mandatory relationships and sexuality education, to support the protection of children and young people from the harms caused by exposure to seemingly legal, adult pornography.

The educational platform underpinning this Global Summit initiative is known as the "Brain Story"⁴, developed by the Palix foundation⁵ as fundamental for individual and family wellness.

The "Brain Story" is supported by years of research and from the work of front-line mental health and medical practitioners and others engaged in the care and treatment of children and families. Lifelong health is determined by more than just our genes: experiences at sensitive periods of development change the brain in ways that increase or decrease risk for later physical and mental illness, including addiction.

We recommend that prior to attending this global summit and to fully understand the harms of legal online pornography that you undertake to learn the "Brain Story" at albertafamilywellness.org.

GOVERNMENT OF CANADA RESPONSE

- On December 8th 2016, the Canadian House of Commons passed a Private Members' Bill M-47 brought forward by Mr. Arnold Viersen, MP from Peace River – Westlock, Alberta that instructed the [Standing Committee on Health \("HESA"\)](#)⁶ to examine the public health effects of access and viewing of online violent and degrading sexually explicit material on children women and men.
- Between February 2017 and April 2017, the HESA Committee, chaired by Mr. Bill Casey, MP for Cumberland – Colchester, Nova Scotia, heard expert testimony from 11 expert witnesses to represent academic researchers and medical professionals. Amongst those requested to speak were Dr. Sharon Cooper, Dr. Gail Dines, Cordelia Anderson and Dr. Mary Anne Layden. In addition, the Committee reviewed 23 written submissions from interested stakeholders, representing individuals at large; from the adult entertainment industry; additional researchers; medical professionals and community organizations.
- On June 15, 2017, Mr. Viersen and Ms. Rachael Harder, MP for Lethbridge, Alberta announced that the Standing Committee on Health (HESA) tabled its study on the effects of individual's access and viewing of online violent and degrading sexually explicit material on children women and men. [The results were underwhelming.](#)

⁴ <https://www.albertafamilywellness.org/>

⁵ <https://www.palixfoundation.org/>

⁶ <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Committees/en/HESA>

- After a thorough review of the HESA report, experts concur with both Members of Parliament that the HESA Committee report did not acknowledge the expert testimony by leading researchers. More distressing however, was the lack of consultation with international experts in the treatment of problematic sexual behaviors and the expertise of neuroscientists, who have current publications, that would concur that the viewing of online pornography is problematic for our mental health and in particular, the developing brains of youth.
- The HESA Committee did hear overwhelming evidence on the negative impact of violent pornography from several highly regarded witnesses with the Committee's expression of unanimity for solutions to address the public health effects of violent pornography, including implementation of age verification, better education for youth, implementing "opt-in" filters, funding for additional research, the development of a public health awareness campaign as well as educational tools for parents, professionals and the public.
- The final recommendations in the HESA report suggested the updating of the Public Health Agency of Canada's 2008 "Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education"⁷ to address sexual health in the digital age. They suggested that this same organization collaborate with provincial and territorial governments, health care providers, public health and experts to develop a "**Canadian Sexual Health Promotion Strategy**" that would address several issues including possible risks of exposure to online violent and degrading sexually explicit materials.
- **A forum to support the undertaking of these tasks – which the experts are – that should be consulted with, were not recommended or directed and a venue for funding these tasks was not forthcoming.**
- Activities in the U.K. may provide us with a road map for future initiatives or at least a useful model as to how to pursue this issue in other countries. The U.K. is currently engaged in a two-year process of rolling out a number of initiatives, including age verification and mandatory relationships and sexuality education, to support the protection of children and young people from the harms caused by exposure to seemingly legal, adult pornography.
- **The key stakeholders in these initiatives are in full support of a Global Summit being created to build a global coalition to address the issue.**

⁷ https://www.ctf-fce.ca/Research-Library/Issue8_Article12_EN.pdf