

ISSUE BRIEF | American Values

DEFENDING CHILDREN FROM ONLINE DANGERS THAT THREATEN THEIR INNOCENCE AND FUTURE WELLBEING

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TOPLINE POINTS

- By 11 years old, most American youth are exposed to sensitive online content, raising questions of accessibility, availability, and lack of accountability with distributors of this content.
- Youth exposure to sensitive content online leads to a need for educating children about harms of this content and educating families about how to protect their children online.
- A family-focused approach to defending children must involve parent notifications, age verification requirements, education, and proper penalties for offenders.
- Offenders that contribute to minor access of such content and development of harmful AI content must be held accountable at federal and state levels.

Introduction

Approximately 68.4% of American adolescents, defined as ages 10 to 19, have been exposed to pornography (Giordano et al., 2022). The average age of initial pornography exposure is between 11 and 12 years old and has stayed consistent around this age for over a decade (2022). Some studies estimate even higher rates of exposure, with 93% of boys and 63% of girls viewing pornography before the age of 18 (Jhe et al., 2023; Coca & Wikle, 2024). Other studies show that 19%-37% of teens *intentionally* access pornographic content, while 35%-66% of teens *unintentionally* view this content (2023).

Children and adolescents are unintentionally accessing pornographic content online largely due to a lack of age verification requirements. Adolescents may become the victims of *revenge pornography*, defined as the “act of ‘disclosing a private, sexually explicit image to someone other than the intended audience’ without the consent of the involved individuals” (Delfino, 2019). Nonconsensual pornographic, or “sensitive,” content may also include images edited with artificial intelligence (AI) that make the victim appear nude or engaged in sexual acts called *deepfake pornography*, which can be created using photos of anyone who has a single image of themselves online, thus making nearly *everyone* a target (James, 2025). For example, in 2023, a 14-year-old female from New Jersey discovered that nude images of her had been created using AI and were circulating around her high school based on photos of herself that she had posted online (2025).

When considering the increase in use of AI and its role in the spread of deepfakes and revenge pornography, 96% of all AI-generated videos and photography are pornographic in nature, and close to 100% of the AI-generated pornographic content depicts women (2025). The presence of these images across the internet not only impacts the well-being of American adults, but also the youngest, most impressionable, and most vulnerable: American children. Deepfake pornography has even become a tool of cyberbullying, often negatively impacting female students.

As sensitive content can lurk around any corner of a pornography-specific site or on social media platforms, a multifaceted approach to solving the issue must be considered. In 2025, “nearly all teens (95%) report having access to a smartphone, up from 73% in 2014-2015” (Pew Research Center, 2025). Not only are social media platforms an incubator for sensitive content, but smartphones account for 86% of PornHub’s site traffic, with many adolescents viewing pornographic material through social media applications (Giordano, 2022; Perry, 2024).

Approximately 95% of American youths aged 13-17 report using social media platforms, “with more than a third saying they use social media ‘constantly’” (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023). Because such platforms are often accessed on smart devices, policies must be implemented at federal and state levels to hold both the pornography companies and social media platforms accountable. Furthermore, parents must be given the tools necessary to control what can be accessed by their child, whether it be through downloading an application on a smartphone or visiting an age-restricted site on a computer. Measures such as these will ensure that accidental exposure to sensitive content cannot occur, that the innocence of American children is protected at all costs, and that offenders are prosecuted accordingly.

Why Prioritizing Safety of Minors Online is Vital and Urgent

The continued rise in the number of American children viewing pornographic content online and the increased risk of being a victim of AI-generated sensitive content, coupled with the decreasing age of first exposure to sensitive content, make addressing this issue an urgent matter. Viewing such content is often not a single occurrence but instead creates a compulsion to view the material again (Giordano, 2022). Further, becoming a victim of deepfakes or revenge porn has lasting negative effects both on the victim and those viewing the sensitive content. The innocence of children, both victim and viewer, is permanently impacted by this exposure: it threatens the child’s mental and emotional health, the child’s future sexual health and

understanding of sexual health, and it threatens normalization of these dangers. Not only does it normalize such obscene acts but invites the moral degradation of the culture and is inherently inconsistent with biblical principles found at the very foundation of American society.

Mental and Emotional Health Impact

Due to the rapid developmental changes in adolescent brains, children and teens are impacted in even more significant ways than adults when exposed to sensitive content such as pornography (2022). Amanda Giordano, Ph.D., LPC, a specialist in addiction counseling, advises that since pornographic content has a “highly rewarding nature,” many adolescents lose control when using pornography, even experiencing a need for increased exposure over time in order to experience the same intensity of response (2022). Furthermore, according to Dr. L. David Perry of the American College of Pediatricians, adolescents viewing pornographic content are more likely to have antisocial behavior and become sex offenders (Perry, 2024). Children who are frequently exposed to this content express feelings of anxiety, disgust, anger, fear, and sadness. This often leads to feelings of depression, increased likelihood of sexually assaulting peers, and even causes some children to act out some of the content they witnessed (2024).

In a report by the Institute for Family Studies, Coca and Wikle write that children and adolescents who are exposed to sensitive content develop a “greater acceptance” of violent sexual acts, such as sexual harassment, early sexual activity, negative attitudes towards women, unrealistic expectations, misunderstandings of gender roles, body dissatisfaction, and sexual aggression (2024). The authors note that a young, developing brain cannot process such sensitive content as an adult would, consequently leading to depression and difficulty with relationships in the long term (2024). The earlier the child is exposed to sensitive content, the “more mental health problems they [will face] later in life” (2024).

Not only is there a significant mental and emotional health impact upon the child from viewing sensitive content, but there is an enormous impact on those who have become victims of pornographic exploitation, often without their knowledge. James (2025) writes that those who are victims of deepfake pornography compare that harm to being physically assaulted, dehumanized, intimately violated, and express feelings of depression, anxiety, shame, and fear. Some victims of revenge pornography even consider suicide (2025). Riana Pfefferkorn, a Stanford policy fellow studying the policy impacts of deepfake pornography, recognizes the immense effect on a school-aged child, noting that the impact is “always grave – psychological damage, reputational harm, a harm to dignity, and a violation of privacy” (Walker, 2025). Pfefferkorn also writes,

There are students who are so severely psychologically affected that they have to change schools...They miss a lot of school or have to leave school abruptly in the middle of the day. They may be crying, depressed, unable to just keep up with activities of daily living. (2025)



The mental and emotional impacts upon children viewing sensitive content or being a victim of deepfake or revenge pornography are detrimental not only to daily life but also to future mental health, relationships, and dignity.

Sexual Health Impact

In a 2023 research study, significant associations were found between exposure to sexual content as a child and “problematic sexual behaviors (PSBs),” which are defined as “developmentally inappropriate sexual behaviors that are potentially harmful to oneself or others” ([Mori et al., 2023](#)). The researchers note that there is special research interest in how a child’s exposure to sexual content online influences a child’s development and subsequent behaviors when viewing sexual content ([2023](#)). The behaviors that children witness in pornographic content will often shape their understanding of sex, leading many to understand sex as involving risky and violent behaviors.

A consequence of viewing such content as a child is an increased likelihood of riskier sexual behaviors, including increased sexual partners and no use of birth control ([Coca & Wikle, 2024](#)). The researchers conclude that “the earlier one is exposed to pornography, the more likely they are to have problems in their future sexual and romantic relationships” due to the “solo” nature of pornography and its ability to isolate an individual from having appropriate interactions with others ([2024](#)). Research by Adarsh et al. ([2023](#)) echoes similar findings regarding early exposure to sensitive content. The authors found that

...more pornography usage in adolescents is associated with stronger sexual liking for the shown sexual behaviors, agreement with gender stereotypes and power dynamics in sexual relationships, acceptance of premarital sex, and obsession with sexual fantasies...leading to dissonance, disillusionment, or unmet expectations as they seek to form relationships.

Not only does the pornographic content influence behavior, but also an adolescent’s understanding of his or her own sexuality. Such content shapes what the child begins to view as norms for both males and females.

Cultural Impact

Sensitive content has become more mainstream and accessible largely due to the rise in social media platforms and smartphone access, which primarily affects children and adolescents and results in earlier exposures to this content ([Giordano, 2022](#); [Perry, 2024](#)). As such young exposure to sensitive content has become normative, it leads to newly accepted understandings of “appropriate” sexual behaviors and interactions, which is proving to be a detriment to society. The American College of Pediatricians reports that an increase in access to sensitive content results in increased aggression towards women, often resulting from a “rape myth ideology” where men wrongly believe that women enjoy rape or sexual assault ([Perry, 2024](#)). This “understanding” fuels male aggression towards women and ultimately leads to less safe spaces for women and young females in society. A 2012 study on the viewing of violent pornography and aggression revealed that exposure to violent pornography increased male aggression, with an increased tendency to be violent specifically towards women ([Yang & Youn, 2012](#)). Also, minor males who are exposed to violent pornography are two to three times more likely to be involved

in teen dating violence compared to those not exposed to violent pornography (Rostad et al., 2019). When women view sensitive content, they develop poor body image that can become distracting during sex (Tylka & Calogero, 2019). However, for both men and women viewing pornography, such use leads to a doubled probability of divorce among married Americans (Perry & Schleifer, 2018), greatly impacting the cohesion of the family in society.

Current Policy Landscape

As pornographic content and its accessibility steadily increase with an ever-younger audience, policy change is necessary to protect the innocence of our most vulnerable population.

State Leadership

Many states now require age verification before accessing adult or pornographic sites to ensure that the viewer is at least 18 years of age. The methods of verifying age vary, with some states requiring a government-issued ID, digital license, third-party verification services, or even transactional data to confirm a user's age. For example, Texas requires "any commercial entity that knowingly publishes or distributes content on a website where more than one-third is 'sexual material harmful to minors' to use reasonable age verification methods to ensure users are 18 years or older" ([Texas Civil Practice and Remedies Code Title 6, Chapter 129B](#)). In addition to Texas, 18 states have followed suit with policies establishing age verification requirements for these sites. Another example is Ohio's H.B. 84, the Innocence Act ([H.B. 84, 2025](#)), which was later included in the state's operating budget. This bill provides age verification requirements along with a prohibition on deepfake images, stronger penalties for revenge pornography, and civil remedies for victims. Of note in this bill are the penalties for online platforms that fail to comply with age verifications, with fines increasing for each day of non-compliance.

Several states have passed or proposed legislation that requires social media platforms to verify the age of users or obtain parental consent for minors, including Connecticut, Louisiana, Texas, Maryland, Utah, Tennessee, Florida, Georgia, Nebraska, and Wyoming. While some laws have already taken effect, others remain blocked due to legal challenges. Most recently, in May 2025, Nebraska Governor Pillen signed into law the Parental Rights in Social Media Act ([L.B. 383, 2025](#)). Not only does this policy completely ban AI-generated child pornography and provide criminal penalties for offenders, but it also requires parental controls on a child's social media accounts. Coupled with this bill, Governor Pillen signed the Age-Appropriate Online Design Code Act ([L.B. 504, 2025](#)) into law in June 2025, which protects the personal information of children online, allows parents to better monitor the online activities of their children, and limits the use of mobile devices in the classroom.

Ohio has introduced H.B. 226, the App Store Accountability Act, which shifts the focus from being solely on social media and pornography platforms and creates age restrictions on smartphone application stores and their downloads, specifically those apps that are likely to be accessed by children ([H.B. 226, 2025](#)). This bill gives parents more control over the content that their child can view through downloaded applications. Parents also must consent before a child can download these apps.

H.B. 226 is in step with public opinion across the nation. In a nationwide poll conducted by Fabrizio Ward in 2025, 88% of parents want app stores to require parental approval before a minor can download an app ([Digital Childhood Alliance, 2025](#)). Age verifications are beneficial for visiting websites with potentially sensitive content; however, it is also imperative that app stores have verifications before children can even download applications, especially those with the potential for exposure to sensitive content. Parental consent for app stores empower parents, support families to make informed decisions, and help protect children. This idea is not restricted to Ohio; Texas, Utah, and Louisiana have implemented similar policies. Also, a federal version of this bill, was introduced in May 2025 with similar provisions ([S. 1586, 2025](#)).

Federal Leadership

The Take It Down Act, S. 146, was signed into law by President Trump in May 2025 ([S. 146, 2025](#)). This law now requires online platforms to remove nonconsensual “intimate depictions of individuals, both authentic and computer-generated” that are intended to harm or harass a minor or where an adult published or created the image to cause harm to the subject. Those violating the law are subject to restitution and criminal charges resulting in jail, fines, or both. Online platforms, upon receiving notice of such an image, are required to remove the images within 48 hours of notification. Such platforms are defined as “public websites, online services, or applications that primarily provide a forum for user-generated content.” This law provides accountability for those causing such harm both to adults and minors and holds accountable the online platforms where this content is displayed.

In *Free Speech Coalition, Inc. v. Paxton* (2025) the United States Supreme Court upheld the Texas law requiring commercial websites that host sexually explicit content to verify the ages of users. The Court explained that these types of age-verification requirements are a constitutionally permissible exercise of state authority to protect children. This ruling opens the door for state and federal legislation to ensure that children are not exposed to sensitive content online.

Family-Focused Considerations for a Safer Future for Children Online

As pornography and deepfake content viewing is on the rise for minors, swift policy actions must be considered to protect children from the lifelong emotional, mental, and sexual impacts of becoming a victim. An America First policy approach to this issue ensures that parents are empowered with information and decision-making authority when it comes to the online activities of their children. Policies should prioritize protecting minor children while also putting the victim first by ensuring that there are multiple routes for civil remedy, allowing for adequate compensation. Such policies should include:

- ★ **Age Verification Requirement** – State laws must require that all online platforms, especially those providing sensitive content, implement systems to verify that users are at least 18 years of age. Create penalties for non-compliance.
- ★ **Prohibition of Non-Consensual or AI-Created Sexual Images** – Ensure that both federal and state laws deem the creation of and sharing of nonconsensual sexual images illegal with the appropriate charges.

- ★ **Parental Consent and Involvement** – Ensure that parents of children online can access all activities of their child on an online platform or application, set restrictions, provide consent for applications downloaded, and be notified of sexual content. Such accessibility should be a required provision of individual applications, Google Play, and the Apple App Store.
- ★ **Strong Penalties for Offenders** – Provide that repeat offenders have more severe fines and/or prison sentences, especially if involving a minor.
- ★ **Victim Protection and Civil Action** – Provide a path for civil causes of action to allow for compensatory damages, attorney's fees, court costs, and any restraining orders or injunctions.
- ★ **Educate Children about Online Dangers** – Beginning in the home and the classroom, both parents and schools should educate children on the dangers of sharing images online or on phones and ensure online literacy in the classroom, along with internet protections on school-issued technology.

The Family First approach to this issue begins in the *home* by empowering parents with information and control over their child's online activities and teaching the child about online dangers. Public policy solutions should complement the empowerment of parents through the implementation of commonsense protections of children. Children should never live in fear of being exploited online or of stumbling upon pornographic content when using a computer to study for school. By putting families in control and making online platforms accountable, the innocence of children can be guarded for years to come.



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