



# Literature Review: Impacts on Children and Young People of Exposure to Nudity on Television and Other Media

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## Executive Summary

In 2019, the Broadcasting Standards Authority commissioned research to explore community views of nudity on television. The Authority was particularly interested in understanding how depictions of nudity in different scenarios may impact or harm children and young people. The media environment is pervasive for young people in today's world. Parents and educators are looking for ways in which they can support children and young people whose healthy development may be impacted by exposure to nudity and sexual media content.

The research approach contemplates a three-stage process. This literature-based study is the first stage in this process, which also involves litmus testing of BSA decisions (stage 2) and may ultimately include New Zealand based research seeking the views of children and young people (stage 3).

The Collaborative Trust for Research and Training in Youth Health and Development was contracted by the BSA to carry out an extant review of the academic and grey literature. This review explored the impact of visual images of nudity in different contexts in the media on children (age range 0-14 years) and young people (age range 15-17 years). Specifically, the following four questions were addressed:

1. What are the key issues that arise when children under the age of 18 years are exposed to visual images of the naked body?
2. What are the most common scenarios in which these issues may arise, or are more acute?
3. What is the nature and extent of any impact that such exposure can have for children and young people under the age of 18 years?
4. What are the good or recommended strategies that have been identified to support children and young people who may be impacted by such images, or the strategies that have been used to mitigate any impacts?

The findings from the literature review are presented in three parts. These are summarised below.

### Part One: Contexts of Nudity

- The review found a limited number of studies that specifically referred to nudity on television and its impact on children and young people. However, nudity was found to be represented within several different contexts in other forms of media. These include family, educational, artistic and sexual contexts.
- *Nudity within a family context.* Studies within this context referred to children and young people's exposure to naked images within the context of a family environment, usually with parents, and often as a first exposure. Young people reported feeling curious and uncomfortable on seeing naked images within this environment for the first time and wanted parents to explain the images to them.
- *Nudity within an educational context.* The majority of these studies focused on nudity depicted in a biological or medicalised context on television and other media. Some studies found that nudity on television could provide a positive context for sexuality education for children and young people but few of these studies examined the impact of such exposure on children and young people.
- *Nudity within an artistic context.* This much smaller body of literature tended to challenge negative stereotypes of nudity by suggesting that looking at the nude in art and in popular culture can help to reframe both nudity and nakedness as a positive discourse, challenging normative responses of nudity as purely sexual.



- *Nudity within a sexual context.* The majority of studies reviewed focused on nudity within a sexual context. Most research references to nudity were within this context, referring to sexual media content or sexy media. Some definitions of sexual media content specifically included nudity but not all did. Research in this area did focus more on the impact of exposure and subsequently provided the basis for the majority of this review.

## Part Two: Sexual Media Content and Impacts on Children and Young People

The empirical literature is divided as to whether exposure to sexy media content leads to harmful impacts for children and young people. Some studies found no causal link between exposure to sexy media content and risky sexual behaviours in children and young people. Other variables, such as the influence of peers and parents, rather than media, had more impact on the sexual attitudes and beliefs of adolescents.

However, a large number of studies concluded that exposure to sexy media content, including naked images, does impact on the attitudes and behaviours of children and young people. These findings are outlined below.

- Exposure to sexy media is a predictor to early initiation to sex and to risky sexual behaviours such as more frequent casual sex, increased likelihood of unwanted pregnancies, a tendency to have more sexual partners and to contacting STIs. All of these behaviours can be associated with mental and physical health risks for young people.
- Exposure to sexual content in the media is associated with more permissive sexual attitudes in teens. Watching popular television programmes which contained sexual content led children and young people to see media examples as normative, shaping their own attitudes towards perceptions of sexual reality.
- Exposure to sexual content on television led to increased estimates about peers' sexual behaviour and, in turn, perceived pressure to increase their own sexual risk taking.
- More frequent exposure to sexy media content was associated with more negative consequences for young people, such as the increased likelihood of unintended pregnancies and more risky sexual behaviours.
- There were some differences in impacts for children and young people across cultures. European and Nordic cultures had a more open view to sex than Asian cultures that promote a restricted view on sex in the media. Children and young people looked for role models on television who were similar in both ethnicity and gender and adopted their gender roles, sexual beliefs and behaviours. More research around exposure to nudity and sexual content in the media for Māori and Pasifika young people in Aotearoa New Zealand is needed.
- Parents are concerned about the impact that exposure to nudity and sexual media content in the media could have on children and young people. Parental attitudes and behaviours can influence both the level of exposure to sexual media content and the ways in which their children experience this content.
- Unwanted or accidental exposure to naked images or other sexual media may cause distress to some children and young people.
- Sexting has become an integral part of the social media climate. Young people are more likely to receive unwanted nude images via sexting than they are to send these. This kind of online sexy media content can be linked to risky sexual behaviours in adolescents. More research in New Zealand around the impacts of receiving unwanted naked images via sexting is required.
- Most children and young people are exposed at some stage to pornography. Definitions of pornography in the literature have in common that the purpose of pornographic content is sexual arousal. Nudity and images of naked people depicted in sexually explicit or sexually



arousing ways were the most common types of pornography which children reported seeing. Children's first exposure to pornographic images is likely to be accidental and unwanted. The majority of studies agreed that there are negative effects for young people from exposure to pornographic images. Viewing porn can normalise some inappropriate and unhealthy sexual behaviours. Some studies found positive effects suggesting that viewing porn could be educational and lead to more liberal views about sexuality that were less restrictive and heteronormative.

- Studies reporting the views of children and young people around exposure to sexual content in the media found that young people had agency around their media consumption. Many were able to discern for themselves what was harmful or unrealistic. Children and young people today are not passive in their engagement with media and seek out new media experiences in order to explore their sexual identities.

### Part Three: Strategies

Conclusive findings that clearly articulate the impacts of child and youth exposure to nudity are not evident from the current review of the extant literature. While direct recommendations and strategies from this body of literature on how to support children and young people to navigate exposure to nudity in various media contexts are limited, strategies based on general principles to promote healthy child and youth development are useful to apply.

These general principles of development include:

- That development occurs within a biopsychosocial framework and occurs in a variety of domains including spiritual, social, cognitive, emotional, physical and brain development.
- That the healthy development of children and young people occurs within contexts of connected family/whānau and communities which promote the active engagement and participation of children and young people.
- That a holistic approach to reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors can also ensure that those children and young people who are growing up in less than optimal circumstances also have a chance to thrive.

In addition, an understanding of the neurodevelopmental changes that all adolescents experience will help to support positive outcomes. Teaching parents, professionals and young people about media literacy was the strategy most commonly promoted in the literature. Other recommendations were around:

- positive parental mediation (explaining content to children) and monitoring (assessing suitable content for children)
- parents developing better understandings of their children's experiences with newer media
- more effective education in schools around the impacts of exposure to sexual media.

Some studies found that a reframing from a reactive, fear-based approach to sexual content in media to seeing the positive opportunities that such media can provide for education could be helpful together with an understanding that media, and exposure to sexual content including naked images, was an inescapable part of young people's lives.



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## Introduction

The media is a ubiquitous part of children and young people's world and one that is constantly changing in its landscape (McRae, 2011; Wright, 2011). Children and young people are frequently exposed to images of nudity and sexual content through the different forms of media to which they have access. Some of this exposure is accidental and some intentional as children and young people actively seek out ways in which to explore issues of sexuality through media (Coyne, Ward, Kroff, Davis, & Essig, 2019). In 2015, a report that was commissioned by the Broadcasting Authority (BSA) found that the trend to include sexual content on television was increasing (Broadcasting Standards Authority, 2015). With the increase of television programmes showing nudity, such as the reality show *Naked Attraction* (Hawkaley, 2017), this trend towards showing naked images and other sexual related content on television appears to be gathering momentum (Jones, 2019).

Childhood and adolescence is a critical time in a young person's development; a time of great change, uncertainty and opportunity (Eleuteri, Saladino, & Verrastro, 2017). Young people are actively exploring their identity and searching for a sense of self. There are a multitude of influences that young people are exposed to which can help to shape their identities. These include messages from peers, parents, teachers and the media (Tanti, Stukas, Halloran, & Foddy, 2011). During this period of development, adolescents are more likely to engage in behaviours that will allow them to explore their identities. Some of these behaviours may be perceived as risky. For most young people, these risky behaviours will help to facilitate healthy development (Lerner & Lerner, 2013; Siegel, 2014) but for some, especially if these behaviours begin early, this may lead to more risk-taking and detrimental outcomes (Eleuteri et al., 2017). Parents and other adults are often concerned about the way messages from various media forms, which expose children and young people to naked images or unwanted and unrealistic sexual content, can exacerbate these behaviours (Netsafe, 2018a; Wright, 2011). New Zealand student Nell O'Dwyer-Strang, whose Masters' thesis looked at the inter-connections between young people, social media and sexuality, encapsulates these views when she muses that "'concern' for young people is ever present. It would seem that with every subsequent generation it becomes a little more 'risky' to be an adolescent" (O'Dwyer-Strang, 2017, p. 88).

This review reports on the key themes from the extant literature around exposure to nudity and images of the naked body on television and other media for children and adolescents, and what the impacts or risks of such exposure might be for the health and identity development of young people.

## Research Aims

The aims of the review were to explore themes around:

- the key issues that arise when children under the age of 18 years are exposed to visual images of the naked body
- the most common scenarios in which these issues may arise, or are more acute
- the nature and extent of any impact that such exposure can have for children and young people under the age of 18 years
- the good or recommended strategies that have been identified to support children and young people who may be impacted by such images, or the strategies that have been used to mitigate any impacts

Some further clarification around these aims is necessary at the beginning of this review. The primary focus of this review has been nudity on television, and the impact that viewing nudity may have on children and young people. However, television is just one part of the wider media environment that young people are experiencing. Literature that informs the influences that nudity or sexual content



from other media forms may have on the health and well-being of young people is also included in this review.

A focus on research that was based within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand was an established aim of the review. However, this aim proved to be problematic. In an extensive search of the literature very few New Zealand-based research studies were found. Most of the recent and relevant literature from Aotearoa New Zealand was in the form of surveys and reports commissioned by organisations such as the BSA or Netsafe New Zealand. Peer reviewed research that looked at the impacts of exposure to nudity on television and other media on children and young people was lacking. This has meant that a focus on international research has been necessary in this review. Although the findings from this international research are relevant for the experiences of children and young people in Aotearoa New Zealand, the review highlighted the need for further research that is contextualised within the particular socio-cultural environment of New Zealand.

The review begins with an overview of the types of contexts of nudity in the media that are examined by the extant research literature. It continues by looking in depth at the literature around the effects of exposure to sexual media content, including nudity, because it is this body of literature that has more specifically focussed on impacts on children and young people, a focus that was largely missing from other studies. Finally, the review concludes with a discussion of the strategies that are recommended in the literature to help mitigate the impacts of viewing nudity or sexy media content for children and young people.



## Methodology

A literature search was conducted in order to obtain a comprehensive list of research studies from a number of psychological, medical, social sciences and news databases. Australian and New Zealand databases were included to cover the Australasian context. Words and phrases that would capture the aims of the study were used including but not specific to nudity and sexual content that occurred in different forms of media especially television but also on the internet. The harms and impacts of media use and the standards and regulations that media agencies used were also included in the search process. The focus was on studies from 2008 till 2019 so that the review would be informed by the most current research.

The initial search yielded around 350 journal articles, theses, newspaper articles, reports and policy statements. The empirical research had a mixture of quantitative, qualitative and longitudinal studies. After screening the papers based on their abstract and title, around 150 relevant articles were finalised and were used to inform the review. Papers that focussed on online sexual activity including online dating, online sexual solicitation and victimisation, child pornography and the impacts of sexual media content on adults were excluded from the review.

Whilst most of the articles focused on the impact of sexual content in media on children and adolescents, also included in the review were views from parents and professionals on children's sexual media use and its impacts. Studies that included nudity in non-media contexts were also included. Although the review specifies the impact on children and young people and thus studies that looked at children and young people aged from 0-18 years were included, the few studies in which adults recalled their childhood experiences of viewing nudity were also included.

The final 150 relevant articles included a range of longitudinal, qualitative, quantitative studies and academic theses and it also included reports generated in New Zealand. Grey literature such as newspaper and magazine articles were also included.



## Part One: Contexts of Nudity

The literature search found a very limited number of empirical articles that specifically referred to the relationship between viewing nudity or naked images either on television or in other media forms, and the impact on children and youth. A key theme from the studies reviewed was that the relationship between nudity and the media was encompassed within different contexts in the literature. There was some literature that looked at nudity and naked images in the media within the context of the family. Studies within the literature around sexual health education included nudity and the media in an educational context, and nudity was explored within an artistic context. By far the largest field of literature which explored some aspect of nudity in the media and the impact on children and young people was that within the wider context of sexual media content. This includes an extensive body of work around sexting and pornography. Nudity within these various contexts and any impacts on children and young people are described below.

### Nudity and the media within a family context

Nudity, and its relationship with the media and children, was discussed in the literature within the context of the family, and primarily from the viewpoint of parents. Research looked at how the family environment might affect the way children interpret what they see in the media. For instance, this review found evidence that viewing their first sexual image in a media form can often happen for children in a family context, with parents or other family members. Allen & Lavender-Stott (2015) asked 199 American young men, aged 18-23 years to recall the first time they saw a sexual image, how they reacted to it and what the situation was when they encountered this image. Television, movies, magazines, pornography, the internet and advertising were listed as the sources of the images. The age range for viewing these images for the first time ranged from 3.5 years to 18 years. Although the majority of young men watched these first sexual images with friends, a significant group did so with parents ( $n = 47$ ). Reactions to the images included curiosity, excitement, embarrassment, confusion, shock, and amusement. Thirty three percent of the young men remembered feeling excited about seeing the sexual image, 25% were curious and fascinated while 21% reported feeling unprepared and unable to understand what they had seen. The participants indicated that they would have liked some form of education from parents. It would have been helpful for parents to explain to them what they were seeing for the first time.

Although not related directly to nudity in the media as such, a qualitative study explored the narrative recollections of 14 men and 43 women of viewing real life nudity in family or non-family contexts as their first sexual image (Allen, Gary, Lavender-Stott, & Kaestle, 2018). The adult participants recalled seeing a “real” person nude or engaged in sexual behaviour when they were children. The participants reported feeling curious and uncomfortable when viewing nudity in a family context, and feelings of curiosity, disdain, discomfort, fascination and excitement when seeing nudity in a non-family context. More girls had negative first reactions. They reported being shocked or ‘grossed out’ compared to the boys who were intrigued and excited by seeing a real person as their first sexual image. Around half of the participants said that they still felt some lingering discomfort from these first images in early adulthood, while 46% said that they were not harmed or disturbed over time. The authors maintain that the implications of this study for young people viewing naked images is that there is unlikely to be harm if the context of the nudity is not abusive but seen as normative, within the realm of normal sexual behaviour.

### Nudity and the media within an educational context

In some studies, the use of nudity in the media was examined within a sexuality education context. Nudity is sometimes depicted in a scientific and medicalized context on television and media. Young



people are curious about sexuality and seek information to satisfy this curiosity (Bale, 2011; Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009).

In Aotearoa New Zealand young people are looking for information about sexual content from a variety of avenues. The media, particularly online media, is a popular source. A survey by Family Planning New Zealand (2019) asked adolescents where they would look for information about sexuality education and 80% reported that they would look for information online. The Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) report on how New Zealand youth view online pornography (Office of Film Literature and Classification, 2018) supports the fact that many young people look to television and other media for sexuality education. Friends, teachers and parents were also common sources of sexuality education but 44% of those surveyed stated that they would use TV or media (p. 69). The OFLC survey found that 65% of participants thought information about sex received at school was very or quite useful but a third said that the information was not useful. A further finding was that 86% of the young people thought porn was likely to have negative influences on teens' sexual behaviour (52% did see porn as having positive influences), yet 54% of these New Zealand adolescents said that they used porn to learn about sex. Implications from findings such as these mean that it is important for adults to understand what it is in the media that young people are viewing as part of their sexuality education (Family Planning New Zealand, 2019).

Several international studies found that young people used media sources to learn about sexual health (Bale, 2011; Doornwaard et al., 2017; McRae, 2011; Smith, 2013). These findings have led to concerns that the messages that children are getting from media around sex are not always appropriate. In the studies reviewed, however, there were both positive and negative findings related to the sex education adolescents obtained from mainstream and online media.

Retrospective information about first experiences of learning about sex was gathered from a group of 51 young adults in a study by Smith (2013). The participants began looking at sexually explicit material (SEM) as adolescents, mainly online, to find sexual health information around topics such as sexual anatomy and contraception. They reported that viewing the information online had provided a safe and private source that had spared them embarrassment. Many of the participants felt that the online portrayals of people and their bodies were more realistic in content than those on mainstream media, such as television. However, others were more negative in their assessment and reported encountering content as adolescents that they saw as upsetting and portraying unrealistic behaviours. Findings from the study suggested that young people need the skills and resources to be able to critically view the information and use it positively for sexual health education (Smith, 2013).

McRae's (2011) doctoral thesis involved a systematic analysis of 25 qualitative global studies that examined the association between sexual media exposure (SME) and sexual health outcomes (SHO). A key theme from this study was the need for more comprehensive sex education that countered some of the inappropriate messages that adolescents could receive from media, such as that there were no negative consequences from sex. Participants across the studies analysed were concerned about younger children getting messages about sex education from media as they felt these younger peers would be more vulnerable to media influences.

There were examples of studies which strongly supported the presentation of some sex education related content in the different forms of media. Most were around online media content but there were some studies that did relate to nudity on television. The Australian Broadcasting Classification system approach is outlined in an article by Williams (2011) and emphasises that nudity in television content may not always be classified in a sexual way. Nudity is sometimes depicted in a scientific and medicalized context. Classifiers may consider the nude images to be natural or non-sexual and there



may be techniques employed within the programme which means that nudity is more stylised, or that it is justified by the context or purpose of the programme. Some nudity may provide an educational merit to the production. Williams (2011) does revisit concerns over content when she asks this question at the end of the article:

*The television classification ratings are self-regulated. Is this a wise option for our audiences? Does this run the risk of letting too much inappropriate content onto our television screens? (p. 89).*

Viewing nudity on television has generally been perceived to be a more positive context of sexuality education for children and young people, than more explicit sexual media content (Gozansky, 2018). An analysis was carried out of 30 nonfiction television programmes focused on children's sexuality between 1964-2016. Relevant to the parameters for this review were the 16 television programmes studied between 2008 – 2016. The author stated that this study presented new ways of looking at the "culturally controversial issue of the body and sexuality on children's television" (p. 1). Television can be a source of positive information for children and address subjects such as puberty without being accused of showing inappropriate or sexually explicit images. Programmes evaluated included those that discussed the penis, showing images of the natural development of the male in a scientific way, the naked body as a natural part of human existence and breast growth, including descriptions from young girls about how this felt for them. The programmes studied did come from a range of cultures (for example, Norway, Hong Kong, America, Australia) and all were focused on the facts of puberty and couched in biological and medical terms, presented by sex educators and other presenters. The author believes that television programmes such as those evaluated can show young people that changes to the naked body are developmentally natural and thus help to overcome cultural and social restrictions. Gozansky (2018) argues that:

*The contradiction between the moralistic 'protective discourse' promoted largely by adults, and children's rights to sexuality education and information, raises the question of children's television's ability to address the subject of puberty without being accused of immorality or inappropriateness for children (p. 556).*

These television programmes which aim to use biological, educational and medical visual representations and terms help to legitimise what is presented making it more culturally appropriate (Gozansky, 2018). There was, however, little emphasis in any of the programmes on the emotional aspects such as pleasure, love or the sexual well-being of children.

Finally, of interest regarding information around sexual health that might be found online is the stand taken by sites such as Facebook and Instagram around showing nudity. Facebook commits to 'community standards' and among these is a standard relating to nudity. This includes the understanding that nudity may be shared "for educational or medical reasons" (Facebook, 2019). An article published in Stuff (Dewey, 2017) points out that both Facebook and Instagram declare that nudity is not permitted on their sites except in a non-graphic or non-sexual context. Yet Dewey (2017) points to many shades of grey in between what is considered sexual and not sexual, graphic and not graphic. The moderators of such sites have the difficult job to deal "with questions of morality and sexuality and propriety that we haven't even solved as a society. Is the body inherently sexual? When is nudity art?" Allowing a full frontal of celebrity Kim Kardashian but taking down pictures of breast-feeding mothers illustrates the inherent difficulties of the different contexts within which nudity can be framed (Dewey, 2017).



### Nudity within an artistic context

While none of the studies reviewed focused on the impact of an artistic context of nudity on children and young people with a specific relation to television or the media, findings from a study by Bey (2011) have implications for this review.

Bey's (2011) qualitative study analysed his formative experiences as a pre-adolescent boy with nudity and nakedness. The findings of this study challenge heteronormative ideas about sex and gender and urges educators and parents to critically reconsider their own experiences to help gain a better understanding of the way images of nudity might be interpreted by youth. Bey argues that growing from childhood through to puberty, young people see different forms of nudity. These include in scientific, social, art historical and erotic forms. Children may be looking to discover their bodies and the bodies of the 'other' sex without the guidance of parents and Bey raises the concern that for some nudity can be seen as sensationalised and a topic that is not talked about in public.

The author proposes three frameworks that society might use to view nudity; artistic, informational, and pornographic (Bey, 2011). He believes that aligning ourselves within these frameworks sets us up for specific experiences and responses to nudity. For example, he believes that the popular media makes it difficult for young people to see the naked body in an objective way through its use of sexual signifiers around nudity, placing it under a pornographic framework. As an art educator, Bey (2011) advocates for using a range of media and interpretive contexts for looking at the nude in art and in popular culture and thus reframing both nudity and nakedness and challenging normative responses. This artistic context of nudity as a positive discourse aligns with the idea that along with scientific and educational contexts nudity can be interpreted by young people within different frameworks, and not always seen within a sexual framework.

### Nudity and the media within a sexual context

#### *Issues of definition*

Most of the studies identified for this literature review focussed on the sexual context of nudity. Sexual or sexy media content was defined or coded in numerous ways in the studies reviewed, with some studies offering no real definition. Some studies used different operationalised terms for sexual content or sexy media content and some simply assumed understanding. The review carried out for the BSA in 2011 around sexual content in television (Billot & Billot, 2011) explored the issue of definition in greater detail than will be done for this literature review. The authors concluded that:

*... sexual content is culturally and sub-culturally defined and that to provide the concept with sufficient contextual meaning for New Zealand television will require an in-depth qualitative study to deconstruct sexual content, so that it can be identified, explored, explained and defined for the contemporary New Zealand free-to air television media environment current at the time of the research (p. 59).*

This is outside the scope of this current literature review but the difficulties are acknowledged. However, in line with the focus of the current review, the search firstly looked for research on sexual content or sexy media content that included references to nudity or naked images. Where these specific references were not found, the focus shifted to sexual media content that could be assumed to include nudity or naked images in some form and the impact that this content may or may not have on the health and development of children and young people. The range of terms for sexual content in media that included nudity but were not limited to nudity included 'naked, nude/nudity, naked images, sexually explicit, sexual content, x-rated content, sexts, pornography'. The current review



outlines the impacts of exposure to specifically the sexual context of nudity but also includes all the other terms above.

A few studies were found that identified nudity within descriptions of sexual content. In an American study Bleakley, Jamieson and Romer (2012) looked at 855 motion picture films and defined sexual content as kissing on the lips, nudity, sexual behaviour or any implicit or explicit images of sexual intercourse. Nudity as a form of overt sexuality was coded in a 2010 study (Downs & Smith, 2010) which looked at sexual portrayals in video games. Hust et al's (2011) study used nudity and sexuality-related content as a specific code in their survey. However, within the majority of studies reviewed, definitions of sexual media content did not allude specifically to nudity. For example, a 2016 review of the nature and prevalence of sexual content in mainstream media described a multitude of themes, storylines, scripts and jokes on television (across 11 major American networks) related to sex and sexuality but depictions of nudity were not isolated as a specific type of sexual content (Ward, Erickson, Lippman, & Giaccardi, 2016). A more common operationalisation of sexual content is represented by Chandra et al's (2008) definition which coded sexual behaviour as five subcategories - physical flirting, passionate kissing, intimate touch, intercourse implied, and intercourse depicted.

While retaining a focus on nudity, this review now moves on to discuss the large body of literature around sexual media content and its influence on children and young people.



## Part Two: Sexual media content and impacts on children and young people

There has been a plethora of research that has focused on whether exposure to sexual content in the media significantly affects the sexual attitudes and behaviours of children and especially, adolescents (Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2008; Collins, Martino, Elliott, & Miu, 2011; Coyne et al., 2019; Ferguson, Nielsen, & Markey, 2017; Ward et al., 2016). The possible negative effects of watching sexual images or encounters in various forms of media on impressionable young people is understandably of concern to parents and educators.

A review by Coyne et al. (2019) analysed sexual content in television and movies and found that 81% of motion pictures and 82% of television programmes contain sexual content and this is without exploring the exhaustive amount of sexual content that can be found via newer media sources. In relation to television as a media form, nudity within a sexual context in television shows has become more popular according to the writer of a piece in the British paper, *The Telegraph* (Hawkaley, 2017, 7 June). Shows depicting nudity in the US have led to an increasing rise in nudity on television where producers wanted to be the “first ones in to the trend of naked themed shows” (p. 3). The article identified seven popular television reality shows from around the world which the author believes depicts nudity within a sexual context. Examples include the dating show *Naked Attraction*, (a show that has since been shown in New Zealand) in which people comment on contestants’ naked bodies and which Hawkaley (2017) maintains caused most people to feel uncomfortable; *Undressed*, a hit in Italy where contestants have conversations in their underwear in bed and *Adam Zoekt Eva*, a Dutch show which is not censored, and shows participants in the nude on an island looking for dates. Several of the television shows have been recreated in other countries because of their popularity.

The increased volume of sexual images in the media and the extent to which they can impact on the daily life of children and young people were common themes explored in the research. Sexualised images and messages are increasingly visible for children and young people who may not have the maturity to critically analyse what they are seeing and put it into context (Papadopoulos, 2010). This growth in the visibility of sexual imagery has led to feelings of moral panic about possible harmful influences on young people (Brown & Bobkowski, 2011; Van Damme & Biltereyst, 2013). Ferguson et al. (2017) point out, “this question is of interest to policymakers, parents, educators, health professionals, adolescents themselves, and even the producers and distributors of media” (p. 349).

However, although there have been many studies which have explored the effects of watching sexy media for children and young people, there is division in the empirical literature as to whether or not it can be proven that any effects are positive or negative or neutral for children’s development. Within the body of sexual research literature, there are studies that support the notion that there is a relationship between exposure to sexy media content and the likelihood of engaging in more risky sexual behaviours, and studies which dispute any causal relationship or significant effects on attitudes and behaviours. The review discusses these contrasting findings on impacts for children and young people in the next section.

### Sexy media content may have negative impacts on the sexual attitudes and behaviours

Many of the studies reviewed supported the argument that exposure to sexy media content may impact on sexual attitudes and behavioural outcomes that are of concern in terms of the healthy development of children and young people. Behaviours identified in studies include early sexual initiation, frequency of casual sex, a tendency to have several sexual partners, unintended pregnancies and contacting sexually transmitted infections (STIs), all of which can be associated with mental and physical health risks (Bleakley et al., 2008; Coyne et al., 2019; Ward et al., 2016; Watchirs-Smith et al., 2013; Watchirs-Smith et al., 2016). In terms of methodology, research in this area has tended to rely



on survey and longitudinal data with some qualitative studies using in-depth interviews and narrative methodology.

There are two main theoretical frameworks which studies refer to in support of the argument that viewing sexual media content shapes attitudes and behaviours: cultivation theory and social cognitive theory (Coyne et al., 2019; Ward et al., 2016). According to cultivation theory, the more exposure that young people have to a particular kind of reality, such as commonly portrayed sexual messages on television (for example, frequent casual sex), the more likely they will adopt this version of reality.

Social cognitive theory, formulated by Bandura and as applied to research on media and sexual content, is predicated on the belief that observing attractive media models can influence viewers' ideas about which behaviours and attitudes are appropriate for the social norms of the time (Ward et al., 2016). Thus, adolescents may see sexy media content and model their own attitudes and behaviours accordingly.

Such theories are seen to support the concerns of parents and educators that there are harmful effects for children and young people from viewing sexualised content on television and other media (Lewis, Somers, Guy, Watchirs-Smith, & Skinner, 2018). The main themes from the literature around effects that could be harmful for children and young people were around early initiation to sex and risky behaviours, negative impacts on young people's sexual attitudes, and an increase in estimates of peers' sexual behaviours leading to young people taking more risks themselves. The negative impacts of more frequent exposure to sexy media content and similarities across cultures is also briefly discussed.

#### *Early initiation to sex and risky behaviours*

Developmental scientists generally agree that there are more negative consequences for teens who have sexual activity before the age of 16 years than as an older adolescent. Early initiation to sex can be associated with more problems for young people as younger adolescents are less likely to practice safe sex and more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviours (Steinberg & Monahan, 2011). Thus, it is important for parents and educators to be aware of factors that might increase teens' intentions to have early sexual activity. The review found several studies which concluded that exposure to sexy media content is a predictor to early initiation to sex and to risky behaviours.

In a recent statistical meta-analysis by Coyne et al. (2019), the researchers looked at 59 studies which explored the relationship between exposure to sexy media content and the attitudes and sexual behaviours of adolescents and young adults. The authors defined sexual content as verbal or visual references to sexual relationships, courtships or sexual acts. Included in the meta-analysis was media exposure through television, film, video games, music and music videos. Findings from this meta-analysis supported the association between watching sexual images and content on various forms of media and permissive sexual attitudes, earlier initiation of sexual behaviour and risky sexual behaviours. Particular points of note were that the effect sizes for teens were nearly twice as large as that for emerging adults and the effect was also stronger for males than females, with the authors surmising that "sexual experimentation fits the male sexual script" (p. 435). Coyne et al. (2019) concluded that there are significant implications from their findings for adolescents' mental and physical health. A young person's sexual behaviours may be shaped by these media portrayals, such as early sexual experimentation, which are then seen as normative.

A review which looked at mainly longitudinal studies found further evidence that the various 'older media'- which included television - influenced the sexual socialisation of adolescents (Brown & Bobkowski, 2011). The authors explored a decade of research from 2000-2010 which differentiated



between what they termed older media – television, movies, radio, magazines – and newer media – such as social media networking sites, music and video games and Smart phones. Brown and Bobowski (2011) do not give a definition of sexual media content in their review but they do make a distinction between ‘sexual content’ and ‘explicit sexual content’. The longitudinal analyses they reviewed provided evidence that early exposure, usually unintentional, to sexually explicit content as they have defined this, correlates with gender stereotyping and having oral sex and sexual intercourse before the age of 16 years. The authors suggest that exposure to sexual content on prime-time television and movies can be problematic as analyses have further shown that portrayals tend to show sex as being free of risks, and there is seldom mention of any negative consequences for young people such as STIs or unwanted pregnancies.

Hust et al. (2011) identified several studies which found that there was a relationship between exposure to sexual television content and adolescents’ initiation of sexual behaviour and more frequent involvement with casual sexual relationships. In a study in the United Kingdom (Bale, 2011), which used in-depth interviews with 21 young people (16-19 years), participants reported that watching sexy media content increased intentions to have sex at an early age. Another study using a three-wave survey similarly concluded that an early introduction to sexual content in television, music, video games and magazines led to the early initiation of sexual activity and ongoing progress in sexual behaviours (Bleakley et al., 2008).

The impact of sexy media content on youth sexual behaviour is further supported by a longitudinal study of 1,058 youths aged between 14 and 21 years old. Thirty-two percent of the cohort reported that the television and movies they watched contained sexual material (Ybarra, Strasburger, & Mitchell, 2014). The study showed that the odds of the young men having casual sex were five times higher if they said that most of the media they watched depicted sexual situations, compared to youth who said none of the media they watched showed sexual content. These findings are correlational and the study did not provide evidence to show a significant causal link between watching sexy media content and having casual sex.

#### *Impacts on sexual attitudes*

A summary report published online in 2016, which looked at sexual media content and the effects of this on young people, stated that exposure to sexy content has been associated with more permissive attitudes towards sexual exploration (Ward et al., 2016). For example, “uncommitted sexual exploration; stronger support of gender-related sexual roles, adversarial sexual beliefs, and the sexual double standard; and increased estimates of peers’ sexual behaviour” (p. 1) were listed as these kinds of attitudes in the report.

McRae’s (2011) synthesis of a number of qualitative studies found that there was an association with adolescents’ interpretations of the sexual messages that they were receiving from the media and their sexual attitudes, perceptions, sexual intentions and motivations. The media messages acted as precursors to teens’ sexual behaviours. For example, adolescents who espoused the attitude that sex can be a casual, recreational activity found that media messages confirmed their beliefs. A review of 21 studies of American young people and their association with sexy media support McRae’s findings (Wright, 2011). Among the findings was that exposure to sexual media content is linked to sexual beliefs and attitudes and that exposure increased young people’s intentions to engage in risky sexual behaviour. Wright (2011) defends his conclusion that there is a causal relationship by noting that the studies reviewed were sizable, and diverse regionally, ethnically and developmentally; participants were pre-teens, teens and emerging adults. Every young person interviewed in Bale’s (2011) study described the media as influencing ‘youth and children’ to have more permissive sexual attitudes.



Researchers from another study (Shah, Das, Muthiah, & Milanaik, 2019) found that new age media technology impacts negatively on the self-esteem of young people, their views on body image and their identity development.

Some studies found that there were reciprocal relationships between watching sexual reality television content and adolescents' behaviours in the form of sexual self-representation (Vandenbosch, van Oosten, & Peter, 2015). Adolescents are looking to fit in to what they see as the preferred norms of society and reality television can be a place where they look to find people whom they might emulate and situations that they see as true to life. Watching reality television content was shown to motivate Dutch adolescents aged 13-17 years to present a sexy self-representation of themselves on social media sites (Vandenbosch et al., 2015; Ward, Seabrook, Grower, Giaccardi, & Lippman, 2018). The study found that watching mainstream media, such as television, had a greater impact on the participants' attitudes around sexual self-representation online than watching pornography, which was believed to be less 'real'.

Young women aged 16-19 years were among participants who were asked how frequently they engaged in looking at three types of media that were known to commonly feature women in a sexually objectifying way (Ward et al., 2018). Reality life style television programmes, such as *The Bachelor* and *Real Housewives*, were included. More frequent consumption of women's magazines, reality TV programmes and situation comedies on television predicted a greater self-sexualization but in turn also predicted attitudes such as lower sexual self-efficacy, more negative sexual affect and stronger sexual motivations for alcohol use for the young women. The prediction that alcohol use to feel sexual increased can be explained by the frequent use of alcohol consumption in reality television to initiate sexual experiences. There are negative consequences for adolescent girls of believing that it is necessary to use alcohol to feel sexual such as an increased likelihood of unwanted sexual encounters.

Brown and Bobowski (2011) looked at research around representations of the body, often naked if portrayed in a sexual context, and concluded that models presented of a slim female body or a muscular male can influence the health and mental well-being of adolescents, who see these representations as ideal and may turn to excessive dieting or other eating disorders. Other studies focusing on adolescent young women confirmed these concerns about the sexualization of the female body in the media and the influences these representations can have on young girls' perceptions of their own body image (McDade-Montez, Wallander, & Cameron, 2017; Papadopoulos, 2010).

Younger children's attitudes towards sexualisation as a result of watching popular television programmes which contained sexual content was explored in a study whose participants were girls in the United States, aged between six and 11 years (McDade-Montez et al., 2017). The authors found that children are exposed to frequent examples of sexualisation in children's programming alone and that exposure to sexual content could begin for children as young as six. They concluded that younger children under the age of eight years would be especially vulnerable to perceiving these media examples as normative, shaping their own attitudes towards perceptions of sexual reality.

#### *Exposure to sexy media content increases estimates of peers' sexual behaviour*

A common finding was that young people preferred to talk about the sexual media content they were seeing with their peers compared to parents or others (Doornwaard et al., 2017; Flander, Cosic, & Profaca, 2009; Hill, 2015). Higher levels of exposure to sexual prime time television led to adolescents believing that television portrayals were true to life and in turn, to increased estimates of sexual activity among peers, in line with what they were seeing on the screen (Ward et al., 2016). Coyne et al (2019) found a positive relationship between watching sexy media content and perceptions of peers' sexual experiences. In a study of 498 adolescents from Belgium, watching sexually oriented



reality television programmes two or more times a week was associated with adolescent girls talking about sex with their peers more frequently and with boys perceiving that male peers were more permissive in their sexual experiences (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2011).

Consulting one's peers on sexual information and perceiving high levels of peers' permissiveness may increase the pressure on young people to experiment sexually themselves. For young people who are unprepared for early sexual initiation this may lead to physical and mental health risks. Studies found that greater exposure to sexy media content predicts normative pressure from one's peer group and this leads to increased intentions to have sex, sexual risk taking, and a greater possibility of sexually transmitted diseases (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2011; Ward et al., 2016).

#### *Impacts of more frequent exposure*

There was evidence from some studies that the more frequent the exposure to sexual content on television, the more likely it was that negative consequences resulted for young people. For example, frequent exposure to sexual content on television (identified as sexual behaviour and sexual talk) almost doubled the likelihood of having an early pregnancy (Chandra et al., 2008). The authors were adamant that there was a causal effect between watching sexual television content and teen pregnancies, going so far as to claim that "reducing the exposure of US teens to sexual content might substantially reduce teen pregnancy rates" (p. 1052). Secondary school students from Nigeria who mostly watched movies on television were six times more likely to engage in sex related activities if they had heavy exposure to television than lighter exposure (Odeleye & Ajuwon, 2015). This was found to be particularly true for students aged 14-17 years. Around 20% of the participants said that "it made them feel like doing what they watched on TV" (p. 279). The students who reported that their parents did not monitor their viewing had more frequent exposure to sexual scenes on television.

Adolescents aged between 12 and 19 years in Nigeria who were exposed to negative sexual health content (which included nude images) on television programmes available to them for more than two hours a week were also more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviour, a study by Wusu (2013) found. Having multiple sexual partners (more than one regular sexual partner in the last six months), condom use, age at first sex and unwanted pregnancy and abortion were all sexual health variables that were found to be linked to more frequent media exposure.

A study of Dutch adolescents showed that the participants who reported consuming a large amount of sexual content in the media also reported the highest levels of permissive sexual attitudes (Baams et al., 2015). In the realm of online media, a survey of American young people aged from 12 -22 years (Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009) found that adolescents who had more frequent exposure to sexually explicit websites reported more sexually permissive attitudes than those who had visited such websites less often. These frequently viewing participants had a combined higher score all round for risky sexual behaviour.

Higher exposure to sexual media was linked to adolescent vulnerability and to an increased interest in sexuality, particularly for older adolescents and males in a study of 11-15 year olds in the Czech Republic (Ševčíková, Šerek, Macháčková, & Šmahel, 2013). Young people who were more sensation seeking and who exhibited emotional problems were more likely to engage in higher levels of watching sexual media content.

#### *Impacts across cultures*

The literature search found that there are differing cultural views around the impact of exposure to sexual content in the media. These understandings are dependent on cultural values and beliefs. Children seek out role models from TV who are similar in both ethnicity and gender and adopt their



gender roles, including physical appearance standards, sexual beliefs and behaviours (McDade-Montez et al., 2017).

Lemish (2011) interviewed children's television producers from around the world about their views on sexual content in relation to children and television. Most producers agreed that the openness to airing sexual content differed in different cultures with the Dutch culture and other Nordic countries seen as most open and direct, without certain restrictions for children. Television producers from the Nordic countries felt that addressing issues around sexy content openly, rather than hiding these, gave young people the avenues to express their fears, curiosities and concerns of discovering their own sexuality.

In contrast, producers from African, Asian and Middle Eastern countries were more likely to hold beliefs that sexualised behaviour was objectionable because it went against many of the values and traditions in their cultures (Lemish, 2011; Miller et al., 2016). Sex and sexual activity were strongly framed within the context of procreation in many developing countries. This was in contrast to the perceived glamourised view of sex and sexual liberty presented in Western media that focussed on pleasure, thereby also being seen as a threat to more traditional societies and their collective identity. If the message was one of highlighting negative consequences of sex, then the shows were viewed as permissible. However, other aspects of sexual discussion were dismissed.

The participants from the African and Middle Eastern and Asian countries (like Japan) in Lemish's (2011) study believed that portraying sexual content openly on children's television and discussing what was seen would legitimise and inspire early sexual behaviours which would be detrimental to young people. However, a study from China found that traditional media could be used to support government controlled sexual education messages for children and young people (Lou et al., 2012). Producers from Asia (Philippines and Kazakhstan) and South America noted the stark difference in content that children viewed from local sources compared to global sources. Western television, in particular American television, showed sexy content that their own cultures forbade. Whilst these countries were censoring and over-protecting their children from open sexual content, there was also ready access within the countries to Western content that was sexualized.

Miller's study of Ugandan youths (Miller et al., 2016) supported Lemish's (2011) findings around African cultural understandings of the impact of sexy media on young people. According to Miller et al. (2016) different forms of media were common places for encountering sexual content, especially American television and movies. The participants stated that the media messages that they received about sex had greater impacts for them than any other sources of sexual information, including parents, school and church. The participants were encouraged to watch a Luganda language television station but often watched the American shows in secret, late at night, as they reported that their parents were very strict. Impacts from watching this sexual content included feelings of pressure to have sex earlier (especially for girls), gender stereotyping around sexual behaviours with girls feeling that they needed to satisfy their men sexually (the men were the providers and the girls derived messages that they should be submissive and nurturing), while many of the boys thought the sexual messages, including any pornography they saw, were positive.

The literature search did not reveal any empirical studies that explored issues around exposure to nudity or sexual content in the media for Māori and Pasifika young people in Aotearoa New Zealand. The New Zealand Youth and Porn survey did not report significant differences related to ethnicity in their findings around the way viewing porn influences young people (Office of Film Literature and Classification, 2018).



Sexy media content can have no or limited effects on the sexual attitudes and behaviour of youth

As a comparison to the studies outlined above, research studies were also found that supported the view that there is limited evidence for a causal link between exposure to sexual content in the media and attitudes towards more risky sexual behaviours in young people. Ward et al.'s review (2016) found that some studies did not support a causal relationship and specified that this null finding was repeated across a variety of media forms, including television.

For example, a meta-analysis of 22 correlational and longitudinal studies concluded that, after controlling for family and peer influences, there was no support for the hypothesis that sexy media contributes to either the early initiation of sex among young people, nor to sexual behaviours more generally, with near zero effect sizes (Ferguson et al., 2017). They surmised that greater influences on the sexual behaviours of youth came from peers and parents, and genetics, rather than media. However, Ferguson et al. (2017) do note that their analyses did not focus on effects on sexual attitudes and concede that sexy media content could have some influence on the sexual attitudes and beliefs of adolescents.

Steinberg and Monahan (2011) acknowledge that there has been considerable angst among professionals and parents around the dangers of exposure to sexy media for adolescents and that several studies have cited a strong relationship between such exposure and risky adolescent sexual behaviour (see examples in above section). The authors point out that this perceived causal relationship has attracted a great deal of media interest and thus, public interest. However, in their re-analysis of previous longitudinal studies, Steinberg and Monahan (2011) found "that using a more stringent approach to accounting for differential selection undoes any apparent effect of sexy media exposure on adolescents' initiation of sexual intercourse" (p. 572). They concluded that the more important influences on adolescents' decisions to start having sex, for example, may be around such variables as parental permissiveness or parental-adolescent conflict than the influence of media.

Another study of Flemish teenagers (Van Damme & Biltereyst, 2013) did not support the harm discourse of sexual media for teens but rather argued that watching sexualised media content led to sex becoming less of a taboo subject for adolescent viewers. The young people were able to openly talk and think about what they had seen. The findings showed that these contemporary teens used television shows to help them construct a gendered and sexual identity. However, they were not influenced to become sexually corrupt by watching sexual media. A trend towards habituation around sexual messages was noted. The presence of sexually suggestive images in television series was seen as normal and sexuality was viewed as part of human life. There were some gender differences in the findings, such as boys' greater tolerance of more sexually explicit images.

There are also contrasting views from a cultural perspective. In China, viewing sexual content in the media did not appear to have harmful effects for a group of young participants. A study across three Asian cities looked at the experiences of young people aged 15-24 years with traditional media, which was categorised as radios, television, videos, newspapers, magazines, books, bulletins, educational columns and telephone hotlines (Lou et al., 2012). Frequent media exposure was significantly related to young people's lower levels of sex-related behaviours. The impact of media was higher than that of family, peer and school influences. Traditional media in China is controlled by the government and the authors concluded that this fact may have led to "healthy" sex information in this type of media.



### *Summary of the potential impacts of sexy media content on behaviours and attitudes*

The findings from the studies detailed in this section can be seen to support the view that attention needs to be given to the various media influences as socialisation agents which can predict sexual attitudes and behaviours in young people (Brown & Bobkowski, 2011; Coyne et al., 2019). There is a strong body of literature that supports a causal relationship between exposure to sexy media content, and risky sexual behaviours in young people. As Wright (2011) concludes in his review and synthesis on sexual socialisation messages in popular media in America,

*Exposure to sexual mass media should be considered a health threat to young people and interventions aimed at increasing parental monitoring of children's sexual mass media exposure and towards reducing the degree to which youth identify with and perceive the sexual exploits of mass media persona as realistic and acceptable should be developed and implemented (p. 375).*

Despite this, there is also a significant body of research that argues that sexual media content has only limited impact on the attitudes and behaviours of children and young people (Steinberg & Monahan, 2011). For adolescents who are exposed to sexual content in the media there is potential for both positive and negative outcomes (Neustifter, Blumer, O'Reilly, & Ramirez, 2015). A further point for consideration in the current media environment is the rise of reality television programming over the last decade and the implications of the sexual content that is encompassed under this genre which has not yet been adequately analysed (Ward, 2011). Studies that look at new directions in television media such as content that is developed for platforms like Netflix or Amazon Prime could be a focus for future research. The nature of sexual content on television is constantly changing and what may have been seen as inappropriate in the past, such as full-frontal nudity on reality television, may not be viewed in this way by young people today (Flander et al., 2009).

### *Parental attitudes and behaviours towards sexy media content*

There was a wealth of evidence in the literature to support the theme that parents and caregivers are concerned about children viewing nudity or sexual content in the various forms of media and the implications that this might have for their children's health and well-being (Broadcasting Standards Authority, 2015; Hill, 2015; Hust, Wong, & Chen, 2011; Netsafe, 2018a). These concerns were overwhelmingly related to sexually explicit forms of nudity and not nudity depicted in a non-sexual way. The Children's Media Study (Broadcasting Standards Authority, 2015) ranks parents' concerns about content on television and children's exposure to the various types of content. Exposure to sexual material was a concern for 61% of the cohort surveyed and nudity was a concern for 30%. When asked about exposure to sexual images in an online media form, 72% of parents were worried about this situation. Further evidence of parental worry from a New Zealand context is provided by Netsafe (2018a) whose survey questioned New Zealand parents of children aged 9-17 years. The survey asked parents about the concerns they had with their children viewing sexually explicit material in a digital context. Sexually explicit content was defined as "material showing people naked or partially naked in a sexually suggestive situation and/or people having sex" (p. 3). The survey did not ask about naked images in other contexts. Fifty nine percent of the parents were concerned about their children sharing online images of themselves and 49% were worried about children seeing sexual images of someone naked. Parents' concerns varied according to the age of their child. Parents of children aged 9 to 11 years were most concerned about these children seeing images of someone naked, while those who had children aged 15 to 17 years were less worried about this. However, the research did not identify what specific harms the parents felt children would be exposed to, just that they had concerns.



In a qualitative Master's thesis, a group of eight African American women who were parents of young adolescent girls aged 12-18 years were interviewed (Hill, 2015). The participants were worried about the large amount of sexual imagery and sexual suggestiveness that they believed was shown in almost all forms of media. As one mother said, "I think it's disgusting. I think it is a shame how much is shown... like, it disturbs me" (p. 70). The mothers all thought that viewing these sexual images influenced adolescents' behaviours and attitudes. There were different reactions around letting their daughters view sexual content in films or on television which seemed to depend on parenting style. The parents felt it was difficult to understand how their children felt about sexual visual media and they wanted to know more about strategies for communicating with their daughters around this.

A different kind of family environment was explored in a qualitative study conducted in Washington State, USA, which looked at the views of caregivers of young people in foster care (Albertson, Moreno, Garrison, Evans, & Ahrens, 2018). The authors highlighted as a rationale for undertaking this study the risk of increased physical and mental health issues for young people who have been in foster care. Caregivers interviewed thought that sexually explicit images and content were rife in both online media and traditional media mediums, such as television programmes, cartoons, commercials and advertisements, movies, magazines, and video games. Data from the study showed that the caregivers worried that exposure to this sexual media led to mostly negative impacts on the young people in their care, such as an increase in risky sexual behaviours. The caregivers were surprised and uneasy about discovering that young people were looking at these images from a very early age. There was a real concern that seeing some of the content at this early age could mean that young children might "internalize depictions of sexual behaviour as realistic and factual" (p. 93).

Hust and colleagues' (2011) study in North America found that parental behaviours can help to mediate children's television viewing habits. In an online survey of 465 parents the author asked participants about how they managed scene-specific content on television with their children. Nudity and sexuality-related content was used as a code for one of these scene-specific areas. According to this study, in 2011 around 63% of the television shows that American youth favour, contain some form of nudity. The findings of this study showed that parents would more often use a restrictive mediation style (limiting television watching rather than talking about the content with youth) than an active mediation style in regard to nudity and sexuality-related content on television. In other words, parents were more likely to restrict their children's viewing of nudity and sexually related content, reflecting parental concerns about the perceived harm impact of sexy media content. However, parents were less likely to openly discuss this content with their children. In fact, they were more likely to talk about scene-specific content that included violence. The authors suggested that parents find discussions around nudity and sexuality more difficult to have with their children than those about violence but they acknowledge that further research around this hypothesis is needed.

Research from other cultures also looked at parental mediation of youth television viewing. A study of Ugandan youth (Miller et al., 2016) found similar results to Hust et al. (2011) with their participants (high school students aged 14-16 years) describing how their parents would often leave the room when sexual content appeared on television. Youth participants also reported that their parents were embarrassed to talk about nudity or sexual content with their children. This was concerning as the adolescents reported that media messages were very influential as sources of sexual information, with boys particularly rating media content highly. Kenyan adolescents reported that their parents used a mix of restrictive or active mediation on their television viewing (Ngula, Mberia, & Miller, 2016). Parents were more likely to use active mediation, in contrast to the parents of the Ugandan adolescents. However, the authors found that these parental responses were not significantly associated to the level of exposure to sexual content experienced by young people. Other influences,



such as the influence of peers, was shown to have a greater impact on the amount of sexual content young people viewed.

There were no empirical studies found within New Zealand which explored parental mediation of children viewing nudity or sexually related content on television or other media. However, the Children's Media study from 2014 (Broadcasting Standards Authority & NZ On Air, 2014) indicates that restrictive mediation is the most common pattern for parents in New Zealand. For example, the survey found that 24% of parents would not allow their children to watch shows with adults only content.

#### Unwanted or accidental exposure to sexual content

A further theme that was found in several studies which looked at sexual media content and impacts on children and young people was that unwanted or accidental exposure to sexual media in childhood can have emotional effects that are disturbing for children (Eleuteri et al., 2017). Feelings of shock, disgust, embarrassment when viewing an image inadvertently are common and can have enduring effects. Unintentional exposure to sexual material is most common for sexually explicit websites (SEW) (Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009; Flander et al., 2009). Accidentally viewing unwanted and inappropriate images may cause distress to some children and young people (Lewis et al., 2018).

Some examples of international studies were found that illustrate the concerns over unwanted or accidental exposure to sexual content. Flander et al. (2009) surveyed children aged 10-16 years in Croatia and reported that a quarter of the children (27%) had unwanted exposure to sexual content while using the Internet. Most participants were exposed to images of human nudity (59%). Girls and younger children reported disturbing reactions and having unpleasant feelings on seeing the images more frequently than did boys or older children. Although the study is not specifically related to media such as television, it has implications for younger children and the accidental exposure to sexual images, particularly nude images, as they may not have developed strategies for coping with seeing an unexpected image and could be more vulnerable.

An Australian study which was also focused on social media as the media platform explored the views of 68 adolescents in 11 focus groups (Lewis et al., 2018) The sexual content discussed was on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, music sites or sites such as Facebook messenger. Most of the sexual content that participants saw was unintentional viewing. The authors state that accidental exposure to sexual content online is close to unavoidable for adolescents who spend much of their time on social media platforms. Of importance for understanding the impact of this on young people is that the study found that many teens reported that this accidental exposure made them feel uncomfortable, distressed and awkward. Most chose to ignore the content with a few, mainly older boys, saying that they had shared it with peers.

Another, slightly older, American study which looked at accidental exposure and its effects found similar percentages to Flander et al. (2009) around unintentional exposure to naked images on the internet (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2003). Results showed that 25% of youth who regularly surfed the internet had accidental exposure to sexual content with 83% of this unwanted content being nude images. A quarter of the participants were distressed by the images and slightly less than a quarter reported feeling embarrassed. However, unlike the previous studies, the majority of participants were not distressed by the unwanted exposure. This may have been related to the age groups of those who reported exposure. None of the 10-year olds surveyed reported unwanted exposure while 7% of the 11-12-year olds reported it, as compared to more than 60% of 15 plus internet users. It is possible that the 15 year plus age group both used the internet more frequently and had better understandings of the images that they were viewing than the younger children.



Within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, Netsafe (Netsafe, 2018b) found that 7 out of 10 adolescents have received at least one form of unwanted communication digitally in the past year. Accidentally seeing inappropriate content was very common. Impacts included feeling annoyed, frustrated or confused and were stronger for younger teens. However, some adolescents reported that they found content funny or were not affected. The survey found that impacts for adolescents in New Zealand were gendered with girls reporting more negative emotional reactions than boys to unwanted digital content. The Netsafe report explores digital harm for young people in greater detail but the implications around unwanted inappropriate content that may include nudity in some form and its impact on children's emotional well-being have implications for this review. Further, The New Zealand Youth and Porn report (2018) reminds us of the vulnerability of our young people when it states that "we know that young people are much more likely to see porn for the first time by accident rather than looking for it themselves" (p. 57). In line with this, parents in New Zealand reported being most concerned for their children about accidental exposure of pornography and sexual content in the media (Netsafe, 2018a).

### Impacts of sexting and pornography

Current research around nudity and young people is dominated by studies which explore the impacts of sexting and pornography. Both sexting and pornography were found to be common scenarios though which children and young people are exposed to images of the naked body. Studies which look at the impacts of viewing naked images through sexting or pornography are specifically related to digital media but implications from the issues arising can be considered for this review. A brief discussion of the review findings around impacts for young people seeing a naked image via sexting and the impacts of viewing unwanted pornographic images follows.

### *Sexting impacts youth health and well-being*

Social media provides a space for teens to interact with others in new creative, social ways. The use of social media has become an important part of the way adolescents develop their identity and provides an influence on aspects such as their emerging sexuality and relationships (Eleuteri et al., 2017). The practice of sexting – "the digital sharing of naked or semi-naked pictures" (Albury & Byron, 2015) - has rapidly become an integral part of the influence that social media has for many young people. This influence is not always seen as being in a positive way for young people's health and wellbeing.

A survey by Netsafe is the first of its kind in New Zealand to explore the practice of sexting in this country (Netsafe, 2017). The catalyst for the survey was the lack of research in New Zealand around sexting which has contributed to the portrayal of a sense of moral distress in the media about the topic. One of the survey's findings was that adolescents were more likely to receive nude images than send them, with 18% of teens reporting that they had received unwanted sexual content in the last year. The survey emphasised the nudity aspect of sexting, defining the practice in this way:

*Any act or practice related to sending, receiving, requesting or being asked for mostly, but not always, self-generated nude or nearly nude images or video through digital tools and/or platforms (p. 4).*

Findings from the survey included that young people see behaviours like sexting as part of forming a sexual identity and that although they, as young people, are aware of any risks involved, many do not agree with the idea of sharing nudes online. Others don't see this as a problem, believing that adults do it so they can too. There were different experiences based on gender – girls are more likely to be asked to send nude pictures of themselves and more likely to receive nudes; and ethnicity – Māori



teens are more likely to have received unwanted nude content. This was also the case for teens with disabilities.

International studies mirror the finding that it is more common for young people to receive an unwanted nude image via text than it is for teens to engage in the practice of sending the nude images themselves (Horvath et al., 2013). In a study of Australian youth, 45.3% of boys and 39.9% of girls had received a sexually explicit nude or nearly nude photo or video of someone else (Patrick, Heywood, Pitts, & Mitchell, 2015). Older students engaged in sexting more than younger students and boys engaged in more sexting than girls. Other studies support these findings. Dutch adolescents aged 16-19 years reported that most of them had received an unintentional sext while only a few of them sent a text. Teens were aware of the dangers of sending sexts (Doornwaard et al., 2017). A meta-analysis of 39 global studies (Joffe, 2018) concluded that the mean prevalence for receiving a text was nearly twice as that of sending one. 27% of participants received a sext as compared to 15% who sent one.

A meta analyses of 14 studies was conducted to find out if sexual content in new media forms can be linked to risky sexual behaviour in adolescents (Watchirs-Smith et al., 2013). The authors stated that “the studies in this review suggest involvement in sexting is likely to be a marker of higher sexually transmissible infection and HIV risk in some young people” (p. 513). They suggest that implications from these studies are that there needs to be more open communication between parents and teens about digital safety mediated by professionals. For example, New Zealand parents are particularly concerned about younger children, aged 9-11 years, seeing naked images presented in a sexual way online or videos showing nudity, and would benefit from support (Netsafe, 2018a). Parents of adolescents aged 15-17 were much less concerned about their teens seeing such images.

Other studies maintain that sexting is strongly associated with risky health behaviours for young people such as depression, alcohol consumption and suicide ideation or attempts although authors note that causal relationships cannot always be proven (Shah et al., 2019). These findings are important for educators and parents who may need to provide education to help adolescents understand some of the psychological dangers to those who have unexpected pictures of naked and sexual images sent to them. A New Zealand report by Netsafe recommends further research around the practice of sharing nude content, whether it is accidental or intentional, and its relationship to issues such as online bullying and risky sexual behaviours (Netsafe, 2017).

#### *Pornography and young people*

Several studies and reports supported the view that children and young people are routinely exposed to pornography (Alexandraki, Vasileios, Burleigh, King, & Griffiths, 2018; Flood, 2009; Shah et al., 2019). As was alluded to in the section on unwanted exposure to sexual media content, a young person’s first exposure to pornography is more likely to be accidental than purposeful (Horvath et al., 2013; Office of Film Literature and Classification, 2018). Nudity is often a part of pornographic images that are unintentionally viewed by young people. Studies reviewed by Horvath et al. (2013) found that children reported that the types of pornography they most commonly saw were images or videos of naked people. In light of this, a short review of some literature which looks at pornography and its impacts on children who have viewed some form of porn follows.

#### *Defining pornography*

Definitions of pornography abound in the literature. There is not space in this broad-brush review to discuss these in depth. Some examples of definitions from the literature reviewed are “by porn, we mean explicit images, video, or movies of a person or person having real sex or doing sexual things and you can see their genitals (e.g. penis, vagina)” (Office of Film Literature and Classification, 2018, p. 18); “sexually explicit media that are primarily intended to sexually arouse the audience” (Flood,



2009); “depicting genitals and sexual intercourse” (Brown & Bobkowski, 2011, p.101); while internet porn is “the online viewing or downloading of pictures and videos with clearly exposed genitals and/or pictures or videos in which people are having sex (with the intention of eliciting a sexual reaction)” (Alexandraki et al., 2018, p.426). The Office of Film and Literature Classification in New Zealand defines pornography as “...of such a nature that it must reasonably be assumed to have been produced solely or principally for the purposes of sexual arousal.” These definitions have in common that the images portrayed in pornography are sexually explicit and that the purpose is sexual arousal. This differs from nudity which can be referenced within several contexts in the media literature, not all of which are related to sexual contexts, as described earlier in this review. An understanding of the various conceptualisations of pornography is important in order to present views from the literature about the impacts that pornography can have on children and young people. Although these definitions may vary, the common themes of ‘sexually explicit in nature for the ‘purpose of sexual arousal’ allow us to draw some conclusions based on the current evidence base about the impacts of pornography on children and young people.

#### *Harmful effects of pornography*

There was strong evidence in the literature of the harmful effects that exposure to pornography is believed to have for children. A report for the Children’s Commissioner in the United Kingdom (Horvath et al., 2013), that looked at the effects that pornography had on children and young people, included in its findings that access and exposure to pornography can affect children’s sexual beliefs, such as increased permissive attitudes towards sex and unrealistic attitudes about sex. The report defined children and young people as up to 18 years, or up to 25 years for young people with a disability. Exposure to pornography would also impact on children and young people’s sexual behaviours such as engaging in risky sexual behaviours. The authors also linked viewing pornography with a greater tendency to engage in sexting as a form of cyber bullying. The report suggested that children and young people learn from, and may change their behaviour, due to exposure and access to pornography, and may show a greater tendency to engage in risky sexual behaviour. The authors recommended that there be further work done looking at the effects of exposure to porn in order “to better inform understanding of possible associations with attitudes and behaviour and improve the targeting of interventions for young people displaying violent, or sexually harmful, behaviours” (p. 67). Teaching professionals in the United Kingdom echoed these concerns about the negative effects of viewing pornography (Baker, 2016). They felt that porn normalised some sexual behaviours, gave wrong messages about gender roles in sexual relationships and that viewing pornography could induce young people to act in inappropriate ways.

Similarly, findings from the survey of young New Zealanders about their experiences with online pornography showed that teen sexual behaviour was being influenced by porn (Office of Film Literature and Classification, 2018). Young people saw this as problematic as exposure to porn could lead to false expectations about sex and stereotypical attitudes, and behaviours that were inappropriate and unhealthy. An Australian study revealed similar findings. Exposure to porn was common and could begin at a young age. Viewing porn was associated with behaviours such as mental health issues, having sex at an earlier age, and risky sexual behaviours (Lim, Agius, Carrotte, Vella, & Hellard, 2017).

The majority of the literature referred to online pornography but the caregivers interviewed in Albertson’s (2018) study classified the sexually explicit material that was shown on some television programmes as pornography. Participants viewed pornography as “a uniquely damaging source of influence over youth norms, attitudes, and behaviours related to sex and romantic relationships” (p.



93. Both the youth participants and the caregivers were concerned about the ease with which teens could access porn and the early age at which children were first being exposed to such content.

Taking a slightly different angle, a review of the global literature by Flood (2009) found both negative and positive effects for young people who viewed porn. There were gender differences in accessing porn. Males are more likely to view pornography than females and tend to view porn to increase their sexual excitement or to aid masturbation, while girls are more likely to be repulsed by the pornographic content. Younger children, in particular, were found to be more disturbed and upset by this exposure. Pornography users were more likely than non-users to have an earlier age of sexual involvement and varied sexual behaviours. The author noted that the effects of pornography on children and young people were greater than for other media showing sexual content and surmised that this was because porn is much more sexually explicit and can often show content that shows a much higher degree of sexual explicitness than other sexual media and that its content is more aggressive and harmful towards women.

#### *Unintentional exposure to porn*

Analysis of the studies reviewed by Flood (2009) showed that most children and youth were not necessarily disturbed by unintentional exposure to porn. For those who were upset, some common reactions to accidental exposure were being extremely distraught, offended, repulsed, shocked, sick, embarrassed and disgusted. Children also reported being upset by the depiction of sexual practices which are outside common cultural norms or even criminal and by frequently being shown in subordinate roles as is common in pornography. Despite these more negative impacts, Flood's (2009) review did find that there were positive effects, such as the idea that pornography could be educational and expand views of sex to include more liberal and less restrictive and heteronormative understandings. Pornography was often seen as part of developing one's sexual identity through sexual experimentation and was unlikely to be the sole influence on a young person's sexual expression. A similar finding was in Miller's study on Ugandan adolescents which used focus groups to find out about the teens' interpretation and evaluation of sexual content in media (Miller et al., 2016). A number of participants, especially boys, thought that sexual content in media including pornography was positive as they were curious and thought it was informative.

Flood's (2009) review is limited in terms of currency and other more recent studies showed teens attitudes to pornography are changing and becoming more liberal. Adolescents can take the view that they have the right to view pornography as long as it is legal and viewing is done in a consensual way. Participants in Doornwaard et al's (2017) study held to this right but at the same time believed that sex in pornography was fake, unrealistic and misogynistic and they warned that it was inappropriate for younger audiences.

This concern was backed up by Van Damme and Biltereyst (2013) whose interviewees felt that younger children needed to be protected from such images and the NZ Youth and Porn report (2018), which found that teens were worried about children younger than them having access to porn. McRae's (2011) review reported similar ideas. Some studies found that there were gender differences in young people's views about exposure to pornography. For example, one study of young people from London, UK, found that 76% of girls were in agreement that 11-14-year olds viewing pornography was wrong and would have negative consequences whilst the boys had mixed responses (Baker, 2016). Older teens had confidence in their own abilities to be immune from upsetting sexual content but they felt that younger children would be more vulnerable to media influences.

The New Zealand youth reported that porn was very much a part of their world (Office of Film Literature and Classification, 2018). The young people in many of the studies in McRae's (2011) review



agreed and thought that pornography was a normal part of life in current times and it wasn't something that particularly bothered them. The author suggests that young people are beginning to become desensitised to sexual media content. A comment in a newspaper article by Dr Deborah Toman, the head of the Sexualization Task Force of The American Psychological Association, reflects this view when she remarks that "pop culture is becoming porn culture. What was soft porn is now prime time television and magazine ads" (Fredericton, 2012).

These findings have implications for the direction of media in the future as it may mean that the tolerance for viewing sexual images, including nude images, is changing as societal norms and expectations change. The following section looks at the theme of the agency of young people and the decisions they might make for themselves should they be exposed to nudity and sexual images in media.

### Young people make their own decisions about how to engage with media around nudity and sexual content

There are both contextual and cultural factors that influence young people's responses to nudity and sexual content in the media. Attitudes and beliefs change over time and the socially accepted norms that existed ten years ago are not the same as those that are understood by young people today (Eleuteri et al., 2017). Further, understandings about what is appropriate in terms of sexual content in the varying forms of media mean different things to those within different cultural contexts. Several studies looked at the understandings that children and young people themselves had about viewing sexual media content.

There was evidence that many adolescents are thoughtful and discerning in their media choices and are able to determine for themselves what is appropriate and realistic content and what is not (McRae, 2011). McRae refers to this as a Third-Party Effect in which adolescents feel they are immune to the impacts of any sexual content and encompasses the belief that they are able to decide for themselves what is accurate or not. Holding to this belief was not always helpful for all young people as McRae (2011) found that some teens would look to trivialise some of the messages that sexual media content gave, such as the pressure on young women to have sex and messages that there were no negative consequences of sexual intercourse. While they were able to analyse that media often gave the wrong messages, some adolescents would minimise the seriousness of them (McRae, 2011).

The 21 young people interviewed for Bale's (2011) qualitative research reported a sound understanding of ways to access pornography and that they would access it if they wanted to. The participants felt they had a right to watch porn and some admitted that they actively sought out and circulated videos for its shock, horror and unacceptable nature. They felt they had the freedom to learn and explore and said that they realised that what was portrayed on the media was different to real life. They understood that the anxiety and inexperience about sex that was part of their real lives wasn't portrayed in media accounts of sexual activity and were able to separate what they saw on television or online from reality. The author acknowledges the varying and complex ways in which young people engage with media and suggests that young people have agency to make decisions around where they search for their sexual information.

Other authors agree with Bale (2011); (Doornwaard et al., 2017; McRae, 2011; Smith, 2013). One of the findings from Flood's (2009) review was that young people are active and have agency around the decisions that they make in their media consumption. The young adults in Smith's (2013) retrospective study reported that they were critical about what they watched and chose content that matched their interests and that they perceived to be more realistic. The various media forms were seen as being safe for exploring and learning about sexuality. It was noted that those participants with the



appropriate skills and resources to critically view sexually explicit material were most likely to assess it positively.

A key theme from McRae's (2011) systematic analysis found that adolescents were able to be critical and selective about the sexual health information they received from media sources. However, there was a recurring theme around the concern that many adolescents had about younger children's ability to critically analyse inappropriate sexual content on television or online media (McRae, 2011; Van Damme & Biltreyst, 2013). Younger children needed to be protected from distressing images. Yet such concerns may not always be warranted. A qualitative New Zealand research study for the BSA points to younger children being relatively unaffected by sexual content or nudity (Broadcasting Standards Authority, 2010). Of the participants in the study children aged 6-8 years were less worried about the inappropriateness of nudity or sexual content than children aged 9-11 years or 12-13 years, a group in which 50% believed that the content was unsuitable. Similar results were reported by Flood (2009). Younger children who looked at sexual media content were said to be less ashamed or offended.

As was noted in the section in this review around nudity within an educational context, adolescents do actively seek out sexual education content in media as part of normative considerations about sex. For example, a study of American youth showed that 51% of participants actively sought out sexual content, with common sources being movies and TV (Bleakley, Hennessy, & Fishbein, 2011). Adolescents frequently explore the Internet looking for sexual material, and regularly communicate about topics of a sexual nature (Eleuteri et al., 2017). With the advent of newer media, adolescents are no longer a passive media audience but an audience which energetically engages with the new media technologies and in turn these new media experiences provide opportunities for identity exploration and sexual exploration. Brown & Boboswki (2011) make the salient point that this rapidly changing media environment means that the research has struggled to keep pace with the ways in which young people interact with and use media and the media's effects on adolescents' health and well-being. In line with this, it is worth pointing out that findings from the research from the decade which this review refers to is already being overridden by new media developments.

As O'Dwyer-Strang (2017) points out in her thesis around sexuality education and New Zealand adolescents, both adolescence and sexuality are socially constructed. The common discourse for young people is that they "are seen as risky, and at risk – in need of protection from their unruly selves and deviant others" (p. 88). O'Dwyer-Strang disputes this position and goes on to advocate that in order "to support young people, our foremost concern should be to listen to them, respect their agency as subjects, and furthermore as sexual subjects" (p. 88).



### Part Three: Strategies

It is clear from the findings of this literature review that comprehensive studies outlining the clear impacts of child and youth exposure to nudity have not been conducted to date. The literature reviewed in this report at best conveys a patchwork of studies that piece together some of the concerns and possible outcomes of such exposure. The inconclusive and contradictory findings of these studies reflect the complexity of this topic as well as the relative paucity of studies directly targeting this topic. While direct recommendations from this body of literature may be limited, strategies based on general principles to promote healthy child and youth development are useful to apply.

These general principles of development include:

- That development occurs within a biopsychosocial framework and occurs in a variety of domains including spiritual, social, cognitive, emotional, physical and brain development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Durie, 1994; Siegel, 2014).
- That the healthy development of children and young people occurs within contexts of connected family/whānau and communities which promote the active engagement and participation of children and young people (Damon, 2004; Lerner & Lerner, 2013; Lerner, Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas et al., 2005).
- That a holistic approach to reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors can also ensure that those children and young people who are growing up in less than optimal circumstances also have a chance to thrive (Masten, 2014; Masten, 2001; Resnick, 2000; Ungar, 2008).

The stage of development of the young person may be the most important factor. Young people themselves at the age of 15-17 years were found to be more concerned about the impact on those younger than themselves (Office of Film Literature and Classification, 2018). Recent research on brain development using MRI scanning and neuroanatomical findings suggests that there may be an important role for a part of the brain called the amygdala (Scherf, Smyth, & Delgado, 2013). During puberty and possibly triggered by the rise in reproductive hormone levels, the brain undergoes large changes with the activation of the cortex, and the accompanying changes in cognitive function (Squeglia, Jacobus, & Tapert, 2009). These aid young people to separate from parents, become ready for adult responsibility and becoming parents themselves. There is a change from literal, concrete thinking to more abstract thought, their concept of time extends from more than a few months to several years, and they are able to think in a more complex way. These changes may be mediated through the amygdala which grows in size at this time, and affect the way in which young people react to stimuli. They perceive threat more readily, especially earlier in the development of the changes, until the cortical links are more established and the ability to contextualize threat is better developed.

It is difficult to place an age on the brain changes as the start of puberty, and therefore brain development, can vary from between eight to sixteen years old. Parental support is very important in supporting healthy changes in the brain. Abuse of any sort including physical, emotional, verbal or sexual will delay development, as will the early use, and exposure to use, of alcohol and other drugs (Bava & Tapert, 2010). These factors probably account for the variable findings of the studies in this review and make it difficult to recommend chronological aged based strategies.

When stimuli are exciting, they result in a release of dopamine that gives a sense of reward, which has led to seeing risk taking behaviours as more likely to be better understood as reward seeking (Saddoris, Cacciapaglia, Wightman & Carelli, 2015; Schultz, 1998). Over time and multiple exposure dopamine receptors are multiplied which sets up an effect that can lead to more multiplication in



response to that stimulus. This change in the brain seems to happen earlier than other changes. If the stimulus is the sexual excitement induced by multiple and frequent exposures to pornography, some forms of sexually arousing sexy media or nudity or by gambling, video gaming or psychoactive substances then receptor pathways grow and addiction may develop. Thus, exposure earlier in puberty has more effect on addiction than exposure later.

Application of these general principles when it comes to working with children and young people's exposure to nudity, whether it be within a family, educational, artistic or sexual context, will help to minimise harm and potentially maximise the benefits of such exposure. Anything that will help give reward to healthy stimuli or increase cognitive development will be beneficial as outlined below.

So where exposure to nudity might be perceived as a 'risky behaviour' it will not lead to harm if that exposure occurs in an environment where the child or young person feels supported, able to talk about what they have seen or are able to make sense of it in a way that is meaningful to them (Overbeek, van de Bongardt, & Baams, 2018; Papadopoulos, 2010). The outcome is not normally optimal when risky behaviours start at a very early age, become very frequent, prolonged or continually outweigh non-risky activities. At this point these types of behaviours can become a risk factor for poor outcomes (Coyne et al., 2019; Hust et al., 2011). These findings apply to a range of behaviours such as alcohol and other drug use and sexual activity and seem to be indicated in the literature reviewed in this report as also being relevant to exposure to nudity, especially within a sexual context.

In order to reduce over-exposure, and to maintain the balance between risky and non-risky activities in the context of child and youth exposure to nudity, the literature search revealed a range of strategies that parents and educators could consider to support children and young people whose healthy development may be impacted by exposure to nudity and sexual media content. Recommended strategies drawn from the literature are summarised below.

#### *Media literacy*

The strongest theme that emerged around strategies that studies advocated as useful to help lessen any harmful impacts was that of teaching media literacy. Media literacy - teaching the skills to analyse, evaluate and communicate information about different media, was recommended for parents, teachers, counsellors and other professionals and children and young people themselves (Brown & Bobkowski, 2011; Flander et al., 2009; Office of Film Literature and Classification, 2018; Smith, 2013). Media literacy training programmes were advocated for schools (Baker, 2016) and for doctors, school nurses and other staff who worked with children and adolescents (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2010). Strengths of such programmes included supporting participants to critically analyse the unrealistic sexual images and attitudes that are often portrayed in media (Pinkleton, Austin, Cohen, Chen, & Fitzgerald, 2008; Scull, Malik, & Kupersmidt, 2018). With access to media becoming almost unlimited for children and young people today, recommendations to support media literacy so that children and young people could engage with media in positive ways were predominant in the studies reviewed.

#### *Parental support*

Parental attitudes and behaviours are influential in ameliorating the impact that exposure to nudity and sexual related material has on children and young people. For example, it was suggested in several studies that parents and educators could work alongside each other more effectively to look at the issues around impacts of sexy media content for young people, especially around the areas of sexting and pornography (Baker, 2016; Broadcasting Standards Authority, 2015; Nikken & de Graaf, 2013; Papadopoulos, 2010). Various forms of parental mediation and monitoring were suggested as



strategies for parents (Ballantyne, Duncalf, & Daly, 2010; Davis, 2012; Tomić, Burić, & Štulhofer, 2018), for both television viewing and internet access. These included a combination of both technical filters or monitors, and guidelines and restrictions around media use. A further common theme from the studies reviewed was that parents needed to develop better knowledge of children and adolescents' experiences and understandings of media and especially, their digital media world (Allen & Lavender-Stott, 2015; Davis, 2012; Hill, 2015). Studies suggested that parents and young people should view and discuss sex-related content together and discuss what they have seen (Nikken & de Graaf, 2013; Overbeek et al., 2018; Papadopoulos, 2010). Parents were encouraged to emphasise the positive aspects of sexuality, such as the love and respect angle of relationships. When children are given the opportunity to be honest about their concerns, fears and curiosities this helped break the taboo around morality and social appropriateness.

#### *Effective sexuality education in schools*

Effective sexuality education in schools was recommended as a strategy to mitigate some of the risks of children and young people being impacted by exposure to sexual media content (Horvath et al., 2013; Laws, 2013; Litras, Latreille, & Temple-Smith, 2015). Recommendations from *Promoting Wellbeing Through Sexuality Education* (Education Review Office, 2018) include that sexuality education programmes in New Zealand schools have a comprehensive curriculum, that students at all levels are given opportunities to engage with the programmes, that students and whānau are included in programme development, that teachers are given adequate training and that sexuality education addresses the needs of diverse populations. Effective sexuality education might also reduce the need that teens sometimes have to look to sexually explicit images in the media to answer their questions about sex (Family Planning New Zealand, 2019; Horvath et al., 2013). Some writers suggested that television programmes could be useful resources for sexuality education programmes (Neustifter et al., 2015; Papadopoulos, 2010).

Aligned with the view that sexuality education programmes were an effective strategy was the strong recommendation that such programmes should include young people as presenters (Albury & Byron, 2015; Baker, 2016; Ballantyne et al., 2010). Young people preferred peer-led discussions for sex education programmes because they found their peers relatable and honest (Baker, 2016). The literature found that young people were the best placed to provide opinions on a rapidly changing media environment and positive, peer-led discussions around these areas were found to be the most successful (Eleuteri et al., 2017; McRae, 2011; Ministry of Women & Netsafe, 2017).

A final theme around strategies for supporting children and young people who may be at risk from exposure to nudity and sexual content in the media came from writers who advocate for a re-framing of adults' approach to sexy media. Several of the writers researching in this field believe that educators and parents need to think about strategies that come from a less reactive or risk focused approach to sexual content in media (Albury & Byron, 2015; Lewis et al., 2018; O'Dwyer-Strang, 2017). A move towards developing positive strategies that recognise the pervasive nature of media in young people's lives and find opportunities for education is advocated. Albury and Byron (2015) support this approach when they suggest that "educators and policy-makers need to move beyond asking 'what does media do to young people?' towards asking instead 'what do young people do with media?'" (p. 3). Above all a better understanding of the neurodevelopmental science teaching us the way young people are developing their thinking and behaviours will guide this change from a reactive to a more proactive approach that supports development.



## Summary of Key Themes

The review explored some of the different contexts in which nudity occurs in the media. Nudity and the media occurred in a family context with research in this area looking at children and young people's exposure to naked images within a family environment, often as their first exposure (Allen & Lavender-Stott, 2015; Allen et al., 2018). Several studies placed nudity in the media within an educational context (Bale, 2011; Gozansky, 2018; Smith, 2013). Nudity could be depicted in a scientific and medicalised context on television and other media. Naked images and sexual content in media were sources for young people who were searching for information around their sexual health. Nudity can be represented within an artistic context. It was suggested that reframing nudity within this context could challenge normative responses about nudity and nakedness and provide alternative ways of looking at the impact of nudity on popular culture (Bey, 2011). Finally, nudity was encapsulated within a sexual context. There was a plethora of literature that looked at sexual content in the media. Nudity was not always included specifically in definitions of sexual content in the media. A range of expressions for sexual media content included terms such as naked, naked images, sexually explicit, and sexual content. A key theme from the literature was that studies focused mainly on the sexual context of nudity in media content and its impact on children, with more limited attention given to the other contexts of nudity.

The second part of the review explored in depth the findings from the literature around impacts of sexual media content, with a focus on nudity or naked images, on children and young people. Evidence from several studies reviewed found that exposure to sexy media content is associated with early initiation to sex and to risky behaviours (Coyne et al., 2019). These risky behaviours or outcomes for young people included frequent casual sex, a propensity to have several sexual partners, having early and unwanted pregnancies and being more likely to contact sexually transmitted diseases. Exposure to media sexual images and sexual content are seen as normative by adolescents and shape their behaviours leading to implications for a young person's mental and physical health.

An association between the viewing of sexual content in media and the negative sexual attitudes, perceptions and intentions of young people was another theme from the literature (McRae, 2011; Wright, 2011). Watching reality television programmes predicted attitudes such as lower sexual self-efficacy and more negative feelings about sexual motivations. Young people themselves believed that messages from media influenced teens to have more permissive sexual attitudes (Bale, 2011). Further themes found were that there were positive relationships between exposure to sexy media content and young people's perceptions of their peers' sexual experiences (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012) and that more frequent exposure was linked to more permissive sexual attitudes (Baams et al., 2015). There were some differences across cultures with, for example, Nordic countries supporting more open exposure to sexual content in the media while African and Asian countries were more concerned about the impact of such content on young people (Lemish, 2011).

Contrasting views were put forward in some studies. Some writers found that that sexual media content has only limited impact on the attitudes and behaviours of children and young people (Ferguson et al., 2017; Steinberg & Monahan, 2011). Other influences such as peers and parents have greater impact on the sexual development of youth. They argue that there can be positive as well as negative outcomes for young people from being exposed to sexual images in the media. Parental concerns over the impact of naked images and sexual media content on children and young people was a strong theme from the literature and parental attitudes and behaviours around media consumption could influence any impacts.



The theme of accidental exposure to naked images or sexual content in media was explored. Unintentional exposure to disturbing images can have emotional impacts on children eliciting feelings such as shock, disgust, embarrassment. Exposure can have effects that are ongoing (Eleuteri et al., 2017). Studies found that unwanted exposures to images of human nudity is common, often in the form of sexting or pornography and via the internet. Girls and younger children were found to be particularly vulnerable to unwanted exposure to naked images (Flander et al., 2009; Netsafe, 2018a).

The review included a brief exploration of the impacts of sexting and viewing pornography, each of which are encompassed within extensive literature fields which are beyond the scope of this review. Sexting is a growing trend among young people and research found that it was more common for teens to receive nude images than it was for them to send them (Horvath et al., 2013; Netsafe, 2017). Most of the young people were receiving unwanted naked images via sexting. Although more research around sexting and its causal relationships with risky sexual behaviours is needed, there is some evidence that receiving unwanted nude images by sexting can be associated with depression, excessive drinking and suicide ideation and attempts (Shah et al., 2019).

A young person's first exposure to pornography is most likely to be unwanted and to include naked images (Horvath et al., 2013; Office of Film Literature and Classification, 2018). There was evidence from the literature reviewed that exposure to porn can have harmful effects for children and young people, such as increased permissive sexual attitudes and the normalisation of unhealthy sexual behaviours (Horvath et al., 2013). Viewing pornography could increase the likelihood that young people would act in inappropriate ways sexually, such as behaving aggressively towards women. There was some support for the view that not all teens were disturbed by unintentionally seeing pornographic images and that porn could be used in educational ways (Flood, 2009). It was also pointed out that the way young people feel about seeing sexual images, including porn, is changing along with changing societal norms and attitudes, reflecting a greater tolerance for such images from young people than in the past. Most studies, however, agreed that younger children were more vulnerable to pornography.

A final theme from the studies reviewed, in relation to sexual content and the media and impacts on youth, was that many adolescents believed that they could make critical and thoughtful decisions themselves about the images they saw in media. Some writers found that young people did not feel that there was any impact for them from sexy media content as they were able to decide for themselves what was realistic or not (Bale, 2011; McRae, 2011). These findings were based around the theme that children and young people have their own agency to make decisions around where they will find sexual information.

The review suggested several strategies from the literature which could help support children and young people to lessen any harmful impacts. It is recommended that any strategies employed by parents and educators should be premised around the general principles which promote healthy child and youth development. In particular, an understanding of the neurodevelopmental changes that all children and adolescents experience will help to support positive outcomes. Although it would be helpful to have an age for recommendations, the range of the age during which brain changes occur is very variable. If set too young many people will be exposed to unwanted images when their brains are not able to contextualise well. If set too high recommendations seem condescending and more readily ignored. From a neurodevelopmental perspective teaching parents, professionals and young people about media literacy was the strategy most commonly promoted in the literature. Other recommendations were around positive parental mediation and monitoring and for parents to develop better understandings of their children's experiences with newer media and for more



effective education in schools around the impacts of exposure to sexual media. Peer-led discussions were suggested as being the most helpful. Some studies found that a less risk-focused approach to sexual content in media could be helpful together with an understanding that media, and exposure to sexual content including naked images, was an inescapable part of young people's lives.



## Conclusion

The aim of this review was to explore findings from the extant literature about the impacts of exposure to nudity on television on the development of children and young people. Studies that referred specifically to nudity on television and its impact were limited. Most studies referred to nudity within the context of sexual media content. Studies more frequently explored sexual content within other forms of media, including online media. The literature was divided over conclusions that there was a causal relationship between watching sexy media and risky sexual behaviours for children and young people. However, there is enough in the empirical literature to conclude that exposure to naked images or other sexy media content does have some impact on some attitudes and behaviours of some children and young people and that strategies to support children whose development may have been adversely influenced should be considered. Implications from this review can be drawn for children and young people in Aotearoa New Zealand but further research which focuses on influences that are related particularly to a New Zealand context, and which includes different cultural understandings, is needed.

For example, the review found that most young people understand and accept the pervasive place of media in their lives so further work on the understandings of New Zealand children and young people themselves around the impacts of exposure to nudity and sexy media content would be valuable. Exploring the ideas that young people might have for positive strategies that could be used to help mitigate any harmful impacts from unintentional exposure to nudity and sexual content (such as through sexting or accidental viewing of pornography), or ways to support younger children who are exposed to nudity on screen, was missing in the literature and could all be future avenues for research. There is a gap in research that looks at the different understandings of Māori, Pasifika and Asian families in New Zealand around exposure to nudity and sexual media content and the impacts on children and young people from these cultures. Empirical studies that explore the effects of programmes which support parents and educators to gain a better understanding of the general principles of healthy child and youth development and, in particular, the neurodevelopmental changes which all adolescents are facing, are recommended.



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