



loathe censorship. But we must block the creeping plague of internet porn causing such harm to our children

ESTHER RANTZEN

Now is the time to act against the creeping plague of pornography on the internet. For the sake of caring parents, and vulnerable children, we must block the images that are destroying so many young people's happiness.

I say that even though, like most people in our democracy, I prize freedom of speech, and loathe censorship.

Nonetheless, I am absolutely convinced that the Daily Mail is right to fight for legislation to protect our children against the filthy tide of pornography on the internet that threatens to engulf them.

As president of the children's helpline ChildLine, I have seen with horror that the number of children calling the charity because they have been deeply alarmed by watching pornography has shot up by 34 per cent in the past year.

We received 641 calls from children who had been exposed to sexually indecent material — more than 50 a month. These children rang because what they had seen was harmful. It's not to be compared with the old innocent days when teenagers furtively bought copies of Health And Efficiency to look at nudists cavorting in the sun.

The stuff our callers see is horrifying, and has stayed in their memories, haunting and frightening them. They are not alone.

Last May, a survey by Sonia Livingstone, director of the EU Kids Online network, showed that it is now frighteningly common for children to be exposed to such material.

She reported that a quarter of nine to 16-year-olds in Britain said they had watched sexual images in the past year, and a quarter of those children admitted that they had been upset by what they saw.

Of the children who had seen these images on the internet, half their parents either didn't know, or believed their children had not seen any.

Pornography is so often heartless, grotesque and violent, no wonder it disturbs and frightens some children.

A boy of ten rang ChildLine to tell us: 'My brother puts sex videos on my computer and shows me them. I have asked him to stop but he keeps doing it.' The child was far too frightened and ashamed to tell his parents.

Another boy rang because he was disturbed by the effect sexually explicit material was having on him. 'My friend at school has porn on his phone and he showed it to me. Since then I have become addicted to it.'

Once again, his parents had no idea what he was watching on a regular basis.

Most parents are very anxious that their children should be protected from this damaging rubbish. Sonia

Livingstone's survey revealed that even if parents do not know what their children are actually watching, they are aware of the potential danger, and are deeply concerned about it.

She reported that a third of parents in her survey said they 'worry a lot' about their child seeing pornography online.

I believe they are right to be so concerned. This is not a trivial problem. The violent heartlessness of porn has seeped into our children's real lives and there seems to have been a disturbing change in some youngsters' behaviour.

That is why automatic web filters must be introduced to make adults 'opt in' if they want to view pornography. This would mean a default block on such explicit material that is only deactivated when users decide to have it switched off when they sign up with an internet service provider.

ChildLine is receiving more calls than ever about violent sexual behaviour, boys forcing girls to do things they really do not want, or like, but are not physically — or emotionally — strong enough to resist.

The surge in calls from young people exposed to these distressing videos comes in tandem with a rise in calls from young people, mainly girls, in sexually abusive relationships. In the past few months, we received more than 800 such calls.

I do not believe this is a coincidence. Over the past year we have also helped hundreds of frightened and distressed teenagers, horrified by having been trapped by the new phenomenon known as 'sexting'.

Girls tell us they are being pressured into copying what happens in pornographic videos or into 'sexting' explicit photos of themselves to boys.

One call that I found particularly distressing was from a 13-year-old who rang to say she was so deeply ashamed and hated herself so much that she had started to self-harm.

'This boy, he was older than me, and he said I was beautiful,' she said. 'I'm disabled, so nobody normally says this kind of thing to me. Then he asked me to take my clothes off and send him pictures, and I did. I hate myself for it.

'Now I'm frightened, because he says he'll send the pictures to his friends unless I agreed to do more things, worse things.'

She didn't dare confide in her parents and was so distressed, she had started to cut herself.

Because hardcore adult videos are now just a few clicks away for many teenagers, their understanding of what is normal is becoming so warped that they are mimicking behaviour which is aggressive, harmful and dangerous.

Often they have picked up ideas about sex from these videos before their parents or teachers have had a chance to talk to them about what a healthy, loving and respectful relationship really means.

Some girls are scared to speak out or think that they have to do what is demanded of them to keep a boyfriend. Risky sexual behaviour is becoming the norm.

Most of the callers are well below the legal age to view these videos, and many are below the legal age of consent — some are not even teenagers yet. This is not a problem that will go away: it is increasing, and will only get worse unless action is taken.

We all have a part to play in trying to solve it. Parents need to talk to their teenagers about this issue just as they would about 'stranger-danger' or alcohol. We know as responsible parents we must explain to our teenagers why they should not experiment with drugs, or stay out late without telling us where they

are. Now we should also be telling them how, and why, to steer clear of sexting and watching damaging videos.

But teenagers are naturally rebellious, it's part of the process of discovering our own identity. So how do parents broach this subject, without increasing the danger that young people will be drawn to them, and worse, drawn to copying them?

It helps if they have a loving example to imitate, so that they understand that sex is at its best when it occurs as part of a committed relationship.

And that it should not be violent, or tainted by shame or regret.

Young people need to know that sexting and being abused are not a normal part of growing up and that they have the right to say no.

We need to encourage them to seek respectful relationships and teach them that these videos represent the reverse: a disrespectful, distorted view of sexuality.

And we need them to know they can seek help. Nothing is too shameful to tell ChildLine about, and if they pluck up their courage to contact us, our counsellors can help and support them.

But parents need help to protect their children. That is why the Mail's campaign is crucial, because industry and Parliament must also play their part. They must take action, by bringing in new laws and guidelines, so that it is possible to shield our children effectively and block these damaging videos from young eyes.

The Government is on the cusp of having to take a brave decision on how to protect young people from online pornography. It's not an easy step to take. There are those who protest, who believe that it is our right to watch whatever we want on the internet, and, of course, adults can opt-in if that is their choice.

But I believe it's now time to protect young people from this new danger. Filters and blocks aren't the only solution, but an opt-in system is a real protection, a positive step forward, for the sake of caring, concerned parents, but, above all, for the sake of our children.

Esther Rantzen is President of ChildLine