ANDREW still recalls the first time he found a stash of porn magazines under his father's bed as an eight-year-old. The sight of naked women laid out on the glossy magazine pages enthralled him and sparked what would become a preoccupation and obsession that spanned almost 40 years.

Recently, the articulate 48-year-old has begun to confront the deep and damaging impact pornography has had on his life, admitting his secret sexual indulgence ended up robbing him of both his masculinity and his sex life.

"I have spent the better part of my life hiding this guilty secret and carrying the burden of embarrassment, self-loathing and shame. It stymied my understanding of women," he tells Agenda. "I lived a lie a lot of the time. I couldn't meet or relate to a woman without wondering what she would look like naked or bent over or whatever." Throughout his adult life Andrew has gone out of his way to avoid intimacy or sexual encounters for fear he would not be able to perform like the men in the porn films he watched. Consequently, none of his relationships have lasted beyond two years. He says porn crippled his chance of a having and maintaining a healthy, loving relationship.

Now Andrew is among a growing number of people who believe the taboo around pornography must end and its consequences must be discussed to protect and prepare generation of children who have ready, free and anonymous access to hundreds of millions of porn sites online displaying any and every sexual predilection imaginable.

For pornography today bears little resemblance to the glossy centrefolds of Playboy and Hustler that teenagers 15 or 20 years ago stashed under their mattresses. It might not be a product of the high-speed internet age, but it has certainly been transformed by it.
A 13 or 14-year-old boy who types "porn" into Google might be expecting to find naked women, some breasts, or couples engaging fairly vanilla sex acts. They are probably not expecting to see young women being held by the back of the head and forced to suck on a man's penis until they gag or vomit. They are probably not expecting to see hardcore anal pounding, or 18 and 19-year-old girls being "gangbanged" while being referred to as "sluts" and "bitches" by older men.

But unless parents have installed filters and software to block explicit adult sites, there is a good chance this is exactly the sort of content young impressionable teenagers are likely to stumble across and at an increasingly young age. On average in Australia, kids are 11 when they are first exposed to online porn.

There are now more than 430 million porn-related search items online. The most popular sites are similar in format to YouTube but, instead of PG-related content, they stream hundreds of thousands of short, amateurish, hardcore porn clips, filed under dozens of categories like facials, anal, lesbians and gangbangs. Users can even upload their own homemade clips. No pretence of a plot line is required. It is a style that has come to be known as gonzo porn.

One of the most popular sites, RedTube, puts it this way: "We know your need for porn, and RedTube is the shrine for your sexual salvation. No matter what strokes you are searching for, RedTube will satisfy the carnal sex instincts of your reptilian brain." These tube-style websites also feature advertisements promoting other, more hardcore porn sites, with names like "18 and abused". Gonzo clips frequently use descriptors such as "cute young girl ruined" or "destroyed" because the violation, humiliation and degradation of women is implicit in the language of much modern porn.

Gail Dines, professor of sociology and women's studies at Wheelock College in Boston and author of the book Pornland: How porn has hijacked our sexuality, doesn't mince her words, she believes porn has become a public health emergency.

"Porn is the public health crisis of the digital age," she says from the US. "This is taking control of our society and the longer we bury our heads in the sand, we risk letting pornographers lay waste to an entire generation of boys and when you lay waste to an entire generation of boys you also lay waste to an entire generation of girls." Dines says most parents don't understand the massive shift that has taken place in pornography and that the material you could once only get if you went to the very back of the pornographic bookstore has now become mainstream, while, conversely, you have to trawl the net for a good 15 minutes in order to find anything that could be classified as softcore.

"The 13-year-old boy who is aroused and puts porn into Google is not prepared for being catapulted into a world of sexual cruelty and violence," she says.

"The word 'no' barely exists in porn, anything that is horrible and debasing the woman looks like she loves - she is consenting to the most humiliating and painful of sexual experiences."
Teenagers have been thrown into this and they're drowning."

There is no doubt much of today's porn is demeaning and often violent towards women. Research from the US shows 88 per cent of some of the most popular porn scenes contain physical violence, mostly spanking and gagging, while 49 per cent contain verbal aggression, with woman almost always the targets.

For the teens accessing this material online and for their girlfriends and boyfriends, the consequences are significant. Experts are seriously concerned that a generation of teens are developing highly distorted ideas about their own sexuality and what sex should be like.

Di Macleod, the director of the Gold Coast Centre Against Sexual Violence, says online porn has been a game changer, with teenagers and young women frequently coming in to her centre for treatment for sexual assaults they have experienced at the hands of their partners, some of whom are mimicking what they see in porn films.

"This is the 21st year of this service. I'm in a position to be able to look back over the last 21 years, and I can say that what's happening in 2014 and 2015 is radically different to 1999," Macleod says. "We see presentations of anal rape almost every day. Young women say 'that's what he expected, that's what he says everyone does, I didn't want to do it but he did it anyway.'" Macleod, who sees teens as young as 15 coming in with serious sexual injuries such as vaginal and anal tearing, says the problem is exacerbated because most teenage boys are accessing porn long before they are naked for the first time with a girl.

"We really need to be conscious about young minds with no relationship experience accessing really violent and derogating material and then thinking that equals a relationship. It's clearly starting to influence people's thinking and behaviour - the increase of choking and strangulation behaviours, you can only look at the parallels being acted out."

Hugh Martin, a therapist and founder of Man Enough, which runs counselling sessions for men who find pornography is having a detrimental impact on their relationship, describes porn like any other addiction.

He says the gulf between the hardcore porn people seek out online and their own sexual experiences is widening, which can lead to men (and less frequently women) gaining less pleasure from their own sex lives and searching for more extreme material online.

"When you think of the addiction cycle in relation to porn, you need more and more stimulation and you need it to be more and more exciting to get a response, so you have this increased severity of content providing that," he says.

"(Porn) is anything that excites men, and that's a dangerous curve, for even on mainstream websites you can have a humiliation category and a crying category - it's all about punishment, domination and vengeance and there is nothing sexual about it." Sex addiction therapist Heide McConkey also says people who repeatedly watch a lot of explicit porn can
be at risk of no longer being able to derive pleasure from normal sex, that their brains become desensitised and what would ordinarily be arousing no longer has that effect.

What is raising alarms bells is that this is occurring in increasingly young men. One anti-pornography website called Fight the New Drug contains a disturbing confession from a young man who suffered from erectile dysfunction at age 21. He had become addicted to online porn at 12.

"I was 19 years old and I couldn't understand why I couldn't get aroused. I thought something was really wrong with me," he writes on the website. "I went on to have this problem with every girl I had sexual interaction with from that point on." Some men are also turning to sex workers to act out the porn-driven fantasies their partners won't agree to. While there has always been a strong market for prostitution, former sex worker Genevieve Gilbert, now the director of the Pink Cross Foundation in Australia which helps women and men get out of the sex industry, says the proliferation of hardcore online pornography has made unusual sexual requests more common and sex work even more risky for women.

"I have experienced men in prostitution asking for extreme stuff they had seen in porn movies," she said. "The way they touch you, talk to you, what they ask from you in terms of sexual acts is a reflection of what they see in the porn on the internet." Porn is also taking its toll on those closest to it - the women who "star" in the films and clips that get hundreds of thousands of viewings. "I shot scenes where I had to pretend to be dead and let someone rape my dead body. I came home bruised and sometimes a little bloody from the rough scenes," porn actress Emily Eve says.

But just as some women are turning their backs on aggressive and demeaning gonzo porn, a recent Netflix documentary about the amateur porn industry called Hot Girls Wanted, which debuted at this year's Sundance Film Festival, exposed just how successful the industry is in luring thousands of young girls each year, many looking to swap small-town life for fame and seeing porn as a mere pit stop along the way.

It is a trend also occurring much closer to home, with "Hot Girls Wanted" ads popping up on Craigslist Australia. A current ad seeking "talent" on the Gold Coast, tells "cute, uninhibited" girls over 18 that they can earn between $125 and $500 for adult modelling.

Overall, the advent of online pornography has been financially dire for the porn industry and the adult entertainment production houses of yesteryear. But one of the most successful players to emerge in this era of high-speed internet pornography is a company called MindGeek, which describes itself as a industry-leading content delivery business.

Although it is not obvious from the company's website, MindGeek operates some of the largest pornography websites including YouPorn, PornHub and RedTube, as well as non-porn-related web business. Together its sites get 100 million visitors each day.

The users of some of MindGeek's porn sites are not asked to verify their age. But the
company says it takes the protection of children online seriously and believes parents must play a critical role in preventing kids from accessing porn.

"All our websites are recognised and blocked by filters, preventing children from accessing inappropriate content. As adults, we should all do our part to help our youth navigate the web," a company spokeswoman says.

The Conservative government in Britain does not think this goes far enough. It has promised to enforce age verification by blocking websites, including international porn sites, which do not ask users to prove they are old enough to access explicit material.

And Australia's Children's Commissioner Megan Mitchell says it is now time to think about what more can be done here to protect children, including whether filters blocking explicit porn should be rolled out at a network level.

"Children's ready access and exposure to violent and pornographic imagery through online platforms poses real risks to distorting their attitudes to sex and relationships," Mitchell says.

"As Children's Commissioner, I strongly support a review of how well the current set of regulatory and other measures are working to reduce the negative impact of pornography on children." While there is no easy answer to how best to protect children online, what is also increasingly apparent is that a new form of sex education - one that canvasses healthy sexual desires, respect, consent, male and female pleasure and how to interpret pornography - must start to fill the knowledge void, so porn does not become the de facto sex educator of multiple generations of young people.lauren.wilson@news.com.au