

It's time we talked: Pornography, young people and sexuality today

Parents: A new normal is here

Pornography is available like never before – access is easy, anonymous and free.

For young people today, technology is part of life. With laptops, smartphones, tablets, music and gaming devices, they can be online anywhere, anytime.

Technology opens up a whole range of exciting, creative possibilities for learning, connecting and creating – but it also means that pornography is more pervasive than ever before.

Example: Thirty per cent of all Internet traffic is porn-related.

Porn. It's everywhere. For many young people, it's harder to escape it than to watch it.

With the click of a button, young people can now access a vast array of free pornographic images via the internet.

Young people are being exposed to porn accidentally, as well as actively seeking it out. It's not so much a question of *if* they will see it, as *when*.

Porn's influence can be seen throughout popular culture – in music, films, television, fashion and advertising.

Example: More than 90 per cent of boys aged 13 to 16 have seen online porn – and that was before smartphones.

The nature of contemporary porn has changed – and it's very different from the centrefold of old.

With the evolution of technology and the growth of the porn industry, porn producers look for an angle that will sell – and what sells is much rougher and harder than ever before.

Acts of aggression – including gagging, choking and slapping – are commonplace in contemporary porn.

Women's degradation and humiliation are also common themes.

Example: Eighty-eight per cent of porn scenes contain physical aggression. Ninety-four per cent of the aggression is directed at women.

The genie is out of the bottle, with pornography now the most significant sex educator for many young people.

A 'new normal' in pornography is here, and it's providing a disturbing model of sexuality for young people today.

In particular, the pornography industry is implying that porn's signature sex acts – ejaculation on faces and bodies, 'deep-throating' fellatio and anal sex – are 'normal'.

Example: Many young women report that their partners are initiating the signature sex acts from pornography.

As parents, families, schools and communities, we must start talking about porn with our young people.

Yes, this is territory that is tough to talk about.

But it's time we put aside our discomfort and discussed the issue as a matter of urgency, as pornography is impacting on the lives of many young people today.

Example: Some young men are genuinely surprised when their partner does not want or enjoy what they attempt to mimic from porn.

We can't let young people's sexuality be shaped by the pornography industry. We can do better than that.

Online porn is shaping many young people's sexual understandings and experiences – but what they are learning won't equip them for a sexuality that is respectful, mutual, consenting and safe.

We need to help young people navigate this new landscape – and equip them with the skills they will need.

Schools and parents can tackle these new challenges best by working together – for our children's wellbeing.

Example: Sexuality education has evolved – and it must now also address the powerful messages that pornography conveys.

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Parents: How you can make a difference

Understand that pornography is today a parenting issue.

Pornography is everywhere. It's now almost impossible for young people to avoid it. Porn has become the most significant sex educator for many young people.

But at the same time as it has become mainstream, pornography has become more aggressive – with the acts of aggression overwhelmingly directed towards women.

As a result, young people are learning very problematic messages about sex, and about men and women.

This new reality means it's time we talked with our kids about sex and pornography as a matter of urgency.

Acknowledge that while you may not be able to control porn, we can control how we choose to respond to it.

We can *limit* young people's exposure and access to pornography.

We can equip and encourage young people to *critique* what they see.

We can help young people develop the *skills* required to resist pornography's influence.

We can *inspire* young people that relationships and sex can be better than what they see in porn.

Set appropriate limits on technology use.

Technology enables us to connect, learn and create all sorts of amazing things – but it also brings risks.

Young people's exposure to pornography commonly occurs through technology – on laptops, desktops, mobile phones, tablets, or even music or gaming devices.

Put age-appropriate limits on your child's internet and technology access – including when, where and for how long they can use it.

Filters can be helpful but they're not foolproof. Time-limited access in supervised spaces is safest.

Encourage critical thinking.

We need to coach our kids to analyse the imagery they see, such as advertising and TV programs. Encourage your kids to ask: Who made this image? Why did they make it? What did they want it to communicate? How might it be different if it was told from another point of view?

Young people need to understand that porn is not reality. Porn misrepresents what bodies are like, what people enjoy, what is safe and how people – particularly women – want to be treated.

Support kids to learn the skills they need to respond to pornography's influence.

Young people need skills to respond to peer pressure to watch porn, or when a partner initiates porn-inspired sex.

Support your child to develop self-confidence and assertive communication skills. Encourage your child to seek support from you or another trusted adult if they ever feel pressured or unsafe.

Help young people to understand that relationships and sex can be so much better than what they see in porn.

Talk with your child about how important it is that sex is consenting, safe, respectful and mutually pleasurable.

The significance of modelling respectful gender relations in your family and community can't be overstated.

Support your school to talk with your teenager about porn.

Young people deserve better than what porn serves up to them. If we're serious about equipping young people for a healthy, respectful, consenting sexuality, schools and parents will need to work together.

Support your school to deliver sexuality education for the twenty-first century, where students learn to critique porn's influence and aspire to something better.

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Parents: What do young people need to know about porn?

Gay and lesbian porn is also limiting.

Some people assume that gay and lesbian porn is liberating and free from the problems – such as sexism and aggression – so common in heterosexual porn.

But gay and lesbian porn communicates many of the same messages – about bodies, sexual health, pleasure, performance and consent – as heterosexual porn.

Often it also communicates the same messages about gender, power and aggression – where a more masculine performer acts aggressively towards a more feminine performer, representing the men and women, respectively, in straight porn.

The most common porn showing women having sex with women is material made for male heterosexual consumers. This porn often misleadingly suggests that women have sex with women for men's pleasure but they would prefer to have sex with men.

Consent is crucial to good sex.

If you watch porn, you might get the impression that everyone wants to have sex all the time. But they don't.

Working out if you and your partner both want to have sex can be difficult – but it is really important. Having sex without the other person's free agreement is never okay.

Learn to communicate well and check in with your partner with questions such as 'Would you like to...?' 'Are you sure?'

Sex is not a performance.

In porn, people perform sex for the viewer. They pout, talk and moan at the camera in positions designed to *look* good (rather than *feel* good!).

In real life, sex is not for a spectator – and it shouldn't be something you just do for your partner. For most people, sex is about the whole experience, not just how it looks.

Porn can shape sexual tastes.

Just as we can acquire a taste for a particular food or drink – even one that we initially find unpleasant – we also can develop sexual tastes.

When someone uses porn – particularly when they use it regularly for sexual stimulation – they learn to associate what they see with arousal and pleasure.

But much of what is shown in porn does not reflect what many people actually enjoy. Often it is unsafe, aggressive and degrading.

Porn is not a good place to have your sexual tastes shaped.

Sex can have meaning.

Porn communicates that sex doesn't require relationship or affection – it's just something people do with anyone.

But for most people, sex is something they do only with someone they care about or love. Sex can be a way of feeling close to someone, expressing love and enjoying each other.

Sex can be so much better than what you see in porn.

Sex can be fantastic, but it can also be awful – and everything in between.

If you want to be a good lover, don't learn about sex from porn – or have your sexual tastes shaped by porn. You can do so much better than learn from porn.

The keys to good sex are communication, consent and respect.

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Parents: How can you start 'the porn talk'?

Pornography is now a parenting issue we can't afford to ignore.

Easily accessible and widely accepted, pornography is now the most prominent sexuality educator for many young people.

Young people's sexual understandings, expectations and practices are being shaped by what they – or their partners or peers – see online.

But porn is a very problematic sexuality educator.

Be prepared. Create a private, unpressured opportunity to talk.

It is understandable that both parent and child may prefer to avoid the porn talk. You may feel equally uncomfortable and awkward. But there are ways to make the porn talk easier for everyone.

Think through what you want to ask and say, and how you can create a good opportunity to talk privately and without pressure or interruption.

If you think getting your child alone or keeping them in the conversation will be difficult, consider starting the porn talk on a car trip together.

Link the porn talk to your child's access to technology.

Your child is most likely to be exposed to pornography through their use of information and communication technologies – such as mobile phones, computers, tablets, and music and gaming devices.

Parents are the 'gate-keepers' for their child's access to technology. A child's request to access or purchase technology provides a perfect opportunity to discuss the associated risks and benefits, your values and expectations regarding their use of the technology.

Pornography, sexting, privacy and cybersafety can all be part of this broader technology conversation.

Consider creating a written agreement describing how technology will – and will not – be used.

Use a film, television program, advertisement, article or website as a springboard.

Using something you or your child have seen or read can be a great way to open up the conversation.

When an advertisement uses sexualised imagery to sell an unrelated product, or a film portrays gendered stereotypes, ask your child what they think about it as a step into a discussion of media influence.

Use a newspaper article about the influence of porn or a website such as www.itsimewetalked.com to get started.

Use a story, personal experience or incident.

Often our own lives provide plenty of conversation starters for the porn talk. If you stumble across porn when searching for something else, or someone you know tells you their child did, use the opportunity to ask your child about their own experiences and lead in to the porn talk.

If you discover that your child has been exposed to or searched out porn, stay calm and plan a porn talk.

Write your child a letter.

If having the porn talk in person feels just too hard, consider writing your child a letter. A letter allows you to carefully select exactly what you want to say, and gives your child time to absorb it.

For inspiration, see this letter written by a mother for her son: www.mamamia.com.au/parenting/talking-to-kids-about-porn/

Do the porn talk in chapters.

If your first go at the porn talk wasn't all you had hoped for, don't worry. There is always tomorrow. And next week. And next year.

This is a conversation best revisited at various ages and stages, so take a deep breath, relax and give it your best.

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Parents: Has your child accessed porn? How can you respond?

Pornography is now incredibly accessible. It's not so much a question of if your child will see it, as when they will.

If you discover that your child has accessed porn, you may feel a whole range of things – from fear to anger to amusement or wishing you didn't know!

You can't stop what's happened already, but you can help your child understand that what they've seen is not reality and support them to develop healthy, respectful expectations of sexuality.

Don't panic. Stay calm.

Young people learn a lot more from a parent's response than just what we say. Try to stay calm and talk reasonably with your child.

If the situation requires an immediate response, calmly intervene. If you're ready to talk, great! If you need some time to prepare before you talk about it further, tell your child you will talk about it with them more later.

Don't make assumptions.

Don't make assumptions about what's going on. It may be the first time your child has seen porn, or they may have already seen a whole range of sexual imagery. They may have gone looking for it, or they may not have wanted to see it at all. Sometimes exposure can occur accidentally, or by someone else introducing them to it.

While boys are much more likely to use porn, and to use it more often, girls may also seek it out.

Whether your child wanted to see it or not, they may feel uncomfortable, worried or even distressed by the experience. Or they may have felt fascinated, excited or aroused. Or all of these things at once – which can be very confusing!

Remember that curiosity is normal and healthy, and sex is good.

The problem with porn is not so much that it is sexual, it's the fact that it conveys misleading messages about what it means to be a man or a woman, about bodies, sexual health, power, aggression, humiliation, performance, and more.

Don't confuse sex with pornography – or pornography with sex. Be positive about bodies and sexuality.

Keep the communication lines open.

Through your words and actions, let your teenager know that you care about them, you are approachable and you're happy to talk about anything.

Ask questions and listen. Invite your child to talk about their feelings and thoughts. For example, ask 'How did you feel when you saw those images?' and 'What did you think of what you saw?'

Encourage your child to talk to you about anything they feel uncomfortable about. Reassure them that you won't stop them accessing technology if they report seeing something inappropriate or disturbing.

Use the teachable moment.

Learning that your child has seen porn may raise a range of concerns for you, but it provides a great opportunity to open up important conversations about things such as bodies, sex, respect, peer-pressure, cybersafety, consent, pleasure, exploitation and values.

Ask your teenager questions such as 'What do you think porn says about women?' 'What does it say about men?' 'Why do you think people like it?'

Talk about values of respect, equality and consent, and how porn often does not portray respectful, safe sex that is likely to feel good for everyone involved.

Use the tip sheet 'What do young people need to know about porn?' to explore with your child how porn misrepresents reality.