

Porn: Young people and the accessibility and influence of pornography

Background Note

Overview

In the past, young people have typically come across or looked for sexually explicit material in the form of photographs, books and magazines. However, with phones and other devices making the internet so readily accessible, sexually explicit material is now even more available, easily accessible, cheap, and quick. Many young people are exposed to a culture saturated with sexualised images that are not easily controlled by parents or schools and can readily view pornography without age-related barriers.

Pornography is generally described as being any sexually explicit materials intended to create arousal in the consumer.

Accessing and viewing sexually explicit material is now common among young people, especially boys.¹ The types of pornography available on the internet ranges from mild to grossly offensive and illegal, and comes in the form of sexual pictures, writing, photos, videos, or chatroom talk.

One study found 28% of Australian 11-16-year olds have seen sexual images online. Of these, 24% say they have seen online sexual images including nudity, 17% have seen someone's genitals online, 16% (more teenagers than young children) have seen images of someone having sex, and 6% say they have seen violent sexual images.²

Exposure to pornography is not always voluntary, with ads promoting porn sites often arising as 'pop-ups'; and many girls report experiencing the incidence of involuntary exposure. Males appear to be more likely to use pornography, to view it alone and to become sexually aroused by its content.³

Some studies have suggested that viewing pornography can assist same-sex attracted, questioning young people to develop a positive sense of identity and sexual confidence.⁴

However, pornography is considered to be an extremely poor and generally inappropriate method of sexuality education for young people, especially men. Some research has suggested that viewing pornography may be linked with young men having 'aggressive' views towards girls.⁴

The impact of pornography on young people

Research on the impact of pornography on young people is rapidly growing; some recent studies have suggested the following:

- Pornography can influence how children and adolescents view sexuality, and can impact on the language they use to describe certain sexual behaviours or body parts.
- Pornography may impact on young people's adoption of certain sexual behaviours. Consistently evidence suggests that adolescent's use of pornography is associated with stronger permissive sexual attitudes, such as premarital and casual sex. It is possible that



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viewing non-mainstream sexual practices can give legitimacy to them, although it is not clear that permissive sexual attitudes are inherently problematic or harmful.

- Young peoples' attitudes, behaviours, and expectations about sex are influenced by what they see in pornography. For example, what boys expect their partners to do and vice versa, and what people 'should' find pleasurable. The gaps between these expectations and reality have been found to produce sexual uncertainty and are related to sexual dissatisfaction.
- Adolescent's pornography use is associated with stronger beliefs in gender stereotypes, an association found stronger in boys.
- Pornography use in adolescents can be linked to stronger attitudes supportive of sexual violence and violence against women. Evidence suggests an association between young males' porn consumption and perpetrating sexual harassment.
- It has been suggested that young people may become upset or troubled by viewing pornographic material (particularly younger children aged 9-12 years). Young girls were more likely to find porn distressing or demeaning.^{5, 6}

Consumption of pornographic materials is not inherently harmful for young people, and there are a number of factors that can mediate the potential harms. These include: pre-existing attitudes and understandings of sexual norms, age and cultural context, content (e.g. violent or aggressive pornography), understandings of the reality of porn (if they think it is realistic or 'real sex').

Responding to students raising the issue

It is likely that some young people will talk openly about the presence and perceived normality of being interested in pornography. Their natural curiosity about sexual practices may result in pornography being a means to share their knowledge with peers and can serve to allow young people confirming elements of social gender expectations.⁵

However, the online-heavy culture presents young people with highly sexualised imagery and seems to normalise many sexual behaviours and gender roles that are not realistic for many people.

If a student asks a question or wants to discuss the topic of pornography, the key fact to emphasise is that pornography is almost always fictional, and is not 'real'. It often does not convey an accurate representation of adult sexual behaviours and desires, nor does it depict real people (people in porn are actors, often portraying a 'character') or bodies (bodies in porn can sometimes be surgically or medically enhanced/altered, and the products of good lighting and angles).

In general terms most educational settings are less than ideal for discussion of pornography as a topic and it can be quite uncomfortable for teachers. Conversations about pornography that do arise should avoid criticism of a student's views or thoughts and try to focus on sexual self-representation and sexual practice.³

Another aspect to emphasise is that most porn movies are filmed in the same way as mainstream movies with scripts, actors, directors and filming over the course of hours/days. Hours of footage is edited down by producers.. This means pornographic videos are not accurate depictions of real sex experiences or timelines.

In real life, often relationships and sex can be about equal people who are mutually consensual. In real life, relationships and sex often involve getting to know each other first, communicating, building trust, and sharing physical expressions of kissing and cuddling. Real sex experiences should include exchanges of mutual consent and negotiations of safer sex practices. Fictional pornography doesn't show these real life experiences.

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1. Important factors

In viewing pornography young people need to keep the following factors in mind:

- What is shown in porn is not usually safer sex
- How porn actors look is not how most people look, including the size, shape, colour, and overall appearance of genitalia and other body parts.
- Remember that Porn is a performance, real life sex and relationships are usually very different
- Sex can be meaningful and so much better than what is shown in pornographic material.

It is important that young people think critically about the content they are consuming online. With young people now growing up in a largely-online world, it is important they build the skills to critically analyze the content they are consuming, to acknowledge that reality is not always depicted. This relates to pornography use, as well as other forms of media such as advertisement, movies, television, and social media.

Note, should a teacher become aware of, or worried about, a particular situation related to a student's questions or behaviour, the teacher needs to assess the seriousness of the situation before responding. Consider factors such as the student's age, the context in which the behaviour has occurred, the history of the young person, and whether their behaviour is impacting others. It is worth noting that it is illegal for anyone to show pornography to a person under the age of 18.

If the behaviour or situation does seem serious, follow school policy on protective behaviours and seek advice from school student services about referring the student to a counsellor. Specific concerns may also need to be discussed with the student and his/her parent(s).

Relevant resources

Websites

[It's Time we Talked](#) - Pornography and young people

[The Practical Guide to Love, Sex and Relationships](#), La Trobe University

Includes a Year 7 and 8 activity and video on pornography.

["Is it illegal to watch porn if you are under 18?"](#), GDHR students FAQ

["Is pornography real or fake?"](#), GDHR students FAQ

["Is my penis a normal size?"](#), GDHR students FAQ

[Traffic Lights](#), Sexual behaviours framework that is age and developmentally appropriate, a resource

Research

[Children and Young People's Exposure to Pornography](#), Child Family Community Australia

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[Youth and Pornography in Australia: Evidence on the extent of exposure and likely effects](#), The Australia Institute

1. Flood, Michael. "The Harms of Pornography Exposure Among Children and Young People." *Child Abuse Review*. Vol 18. 2009.

Postscript

This Background Note relates to the following Learning Activities:

- ☐ [Porn: The who, what, where, when, how, why and why not](#)
- ☐ [Is pornography real or fake?](#)
- ☐ [What about the issue of young people looking at pornography on the internet?](#)

Date printed

29 March 2024