

Guide for parents with kids 11-15

The Porn Conversation

A Guide for Parents with children between 11 and 15 years

"I love the idea of pornography. Simply seeing people have sex is not inherently misogynist or horrible to women. Pornography isn't the problem. It's the porn industry that's the problem...you don't ban things for being crass and dispiriting. No. What we need to do is affect a 100% increase in the variety of pornography available to us. It informs the imagination, as well as the mechanics...Feminism doesn't need to start banning pornography. It needs to start making it." - Caitlin Moran

You can watch her interview here: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03pc35q>

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The facts about porn

It depends what stats you look at – some sources say boys are discovering porn at an average age of 14; others place it at as young as 11. Some researchers encountered multiple examples of children stumbling across pornographic imagery or being shown it by older friends when they were as young as 9 or 10. So although it will invariably depend on your children's circumstances (do they and their friends have smartphones? What gender are they?) exactly when they will first encounter porn, we can know for sure that it is before they are of the age of consent, and far before it's legal.

Which is long before many schools are even thinking about sexual education. The younger generations are, through no fault of their own, learning that sex is what they see in pornography – a medium that is, for the most part, violently misogynistic, devoid of intimacy, and completely unrealistic.

We all know that mainstream pornography is violently anti-women. It is also homophobic and racist, with the exoticism of black, asian and all POC defined as a separate category to regular porn, which is between white people. **Gay pornography is the same, and lesbian pornography is most commonly performed by straight women performing acts that have no connection to real sex between women.** Any kind of trans/queer pornography is niche and equally unsympathetic to real people's experiences.

Many teenagers are streaming porn from the numerous, free redtube-style websites, such as YouPorn, Pornhub and the ever-popular RedTube. The sites are easily accessible from many devices, including mobile phones, tablets, and teens' PlayStations. Anyone can view the pornographic content, which is often aggressive or disturbing and inexperienced eyes can misinterpret the sexual situations as realistic.

Fact: Most teenagers are learning about sex by watching porn.

How many teens are exposed to porn? 90% of boys and 60% of girls see porn before their 18th birthday. Most boys are exposed to porn around age 12. And since 71% of teens hide their online activity from their parents they can't ask about the unusual or non-consensual porn they're exposed to online.

42% of Internet users age 10-17 said they viewed porn in the last year. 66% of adolescents who saw porn online said they stumbled upon it by accident, according to a study by the University of New Hampshire. 33% of Internet traffic is porn. Porn is unavoidable. **And the problem now is that we don't know what the long term effects are, because the generation growing up with such free, easy access to it aren't adults yet.**

Why talk to your kids?

Porn can confuse teens about how sex connects with sensuality and relationships. It can be damaging because it separates sex from emotions. Most porn doesn't teach women how to communicate their needs and desires. Furthermore, porn often gives teens unrealistic expectations about how to look and act. It can also teach girls to depend on men for pleasure or to prioritize a partner's pleasure over her own- and how a woman's body appears often seems more important than how it feels.

Pornographic material frequently normalizes degrading or violent behavior towards women. 71% of girls aged 11-21 in the UK think porn gives confusing messages about consent and makes sexually violent behavior seem normal. A teenage boy quoted in the NSPCC 2015 Survey said, *"I'm always watching porn and some of it is quite aggressive. I didn't think it was affecting me at first but I've started to view girls a bit differently recently and it's making me worried."*

Porn is a massive part of a teen's understanding of sex, and yet they're not equipped to think critically about porn. As sure as sex fascinates teenagers, porn is not going away. It's time to face porn. It's time to have The Porn Conversation.

From The Guardian, Aug 2016:

When a therapist friend told Allison Harvey that her then 13-year-old son was almost certainly viewing online pornography, she felt angry. "I was offended because I thought, why would he be doing that? It's deviant behaviour and he's not deviant."

We want our kids to grow up respecting themselves and each other, avoiding dangerous situations and maintaining an idea that their bodies are their own and that they should never feel pressured to perform like a porn star, or expect their partner to.

Whether you, as a parent or mentor, enjoy or detest porn, your child or teen will definitely be exposed to it. Even if it's uncomfortable to talk about pornography it must be addressed.

Ignoring it only makes matters worse, and adds confusion to a young person's sexual future. No matter where a parent stands, he or she should talk about it and explain how most porn is unrealistic, and not a guide to sex.

Many parents don't discuss mature topics with their sons and daughters. That's why sex education in school is essential - and yet it never covers porn. We need to take this matter into our own hands.

Take Denmark as a case study: In Denmark, (the first country to legalize pornography), sex education is required in every school. Most schools teach an entire week of lessons about sexual health and relationships. Statistically, Denmark has a very low rate of teen pregnancy, abortions, and sexually transmitted infections (much lower than the U.S.A. or the U.K.) By discussing sex and demystifying it, they are reducing the potential consequences of early sexual experiences.

Starting the talk

So now we've convinced you, it's time to bite the bullet and have "The Talk". We know it's horrible. It's not meant to be fun. They will have as much, if not more, of a sinking feeling and sense of embarrassment and shame as soon as you bring this up. But it is really important and what you may find is that when you both get past the initial embarrassment, they will probably have loads of questions. They may even have seen something they found upsetting, or had someone ask them for something – you don't know what's going to come up, but you are the best person for them to ask, so give them the space to do so.

Don't sit them down for "a chat". You don't want them to think they're in trouble! Or that you are going to lecture them.

A suggested opening sentence could be:

"Hey. Y'know, this is a bit embarrassing for me to bring up, but I'm a bit worried about some of the stuff I've stumbled across on the internet recently, and I'm worried you've seen it too. When I go on the most normal sites to shop I keep getting these pornographic pop ups and stuff. Does that happen on your phone? Well..."

What to say

Here are the main pointers that you can try and hit:

- Porn isn't real sex. It's people performing and it's nothing like what sex is actually like.
- Women and men are hairy – they have pubic hair and it's totally normal. You can choose to be shaved or not.
- Racism is abundant in porn – and defining whether you find something appealing or not based purely on the race of the performers is offensive.
- Porn is full of cliches: as fake as some action movies...
- Women should not be expected to perform sex acts in exchange for anything.
- Sex doesn't have to be with someone you love, but it is always better when it is with someone you trust and who treats you with respect.

And these are some things you definitely SHOULD NOT say:

- Who showed it to you? Where did you find it?
- Why are you watching it?
- Porn is bad/evil/manipulative (negativity won't help)

And try and end with some positivity (even if they storm off in an embarrassed huff, but lets hope not...)

- You can always talk to me about anything – I know it's embarrassing but I will understand.
- If you get a weird feeling watching something, that probably means you're not enjoying it. Everyone likes different things and that's okay! It's totally normal for you to not want to watch it.
- It's also normal for you to want to watch sex, and to learn, but there are other more reliable ways, sources: books, certain films sex positive....

Teach don't ban

How much your kids listen to you and do what you say totally depends on you and your kids. What we do know is that a lot of children's first experiences of porn is through being shown something by their friends or by it popping up when they're browsing on their phone or ipad or computer. They also might just be curious about sex, but typing that into google only results in hardcore porn films and not a lot of real education.

It's key when you talk to your kids about sex and porn that you encourage understanding rather than just telling them not to watch it - because if you do that, they'll never talk to you about it.

Make them notice the difference between healthy porn and unhealthy porn.

Healthy porn shows:

- Consenting adults as equals, who care about respect and mutual pleasure.
- A variety of bodies and sexual situations.
- Sex can be more than physical; it can involve emotions and connection.
- Porn can be intelligent, funny and realistic.
- Sexual communication is encouraged, even in casual situations.

Healthy porn doesn't mean boring or conservative. It is sexy and erotic. It is created to turn people on in a positive way.

If you watch porn aim to do it ethically: find out who produced it, who directed it. Consider on-set conditions and how the performers are treated. If the creators and performers are open and happy with their work it will show in the film. When the cast and crew are visible and proud (within credits or on their website) it is probably created with pleasure instead of exploitation.

Unhealthy porn portrays:

- Sex as something to be done to a person, instead of with a person.
- Manipulation, violence, degradation, or depersonalization.
- Unrealistic body types and standards of beauty.

This kind of porn doesn't respect the performers, their requests, or their well-being.

Other Parents

I consider myself quite open-minded and liberal but I didn't expect to find porn videos on my 12-year old son's smartphone. I noticed he had been spending a lot of time in his room with the door closed. He doesn't have a laptop or television in there so it seemed unusual. Out of curiosity I looked at his smartphone and found some very shocking videos. I felt embarrassed to be snooping there but also responsible, somehow. -Mélanie, 40, Paris

One night I went into my daughter's room to say goodnight and noticed she had fallen asleep with the lights on. She was lying in bed with headphones on and her laptop open. When I closed the laptop I was shocked to see a pornographic movie playing. She's only 13! Why is she watching this kind of movie? I never thought of her as a sexual person before. She has never even had a boyfriend. I told my husband and we decided to tell her these kind of movies are not appropriate for someone her age. Now I wonder if we should have explained them more...but I don't know where to start! -Alicia, 42, Madrid

I was writing emails when my laptop ran out of charge. I didn't want to go upstairs to get my charger so I just grabbed my son's laptop. There were lots of windows open and one had a very provocative name, so I checked it out. It was a porn website... I couldn't believe it – he's eleven years old! When I was eleven I was reading comic books and collecting baseball cards. Clearly, times are changing. When I asked him about it he said the site appeared as an ad on a video game website and he was curious so he clicked on it. -Michael, 51, Chicago.

I walked in on my son masturbating to a violent sex film on his tablet. It was mortifying for both of us. He's 14. Also, the film itself disturbed me. What if he thinks this is how you're supposed to have sex? Will these movies affect his relationships? -Karen, 45, London

Some more useful links

Most boys think online pornography is realistic, finds study

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2016/jun/15/majority-boys-online-pornography-realistic-middlesex-university-study>

How to Talk to Your Kids About Pornography

http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/05/10/garden/porn-intro.html?_r=2&

How porn is damaging our children's future sex lives

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/sep/10/how-porn-is-damaging-our-childrens-future-sex-lives>

Students turn to porn for sex education

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/jan/29/students-turn-to-porn-for-sex-education>

Sex education without porn is not sex education

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/17/porn-sex-education-consent-sexual-exploitation>

Porn as sex education: a cultural influence we can

no longer ignore

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/04/porn-as-sex-education-a-cultural-influence-we-can-no-longer-ignore>

How porn is damaging our children's future sex lives

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/sep/10/how-porn-is-damaging-our-childrens-future-sex-lives>