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East Sussex
County Council

Talking to children about pornography

A guide for parents

Developed by ESCC Specialist Family Services

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Availability of pornography

Pornography is so widely available on the internet nowadays that it has become more difficult for parents/carers to prevent their children from being exposed to it or from intentionally accessing it. Most pornography websites allow users access that is simple and fast with no verification of age required.

Research has shown that by age 11, 90% had their own device, and phone ownership was “almost universal” once children were in secondary school. Commonly children use their mobile phones and other electronic software, such as tablets; I-pads or laptops to access the internet. As such, it is common for children to have a lot of privacy in terms of what they watch online or how they communicate with others.

The pornography industry has changed significantly over the last couple of decades from still images in magazines and pornographic scenes on DVDs to the widespread availability of different types of explicit pornographic videos. Therefore, children and young people of today are likely to view far more sexually explicit material than their parents may have done when they were children/young people.

How did my child start looking at pornography?

Some children first start looking at online pornography through accidental exposure. It may be that they have been shown online videos by their peers or older siblings on smartphones or tablets. Some children find online pornography by clicking on links or pop-ups without intending to look for it.

Some children and young people may intentionally seek out pornography due to curiosity, having heard about it through peers or

siblings. Pornography can be exciting and sexually arousing for young people and adults and so it can be normal for young people to want to access pornography for pleasure and to learn more about sex, including different types of sex and sexual positions.

In a small number of cases, some children are intentionally exposed to pornography by adults or older children for the purpose of grooming.

How might I be feeling as a parent/carer?

It can be upsetting and worrying for parents to discover that their child has accessed or been exposed to pornography, regardless of the child's age. Parents/carers may have worries about how their child has accessed or been exposed to pornography, regardless of the child's age.



Parents/carers may have worries about how their child may be impacted by what they have seen or feel ill prepared to address the issue with their child.

Pornography has become one of the main sources of sex education for young people and so it is important to not ignore your child's use and hope it won't have an impact. Pornography is not realistic of most normal sexual relationships. It teaches problematic lessons – about bodies, sexual health, pleasure, consent, gender, power, aggression and performance and so these messages can be powerful, particularly as children and young people are inexperienced within relationships and sexual activity.

Impact of viewing pornography

Children will be impacted differently by viewing pornography and this will vary dependant on their level of exposure, their age and circumstances. For many children, the impact will be minimal but for some the following factors may be relevant.

For younger children:

- Children often imitate what they've seen, read, or heard. Studies suggest that exposure to pornography can prompt children to act out sexually against younger, smaller and more vulnerable children.
- Use of sexualised language.
- Withdrawn behaviour.
- Difficulties in forming and sustaining relationships.
- Confusion over personal boundaries.
- Developing fixed beliefs about body image.

For older children:

It is common for young people at secondary school to access or be exposed to pornography use. Research suggests more than 90% of boys and more than 60% of girls have seen online pornography (Fleming et al, 2006).

It's natural and healthy for young people to be curious about sex, bodies and sexuality, particularly as they enter puberty and their bodies start to change.

Young people may also be keen to keep pace with their peers in terms of their knowledge and development and so it can be common for young people to want to access pornography because their friends are.

While many young people recognise that pornography is not realistic of most sexual relationships, some young people can assume certain sexual practices or behaviours are normal:

I like that

Absolutely

Yes

Of course

This is ok

For sure

CONSENT SOUNDS LIKE

- Condoms or other forms of contraception are seldom seen or spoken about in pornography and young people may believe it is normal to have unprotected sex.
- Developing beliefs that women enjoy men being aggressive in sex. A recent content analysis of the most popular porn found that 88% of scenes included acts of physical aggression and 48% of scenes included verbal aggression.
- It helps create unhelpful beliefs about body image – such as females having no or very little pubic hair; females having large breasts or males having large penises. Porn performers may do several things to make their bodies look like they do, e.g. surgery (to enhance their breast or penis size), botox, waxing or bleaching. In reality, people come in all shapes and sizes – and adults grow body hair!
- Skewed messages about sexual preferences and pleasure, e.g. most heterosexual pornography videos end with men ejaculating on women's bodies and faces, which may shape young people's expectations of how their sexual relationships will be.
- Problematic messages about how consent is gained – e.g. individuals being persistent in seeking sexual activity despite being told "no" and this resulting in them getting an enthusiastic "YES". Pestering or forcing someone to say "yes" is NOT consent.
- Gay and lesbian porn feature many of the same problematic messages about bodies, sexual health, pleasure, performance and consent, gender, power and aggression, which are seen in heterosexual porn. For example, in gay porn aggression is often displayed by a more masculine performer towards a more feminine performer.
- Porn showing women having sex with women is most commonly made for male heterosexual consumers. This porn often misleadingly suggests that lesbians have sex with women for men's pleasure, but they would really prefer to have sex with men.
- The porn industry suggests that sex is something people do with anyone. But for most people, sex is something they do with someone they know – often with someone they care about or love. Sex can be a means of feeling close to someone, expressing love and enjoying each other.

Not tonight

I guess so

No

Stop

I'm not ready

I'm not sure

CONSENT DOES NOT SOUND LIKE

What can I do as a parent?

It is important not to panic, you can still support your child to develop a healthy sexual identity and beliefs about relationships despite the presence of pornography in their lives. As parents we need to ask ourselves what view of sex and relationships, do we want our children to develop?

It is important to be aware of how you view pornography. Some individuals may find pornography disgusting and degrading, which is an okay view to have; however, others may view it more positively. To support children to feel able to ask questions about pornography and to support them to make their own assessments of how real relationships may differ from pornography, it is important that parents are able to show a more balanced view when discussing pornography and the issues it raises with their children. Often, children will pick up on how their parents react to topics. If children perceive their parents to have strong views about pornography, this can lead them to feel ashamed and to be reluctant to speak about it. Parents can unintentionally make such topics “taboo”.

Parents will be used to having “the birds and the bees” discussion with their children and pornography now needs to be part of that chat about growing up and sex.

Secondary school aged children (11-17 years)

Young people often report embarrassment about speaking with their parents/carers about matters to do with sex. This should not prevent parents from trying to create a dialogue to explore some of the issues though. Parents should not aim to have “one big talk” with their child about pornography but should instead try to discuss issues relating to sex, consent and pornography little and often. This will help the child to feel more comfortable discussing such subjects with their parents and will ensure there are opportunities to repeat key messages.

Useful prompts when discussing pornography with young people:

- Acknowledge that the conversation may be a bit embarrassing. Using humour can help to make you as the parent and your child to feel more comfortable.
- Recognise that their friends are likely to view pornography and they may feel they have to keep pace, but they have a choice and can decide not to if they wish.
- Ask them how they would respond if they felt pressured to watch porn when they didn't want to? E.g. Use humour to deflect attention (think of a specific example of something they could say); be prepared to assertively say they do not want to; or make an excuse to leave. Support young people to think about the pros and cons of each example.



- Ask them what their understanding of consent is and encourage them to think about whether pornography always shows consenting sexual relationships. Ask them to consider how someone may show they are consenting to sex (e.g. what they say, body language, facial expressions).
- Highlight that most individuals do not look like porn performers (e.g. large breasts, large penises) or behave like porn performers in sex. Emphasise that porn is fake and that it is not something you just do for your partner. Sex should be enjoyable – emotionally and physically – for everyone involved.
- Help young people to understand that sex and relationships can be so much better than what is shown in pornography.
- Help young people to think about how the media presents men and women generally and the messages it shares about power and relationships communicated in advertising, films and television.
- Leave some age appropriate and educational information about pornography lying around for young people to read, e.g. SWIFT's "Puzzled about porn" educational guide for young people, aged 13-18. Then follow this up by asking for their views on some of the key messages.



Sexting or sending nudes

Pornography promotes the message that it is normal to video sexual activity or to take photographs of someone posing sexually. Due to the access young people have to technology and the privacy this gives them in terms of their communication with their peers, some young people engage in "sexting". Sexting or sending nudes is when someone shares a sexual message, naked or semi-naked image, video or text message with another person.

Sending or receiving a sexy message or picture can be a "turn on" and so it is not uncommon for young people to want to send such messages, especially as

they explore their sexual identity and navigate relationships. However, some young people may also feel pressured to send images. While the young person who shares a nude image may be doing this for fun and may not intend to cause anyone harm, there are problems with doing so:

- It is illegal to make or share a nude image or video, when the image is of someone under the age of 18. This is even if the young person shares an image of him/herself.
- Once a young person shares an image, they lose control of it as it could be shared again and again, which could result in bullying.

How to talk to your child if they have shared a nude image?

- Don't shout at them and avoid using language which will make them feel it is their fault.
- Reassure them that they can talk to you or another trusted adult about any worries they may have.
- Use open questions, such as "what happened?" or "How are you feeling about it?" Avoid questions, which could make the young person feel they are at fault, e.g. "what were you thinking?" as this could cause a young person to avoid sharing concerns.
- Report any images which have been shared to CEOP to hopefully prevent any further victimisation.

<https://www.ceop.police.uk/safety-centre/>

Primary school age children (4-11 years)

It is important to not avoid talking to children of this age about inappropriate material, including pornography which they may see online. Adults can sometimes worry that by having such discussions they may encourage their children to intentionally seek out pornography and consequently skew their sexual development.

In an age-appropriate way, it is possible to support children's understanding of safe and unsafe touches and behaviours, as well as appropriate and inappropriate online content. You can explain that there are some things online that are for adults only and that if they ever see anything that worries them online that they should come and tell you. Make sure they know to always tell you if anyone ever shows them a picture of a naked person, or if anyone wants to take a picture of their private parts.

Appropriate language to use when talking to younger children about pornography:

Understandably, many parents may feel reluctant to use the word "pornography" when talking to younger children and it is unlikely, they would understand the term. Furthermore, younger children may not understand the word "sex", particularly if the concept has not been explained to them before.

It may therefore feel a daunting task for parents to speak to their children about both sex and pornography in "one go". It is better to have such discussions little and often to support your child to understand sex and relationships better but to also show them that it is okay to speak to you about any issues and to ask you questions.



The way to think about addressing sex and pornography with children is to think about it in the sense of having a series of age-appropriate talks. For example, in earlier childhood, the focus can be on learning the correct anatomical names for all their body parts (e.g. penis, vagina, vulva), recognising that different people have different bodies, and understanding appropriate versus inappropriate touching. As they get older, you can talk about how babies are made and the bodily changes that happen during puberty. In adolescence, you can address safe-sex practices, sexual consent, and how to navigate relationships

You can explain to your child that sometimes adults take photos or videos of people who are naked and touching each other's private parts. Be conscious not to talk about pornography as bad or something to be afraid of but explain that such photographs and videos are for adults only and that lots of adults choose not to look at them.



If your child has seen pornography

- **Stay calm.** An overly emotive reaction may reinforce a child's reluctance to share what they have seen.
- **Offer reassurance.** Reassure the child they have done nothing wrong, they are not to blame and have done the right thing by telling someone about what they have seen.
- **Ask them how they came across online pornography (but do not interrogate).** It is important to ask younger children how they found online pornography. While they may have accessed it accidentally, it is also possible that someone may have shown them how to find it, including for the purpose of grooming.
- **Explain that pornography is not for children.** Make children aware that these types of websites are for adults only and that they should always tell you if they see any pictures or videos of naked people.
- **Encourage children to share worries/concerns about what they view online.** Make internet safety a regular discussion rather than "one big discussion". This will help your child to see that it is okay to share concerns and that they are not in trouble.

How can I monitor my child's use of the internet and restrict what they view online?

- Draw up a family agreement about responsible internet use (visit www.childnet.com for an example family agreement).
- Talk to children about apps and websites they use, asking them how they use sites, including whether they post any information about themselves. Avoiding a confrontational approach helps to develop better communication between children and their parents about what they may have seen online.

Talking to children about pornography

- Discuss with children how they stay safe online and what they would do if they saw something upsetting or that they were worried about?
- Check mobile telephones/tablets, other technology on a regular basis. Do this with your child and ask for permission so that you can model consent and build trust. If a child thinks you are looking at their private messages without their knowledge or consent, this could lead them to conceal information and feel less able to be open with you.
- Restrict use of mobile telephone and other forms of technology at night-time, e.g. Have a family rule that no-one should have their mobile telephones or their gadgets in their bedroom at night-time.
- Install parental controls (contact internet provider for guidance). The following website provides useful advice on how to set up parental controls and online safety advice for parents

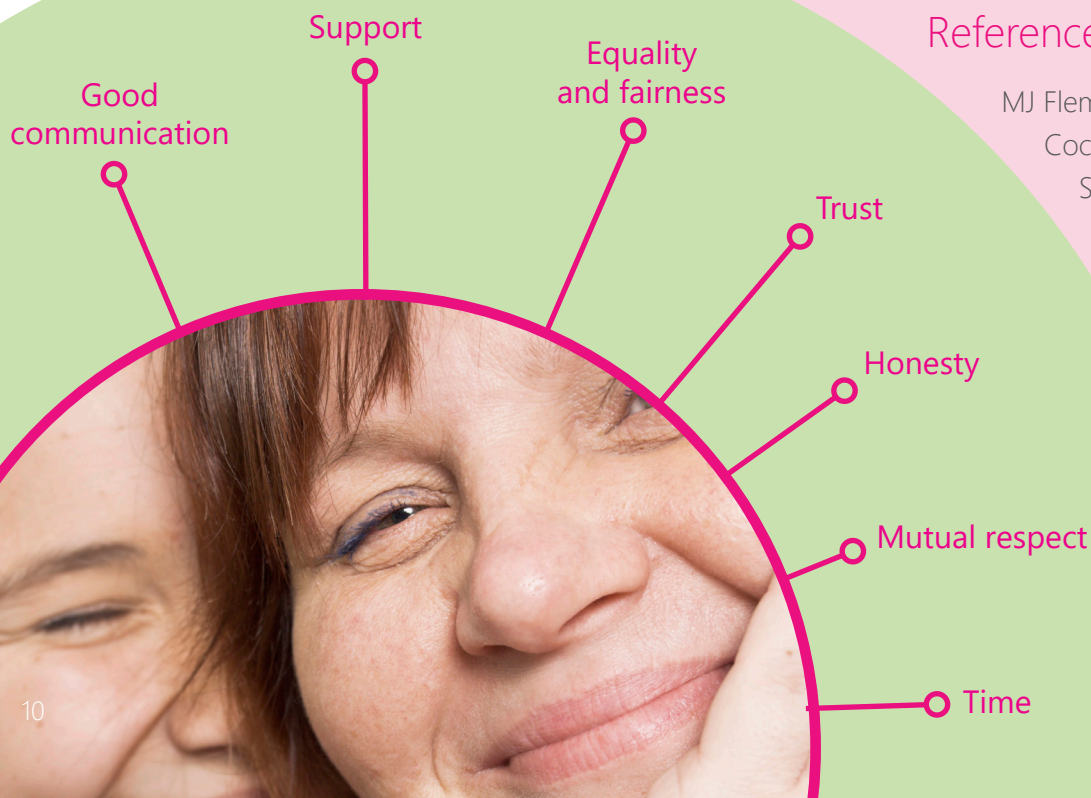
<https://www.internetmatters.org/parental-controls/>

Useful resources

- Smartie the Penguin: An online safety story for 3 to 7 year olds
<https://www.childnet.com/resources/smartie-the-penguin>
- What Information online is reliable? A video for 6-9 year olds and their parents/carers
<https://www.childnet.com/blog/what-information-online-is-reliable-new-video-for-use-with-6-9-year-olds>
- BISH – this website is for young people aged 14+. It offers a guide to sex, love and pornography for young people and it's for all genders and sexualities, people with disabilities, backgrounds, beliefs and values.
<https://www.bishuk.com/porn/>
- <https://www.stopitnow.org.uk> for confidential support when someone is worried about their or someone else's sexual thoughts/behaviour
- www.parentsprotect.co.uk – information on how to protect children from child sexual abuse
- www.nspcc.org.uk – information on warning signs and how to talk to children about sexual abuse.

References

MJ Fleming, S Greentree, D Cocotti-Muller, K A Elias & S Morrison, 'Safety in cyberspace: Adolescents' safety and exposure online', *Youth and Society*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2006, pp. 135–54.



Appendix 1

Top tips for parents on how to talk to their children about healthy relationships and appropriate sexual behaviour.

It can be difficult to get children to share information when something is worrying or upsetting them but there are some ways this can be made easier.

Create the right situation

Whatever you want to discuss, it's important to think about where and how to talk so children will listen. Sometimes a child may feel more comfortable discussing difficult subjects if they don't have to look at the adult or if there is something else to occupy them. Suggestions for initiating discussions are:

- In the car while driving.
- Whilst doing the washing up together.
- While watching tv programmes with relevant storylines, such as soaps.
- Ask other parents for advice on how they've created the right situation to have difficult conversations.
- Read stories together which can be used to prompt discussions about relationships and sex.
- Cheat – leave a book which is relevant to what you want to discuss in their room or leave relevant web pages open on a shared family computer for them to see (such as www.bishuk.com) and then follow this up with a conversation.

Try to avoid the following times:

- When siblings are around, or it is likely the conversation will be interrupted.
- Late in the evening when both you and your child are tired.

Talk about other people/things they have been learning

A great way to make talking about sex and relationships easier is to talk about other people as this can feel less threatening and embarrassing for the child. You could talk about the sex lives and relationships of people on soaps or celebrities.

A good way to get your child's interest could be to say that a friend of yours needs some advice about an issue and to ask if they have any ideas. It shows you value their opinions while also finding out what they know – like how to stay safe on the internet.

It could be that your child has been learning about the subject you want to talk about at school as part of their PSHE lessons. Use this as a prompt to start conversations.

Listen and don't lecture

We want our children to be safe, but sometimes we can end up lecturing them and telling them what to do without actually listening to what they're saying. Ask open questions (questions which you can't answer with a yes or no) and really listen to the responses. Don't be afraid of awkward silences (your child might be working out what they are going to say or building up courage to say it).

Just do it (little and often)

A big mistake that a lot of parents make is to think of this as one big "sex talk". Rather than having one big discussion about sex or pornography which may feel uncomfortable for you and your child, it is better to discuss the issue a little at a time as this will help your child recognise it is okay to talk about it and ask questions. If you're too disapproving or imply that sex or pornography shouldn't be spoken about then your child may be less likely to come to you with any questions or worries they might have.

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