

## Parenting for prevention navigating the world online - part 4 pornography



Young people are watching porn, and more than their parents think.<sup>1</sup> Most have seen it by the time they are 18, and a third have seen it before they turn 12.<sup>2</sup> Technology makes it easy for young people to have limitless access to a world of online pornography. Curiosity about bodies, sex and relationships is developmentally normal, but the messages from mainstream pornography should not be what our kids learn about sex and sexuality.



Studies of mainstream pornography show that the majority of content does not emphasize love, intimacy, and consent. According to a review in 2018, 90% of the top porn websites contained explicit violence against women.<sup>3</sup> Even content that is not physically violent often contains gender stereotypes that objectify and degrade women and girls, and emphasize male pleasure. This has an impact on the expectations of young people who increasingly say they turn to porn to learn about sex and relationships. Boys who have early access to porn are at an increased risk for sexual coercive attitudes and behaviors towards girls and women,<sup>4</sup> as well as depression and anxiety, stress, and social anxiety for themselves.<sup>5</sup> Without intensive education to counteract these harmful messages, they become normalized and cause real harm.

It is unlikely that kids are going to ask the adults in their lives about the behaviors and messages that they absorb from pornography. As adults, we can be proactive in starting and continuing these important conversations. Teenagers benefit from processing the messages in porn against their values as individuals and by seeing ways to engage in healthy sexuality which rejects power imbalances, gender stereotypes, and violence.<sup>6</sup>

### Some things to consider:

- Do your own work first. Self-reflection on what you learned about sex and relationships as a kid can be helpful as a starting point. Think about how that information served you and how it did not. Set aside some of your own baggage that you do not want to pass on.
- Start the conversation before porn becomes their primary resource. Make sure young people have accurate information about bodies, relationship and sex, so that they are not relying on porn to get the information.
- Take every opportunity to point out healthy, positive messaging and examples of relationships, love, body positivity, and consent.
- Stay curious. Ask teenagers to explain how porn is talked about in their inner circle and if there is any social pressure to act like porn is cool. Help them think about how the messages might not fit in with the kind of person they want to be, and strategize what to do if it comes up.
- Go beyond the birds and the bees. Include consent, gender, and social pressures as part of your ongoing conversations about sex.

1 Jones, M. "What Teenagers are Learning from Online Porn," *The New York Times* (February 7, 2018).

2 Bindel, J. "How To Talk To Your Kids About Porn (before the pornographers do)," *The Guardian* (October 25, 2018).

3 Ibid.

4 Perry, D.L. "The Impact Of Pornography," *The American College of Pediatricians* (2015).

5 Zimbardo, P., Wilson, G., Coulombie, N. "How Porn Is Messing with Your Manhood," *Skeptical* (June 22, 2016 2016).

6 Jones, M. "What Teenagers are Learning from Online Porn," *The New York Times* (February 7, 2018).

**Recommended resources:**

Culture Reframed: [www.culturereframed.org](http://www.culturereframed.org)

Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality by Gail Dines

Girls and Sex by Peggy Orenstein

“Overexposed and Under-Prepared: The Effects of Early Exposure to Sexual Content,” *Psychology Today* (August 2012)

“Sex Education in the Digital Age,” *Internet Health Report* (2019)