

It's time we talked about pornography

Parent tip sheet **3**



What do young people need to know about porn?

Pornography has become a default sexuality educator for many young people – but the messages it conveys can undermine young people's capacity to develop a sexuality that is safe, respectful, mutual and consenting. Young people need support to critique what they see in pornography.

Pornography is not reality.

One of the most important things for young people to know about porn is that it is not reality.

The people in porn are real people who are actually doing what is shown. But they're acting. They're performing for the viewer.

Lots of what is portrayed in porn is not only fake – it communicates dangerous messages.

Porn misrepresents pleasure.

Porn focuses on particular types and ways of doing sex which are not reflective of what most people – particularly women – like or want in real life.

Porn performers are paid to act like they're enjoying what they're doing, even if it is uncomfortable, painful or humiliating.

Porn bodies are not normal.

The bodies of porn performers – like those of models and sports stars – do not reflect how most people look.

The men in porn almost always have a very large penis. The women are usually young and thin. They may have very large breasts and their genitals often look small and even. Trans porn often shows limited, stereotyped trans bodies.

Sometimes porn performers have had surgery to make their bodies look like that. In reality, people come in all shapes and sizes – and they grow body hair.

Sex is not just for men to enjoy.

The vast majority of porn consumers are male, so porn focuses on men getting what they want – or what porn suggests they should want. The women in porn are there to please the men – and they're often treated terribly in the process.

But sex is not just about male pleasure. Sex should feel good – emotionally and physically – for everyone involved, whatever their gender.

Porn sex is not safe sex.

Porn often shows people doing all sorts of unsafe things, such as anal sex followed by oral sex, or ejaculation in mouths and eyes.

Most porn doesn't show condom use. Often porn shows multiple partners having unprotected sex.

Porn performers often catch sexually transmissible infections. Some performers experience long-term damage to their bodies from the things they do in porn.

Women are not sex objects.

Women's sexuality is used to sell all sorts of things – from cars to ice-creams and phones. Porn takes it one step further. Porn says that women are objects for men's sexual pleasure.

But women are not objects to be owned and used. Like men, women are human beings with feelings, thoughts, hopes, fears, desires and all sorts of abilities.

What do young people need to know about porn?

Violence and humiliation are not sexy.

Porn often shows men being rough and in control and women being dominated.

Lots of pornography is very aggressive, and almost all of the aggression is directed at female performers. Porn suggests that violence is sexy.

But violence and humiliation are not sexy. Nor is it just fantasy. In reality, huge numbers of women all around the world experience violence from their partners.

People who use pornography are more likely to have aggressive attitudes and behaviours towards women.

Porn's messages about violence against women are dangerous.

Porn reinforces stereotypes.

Porn commonly portrays – and reinforces – racial and gender stereotypes. It communicates rigid ideas about men, women, transgender people, and people of different ethnicities, including ideas about how people should look and behave.

Porn suggests that stereotypes are sexy, but stereotyping is limiting and unfair. It reinforces prejudices and creates the conditions for other injustices.

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 can also communicate problematic messages about bodies, sexual health, pleasure, performance and consent.

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

The most common porn showing women having sex with women is really made for heterosexual male consumers. This porn often misleadingly suggests that lesbians want to have sex for men's pleasure, rather than their own – and it can contribute to the objectification of women.

Consent is crucial to good sex.

Porn can give the impression that everyone wants to have sex all the time. But they don't.

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

Young people need to learn to communicate well and check in with a partner with questions such as 'Would you like to...?' 'Are you sure?' It's important to be sure that everyone involved is keen.

Sex is not a performance.

In porn, people perform sex for the viewer. Often, they perform a kind of 'porn script' of acts that are common in porn.

In real life, sex is not for a spectator – and it shouldn't be something someone does just for their partner, or just for themselves. For most people, sex is about the whole experience, not just how it looks or about following a script. And it should feel good for everyone involved.

Porn can shape sexual tastes.

Just like 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. Porn can start to shape what they find sexy and what they would like to do.

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

Young people need to understand that porn is not a good place to have their sexual tastes shaped.

What do young people need to know about porn?

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 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's in porn.

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

Young people need to understand that if they want to be a good lover, they shouldn't learn about sex from porn – or have their sexual tastes shaped by porn. They can do so much better than learn from porn. And they shouldn't let someone else's porn use shape expectations of them.

The keys to good sex are communication, consent, respect and making sure that sex feels good for everyone involved.

Young people can make choices about porn.

Help your child to understand that whether or not they have seen it, they can make choices about porn and how it impacts on them.

They may feel some expectation to watch it or do things in porn, but they can choose to not watch porn. No one has a right to force them to see it.

If they do choose to watch porn, they can try to be selective about what they see. For example, they could try to avoid porn where they think anyone is being pressured, hurt, abused or degraded. Or where they think the performers are faking pleasure and what it's showing is not likely to feel good in real life.

They can choose to limit their porn use. If it is impacting on their sleep, study, work, sport, hobbies or relating to real people it is time for them to talk to someone who can help them.

Young people can get support about porn.

Let your child know that they can get support if they think that porn has impacted on them in ways they don't like. For example, if they:

- feel confused or upset by something they have seen in porn
- feel like porn is impacting negatively on how they think or behave
- feel pressured to watch or do something from porn
- feel like their porn use is out of control.

They don't need to deal with that alone.

Encourage them to talk with you or someone else they trust, such as another family member, a teacher or school counsellor, or a service such as headspace: headspace.org.au/.

Young people can make choices about their sexuality.

Encourage your child to understand that they can also make choices that can help ensure their sexual experiences are positive for them, and for anyone they share their sexuality with, now or in the future.

For example, they can choose to only engage in sex with someone else if they both feel safe and respected, and where they communicate together to make sure that everything is consensual and feels good for both of them.

Where to now?

For more information, see our tip sheets for young people or itstimewetalked.com/young-people/.