

It's time we talked about pornography

Parent tip sheet **1**



A new normal is here

Pornography has become a parenting issue we can't afford to ignore. Parents need to understand how pornography is impacting on young people and what we can do to support them to navigate this new normal.

Pornography is available like never before – access is easy, anonymous and free.

For young people today, technology is part of life. With mobile phones, laptops, tablets, music and gaming devices, they can be online anywhere, anytime.

Technology opens up a whole range of exciting, creative possibilities for learning, connecting and creating – but it also means that pornography is more pervasive than ever before.

48% of boys have seen porn by the age of 13. **48%** of girls have seen porn by the age of 15.

Porn is everywhere. For many young people, it's harder to avoid it than to watch it.

With the click of a button, young people can now access a vast array of free pornographic imagery via the internet.

Young people are being exposed to porn accidentally, as well as actively seeking it out. It's not so much a question of *if* they will see it, as *when*.

Porn's influence can be seen throughout popular culture – in music videos, films, television, fashion and advertising.

56% of girls first saw porn unintentionally. **46%** of boys first saw porn unintentionally.

Many young men – and some young women – use pornography regularly.

Young people's views and experiences of pornography are highly gendered. Young men are much more likely than young women to hold positive views about porn and to use it regularly.

Young women are more likely than young men to express concern about porn and about its impacts.

56% of young men use pornography at least weekly and **17%** use it daily.

15% of young women use pornography at least weekly and **1%** use it daily.

Young people seek porn out for a range of reasons.

The reasons young people give for intentionally seeking out porn include out of curiosity, for sexual arousal, to keep up with peers, for sex education, for entertainment, to prevent boredom and to manage difficult feelings – such as frustration, fear or anger.

While they may see it with friends or a partner, most young people see pornography alone. And home is the most common place they watch it.

78% of young people whose first exposure to porn was intentional say that curiosity was their main motivation for viewing it.

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A new normal is here

The nature of contemporary porn has changed – and it's very different from the centrefold it used to be.

With the evolution of technology and the growth of the porn industry, porn producers look for an angle that will sell – and what sells is men being in control and rough sex.

Acts of aggression – including gagging, strangulation and slapping – are commonplace in contemporary porn.

Women's degradation and humiliation are also common themes. Gay male pornography can also communicate similar messages about gender, power and aggression.

97% per cent of the aggression in porn is directed at women.

35% of pornography includes non-consensual behaviour.

Pornography is now the most significant sex educator for many young people.

Young people are at a formative stage in their development. They are forming their understandings and expectations about who they are, and about relationships and sexuality. For many, porn has become a default sexuality educator.

60% of young men and **41%** of young women report using pornography as a source of information about relationships and sex in the last 12 months, even though most of them think it is neither realistic, nor a good place to learn about sex.

Pornography's influence undermines healthy relationships.

A 'new normal' in pornography is here, and it's providing a disturbing model of sexuality for young people today.

Pornography's influence has serious implications for young people's capacity to develop a sexuality that is safe, respectful, mutual and consenting.

For example, young men are increasingly asking or expecting their partners to engage in what they have seen in porn. Practices such as ejaculation on faces and bodies, 'deep-throating' fellatio, strangulation and anal sex have become normalised.

Young women often describe struggling with how to respond. Some young men are genuinely surprised when their partner does not want or enjoy what they attempt to mimic from porn.

As parents, families, schools and communities, we need to talk about porn with our young people.

Yes, this is territory that is tough to talk about.

But it's time we put aside our discomfort and discussed the issue as a matter of urgency.

We can't let young people's sexuality be shaped by the pornography industry. We can do better than that.

We need to help young people navigate pornography's influence – and equip them with the skills they will need for a sexuality that is respectful, mutual, consenting and safe.

Schools and parents can tackle these new challenges best by working together.

Where to now?

Learn more about how you can talk with your child about porn. To view the other tip sheets in this parent series, visit [itstimewetalked.com/resources](https://www.itstimewetalked.com/resources).

References:

Our Watch, 2020. *Pornography, young people and preventing violence against women background paper*.

Fritz, Malic, Paul and Zhou, 2020. "A descriptive analysis of the types, targets and relative frequency of aggression in mainstream pornography", *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 49.

New Zealand Office of Film and Literature Classification, 2019. *Breaking Down Porn*.

It's time we talked about pornography

Parent tip sheet **2**



How parents can make a difference

Pornography is impacting on young people in ways we've never seen before. There's no simple way to prevent it – but there are things that parents can do to support their children to navigate pornography's influence.

Understand that pornography is now a parenting issue.

Pornography is everywhere. For young people growing up online, it is almost impossible to avoid it. Porn has become the most significant sex educator for many young people.

At the same time as it has become mainstream, pornography has also become more aggressive – with the acts of aggression overwhelmingly directed towards women.

Young people are learning very problematic messages from porn – about gender, sex, aggression, consent and race.

This new reality means it's time we talked with our kids about sex and pornography as a matter of urgency.

Understand what we can do to minimise pornography's harms.

We may not be able to prevent pornography's harms altogether, but we can:

- limit young people's exposure and access to pornography
- equip and encourage young people to critique what they see in porn
- help young people develop the skills they need to resist pornography's influence
- inspire young people that relationships and sex can be better than what they see in porn
- Support schools to address pornography's influence.

Set appropriate limits on technology use.

Technology enables us to connect, learn and create all sorts of amazing things – but it also brings risks. Young people's exposure to pornography commonly occurs through technology – on phones, tablets, laptops, desktops, and even music or gaming devices.

Put age-appropriate limits on your child's technology access – including when, where and for how long they can use it.

Filters on modems and devices can help prevent exposure – particularly unintentional exposure. But they're not perfect. Use filters in combination with time-limited access in supervised spaces.

Encourage critical thinking.

We need to coach our kids to analyse the imagery they see, such as advertising, video games and TV programs. Encourage your kids to ask: Who made this imagery? Why did they make it? What is it saying about men, women, power, aggression, sexuality and race? Are its messages healthy? Respectful? Realistic?

Young people need to understand that pornography is not reality. Porn misrepresents what bodies are like, what people enjoy, what is safe and how people – particularly women – want to be treated.

Use the tip sheet

'What do young people need to know about porn?' to explore with your child how porn misrepresents reality.

How parents can make a difference

Support your child to learn the skills they need to respond to pornography's influence.

Young people need to develop practical skills to protect their wellbeing in situations such as when they experience peer pressure to watch porn, or when a partner initiates porn-inspired sex.

You can support your child to develop these skills by talking through the types of situations they may face and exploring options for how they could respond. Let them know you understand that these aren't easy situations – it can feel hard to know what to do or say.

Think creatively with them about their options and discuss pros and cons. Through your encouragement and support, you can help build their self-confidence and assertive communication skills.

Remind them that it is never ok for anyone to pressure them to do anything sexual and affirm that you will support them however you can.

Encourage your child to seek support from you or another trusted adult if they ever feel pressured, unsafe or concerned about anything.

Support your school to address porn.

If we're serious about equipping young people for a healthy, respectful, consenting sexuality, schools and parents will need to work together.

Support your school to deliver sexuality education for the twenty-first century, where the curriculum includes content that helps students critique porn's influence and aspire to something better.

Refer your school to our website for more information: itstimewetalked.com/schools/.

Help young people to understand that relationships and sex can be so much better than what they see in porn.

Talk with your child about how important it is that sex is consenting, safe, respectful and mutually pleasurable.

The significance of modelling respectful gender relations in your family and community can't be overstated. When young people see respect and equality modelled in the relationships around them, it can help them to develop healthy expectations about how they should be treated – and how they should treat others – in their own relationships.

Where to now?



Learn more about how you can talk with your child about porn. To view the other tip sheets in this parent series, visit itstimewetalked.com/resources.

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/.

It's time we talked about pornography

Parent tip sheet **4**



How can you start 'the porn talk'?

Pornography is now a parenting issue we can't afford to ignore – it is easy to access, communicates deeply problematic messages, and is shaping many young people's sexual understandings, expectations and experiences. Most young people won't initiate a conversation about pornography with us. It's up to us. Here are some ways to get started.

Be prepared. Create a private, unpressured opportunity to talk.

It is understandable that both parent and child may prefer to avoid the porn talk. You may feel equally uncomfortable and awkward. But there are ways to make the porn talk easier for everyone.

Think through what you want to ask and say, and how you can create a good opportunity to talk privately and without pressure or interruption.

If you think getting your child alone or keeping them in the conversation will be difficult, consider starting the porn talk on a car trip together.

Link the porn talk to your child's access to technology.

Your child is most likely to be exposed to pornography through their use of technology – such as phones, computers, tablets, and music and gaming devices.

Parents are the 'gate-keepers' for their child's access to technology. A child's request to access or purchase technology provides a perfect opportunity to discuss the associated risks and benefits, and your values and expectations regarding their use of the technology.

Pornography, sexting, privacy and online safety can all be part of this broader technology conversation.

Consider creating a written agreement describing how technology will – and will not – be used.

Use a story or personal experience.

Often our own lives provide plenty of conversation starters for a porn talk. If you stumble across porn when searching for something else, or someone you know tells you their child did, use the opportunity to ask your child about their own experiences and lead into a porn talk.

If you discover that your child has been exposed to or searched out porn, stay calm and plan a porn talk.

Use the tip sheet

'How can you respond if your child has seen porn?' for more information.

Use a film, advertisement, article or website as a springboard.

Using something you or your child have seen or read can be a great way to open up the conversation.

When an advertisement uses sexualised imagery to sell an unrelated product, or a film portrays gendered stereotypes or an unrealistic sex scene, ask your child what they think about it as a step into a discussion of media influence.

For example, you could ask: What do you think about how movies like this portray sex? Do you think it's realistic? How do you think it impacts on what people expect in their own lives? Where do young people learn about sex? Do people talk about porn? Do you think it's impacting on people's expectations of sex?

Use a newspaper article about the influence of porn or a website such as itstimewetalked.com to get started.

How can you start 'the porn talk'?

Use a conversation about bodies.

Pornography is often the only place young people see naked bodies up close.

Although there are diverse body types in porn, the men in porn almost always have a very large penis and women often have small, flat labia with little or no hair. Trans people in porn often have breasts and penises.

Porn's portrayals can impact on how people think their own body – or their partner's body – should look. This can leave them feeling inadequate, since most people don't look like porn performers.

A conversation about bodies can be a good springboard for a conversation about porn. For example, if you hear someone make a joke about penis size you could use that as an opportunity to ask your child about where young people get the impression that having a large penis is normal (and important!), then lead into a conversation about other ways that porn can shape expectations.

Use a conversation about relationships and sex.

When you talk with your child about relationships and sex, use the opportunity to mention porn.

For example, you might talk with them about how important it is that relationships are respectful and equal, and that sex is mutual and consenting, and include a discussion of how media like porn often conveys the opposite messages.

Write your child a letter.

If having the porn talk in person feels just too hard, consider writing your child a letter. A letter allows you to carefully select exactly what you want to say, and gives your child time to absorb it.

For inspiration, see this letter written by a mother for her son: mamamia.com.au/parenting/talking-to-kids-about-porn/

Do the porn talk in chapters.

If your first go at the porn talk wasn't all you had hoped for, don't worry. There is always tomorrow. And next week. And next year.

This is a conversation best revisited at various ages and stages, so take a deep breath, relax and give it your best.

Where to now?

Learn more about how you can talk with your child about porn. To view the other tip sheets in this parent series, visit itstimewetalked.com/resources.

It's time we talked about pornography

Parent tip sheet **5**



How can you respond if your child has seen porn?

You can't stop what's happened already, but if your child has seen porn, you can help them understand that porn is not reality and support them to develop healthy expectations of sexuality.

Don't panic. Stay calm.

If you discover that your child has accessed porn, you may feel a whole range of things – from fear to anger to amusement or wishing you didn't know!

Young people learn a lot more from a parent's response than just what we say. Try to stay calm and talk reasonably with your child.

If the situation requires an immediate response, calmly intervene. If you're ready to talk, great! If you need some time to prepare, tell your child you will talk about it with them more later.

Don't make assumptions.

Don't make assumptions about what's going on. It may be the first time your child has seen porn, or they may have already seen lots of it. They may have gone looking for porn, or they may not have wanted to see it at all. Sometimes exposure can occur accidentally, or by someone else introducing them to it.

While boys are much more likely to use porn, and to use it more often, girls may also seek it out.

Whether your child wanted to see it or not, they may feel upset or even distressed by the experience. Or they may have felt fascinated or aroused. Or all of these things at once – which can be very confusing!

Remember that curiosity is normal and healthy, and sex is good.

The problem with porn is not so much that it is sexual, it's the fact that it conveys problematic messages about gender, and about bodies, sexual health, power, aggression, humiliation, performance, and more.

Don't confuse sex with pornography – or pornography with sex. Be positive about bodies and sexuality.

Keep the communication lines open.

Through your words and actions, let your child know that you care about them, you are approachable, and you're happy to talk about anything.

Ask questions and listen. Invite your child to talk about their feelings and thoughts. For example, ask: How did you feel when you saw those images? What did you think of what you saw?

Encourage your child to talk to you about anything they feel uncomfortable about. Reassure them that you won't stop them accessing technology if they report seeing something inappropriate or disturbing.

Use the teachable moment.

Learning that your child has seen porn may raise a range of concerns for you, but it provides a great opportunity to have important conversations about things like bodies, sex, respect, peer-pressure, online safety, consent, pleasure, safety and exploitation.

Ask your child questions such as: What do you think porn says about women? What does it say about men? Why do you think people like it?

Talk about values of respect, equality and consent, and how porn often does not portray respectful, safe sex that is likely to feel good for everyone involved.

Use the tip sheet

'What do young people need to know about porn?' to explore with your child how porn misrepresents reality.