



Spotlight issue

Pornography

The purpose of the spotlight issues series is to highlight themes or topics which have arisen across parental contributions. While these issues are reported across chapters, these short papers highlight key aspects for further reflection.

In small group chats and in responding to theChat national survey parents have expressed concerns about children being exposed to pornography and have talked about how talking and learning at home and in school might help.

Parents have acknowledged that by the teenage years many young people will have viewed pornography, perhaps inadvertently, they may have looked for it, or friends may have shared content.

I checked his phone, he's 14, and found he was accessing stuff that I didn't think he was, that he probably doesn't have a clue about in terms of understanding what he's seen. So that was a shock. With the younger one I'm now more on the ball, keeping track.

(Group chat 21)

When my son was at primary school, he was shown pornography by P7 boys, on their phones. The school did communicate about it. I know he's going to be exposed to these things. And will certainly have seen more since his primary 7 days. So, I've always had a conversation with him that says it's not like that in real life, do not expect to look or be like that, that's movie sex, you mustn't base yourself on looking like these people, or thinking others look like this. But I suppose I have been forced to have these conversations.

(Group chat 19)

When younger children hear something about pornography, and then ask what it is, it is difficult to know how to respond.

I think this is where parents can feel quite uncomfortable, particularly with where the online world, social media, is right now. Over the holidays my daughter, in P5, just asked me: What is porn? I keep hearing about porn, what is that? So, I know it's being talked about, there are four kids in her class with phones – I don't agree with that. But it's just so early to have to be talking about these things. I mean we are just talking about conception; it feels like a jump to pornography. I didn't know what to say, so we kind of paused and I said let me think about that. I feel like we are missing the tools about how to approach this with younger kids. Because they'll be seeing it, it doesn't make them feel okay. How does it make them feel? Are they scared? Ashamed? What is this doing to their perceptions of sex? It's completely messed up. We could use some tools, help so that we know how to talk about this. And this shouldn't be up to teachers, we should be able to do this stuff at home. But how do I know how to not say too much, I say something and then she says to a friend and other people get upset that she mentioned it... It's an uncomfortable place to be.

(Group chat 10)

At upper end of primary school, they are seeing and hearing and being told things. I was asked what fingering is. I've had questions about fetishes. They seem to be talking about explicit things, I don't know where this comes from. I think it's coming from pornography. We think we are protecting them, well they can come to us, but they are hearing and seeing so much we can't even imagine. I'm shocked constantly by the level of talk they seem to have.

(Group chat 13)

You know if my daughter asked me, what is pornography, I wouldn't know what to say. Is it people filming themselves having sex? Because you know people do that. I wouldn't know the right way to say, some people like it, some people don't, some people think it's for grown-ups. I don't want them to be ashamed if they want to watch it when they are older, but then you don't want them to become addicted, or pass it round. I don't know. It's a minefield.

(Group chat 19)

Parents have said that they do not want easy access to pornography – or having to talk about it with their child - to mean it is acceptable.

It worries me that people just normalise things like pornography now, you know, 'oh it's just something that happens'. I think we need to see it for what it is, exposing children to things they shouldn't be exposed to.

(Group chat 33)

Parents have talked about trying to have conversations that help young people understand what they see and the harm it does. These chats are not easy, and young people can reject their parents' interest.

Pornography would be the thing I'm not that confident in talking about.

(Survey response/parent of 12–18-year-old)

I think the most important thing with boys is for them to learn pornography is wrong and harmful to them if they watch and those in the industry. I feel it's a parent's job to safeguard their children through education and monitoring use of online platforms.

(Survey response/parent of 12–18-year-old)

Whether we like it or not, they are teenagers now, and they will have seen pornography. Or people in their class have. We have to address that. I would rather they learned what sex is from me, than learning from stories from other young people, or porn.

(Group chat 17)

I'm quite terrified about this one, I feel like the whole thing is difficult. Porn.... Boys.... That whole relationship thing when what they might be seeing, things you can't explain. There's so much nuance in it. How do you explain attraction, imagery.... And if I approach it with the kids no one wants to talk about it.

(Group chat 18)

You know it was an old work colleague who has an older son that made me aware of some of the different things our kids might have accessed by this point. Having a son in S2 he's probably seen these images. So, every so often I will try to talk about this, just bring up porn basically. Maybe if we're driving and having a conversation. I know its awkward, but in the car, we don't have to stare at each other. So, I say, you know at some point you will see these images, I just give a bit of background, that people in the porn industry are acting, it's not normal, not what a normal relationship looks like. I've heard about the violence in porn, so I am worried boys see things and think it's normal.

(Group chat 18)

Parents are concerned that pornography is impacting on how young people think about intimacy and sexual relationships. They have talked about the need to engage young people in talking about pornography so that they can learn that it is harmful to their ideas about relationships.

I think it's very sad that this generation, because they are exposed to porn, won't explore physical intimacy themselves. They've been given a template, and that must fry their head.
(Group chat 17)

Early expose to sexual content is not a healthy thing. It skews their perception of healthy relationships, of sex. This is a huge issue. I'm concerned they don't know what's normal, what's not normal. What's rights and what's wrong. There are people that video sex acts themselves, sharing it and getting attention, wanting to make themselves popular. That is very concerning.
(Group chat 16)

I wished I'd done this much sooner. I honestly had no idea that porn was so readily available until my child told me about porn hub. Boys who watch lots of porn at a young age lose sight of reality and are a risk to girls.
(Survey response/parent of 12–18-year-old)

We had to with our son because he was going online and looking at porn. So, we had to discuss with him that that wasn't a proper sexual relationship, and you know, that a lot happened in a relationship before you got to sex. You know some of the porn he was looking at was things like different family members, we had to explain that the people in these films were pretending or possibly getting forced to do these things, women that are being abused. We had to make sure he stopped looking at that sort of content. That opened the door to talking about what a proper relationship is. Like meeting someone, feeling good about them, holding hands, getting on.
(Group chat 33)

It's like this unknown thing to them about what a healthy relationship is, especially when it comes to sex, it's different to what this might have been 10 years ago, because what they are accessing and viewing, that's not normal healthy relationships. It's hard core, extreme, and their perception is 'is this what a normal relationship is?' So, it's up to me to say, this is not a normal relationship, this is not what sex is like. I want them to understand what they see, that's not what they have to do, you just don't.
(Group chat 16)

I imagine the majority of young people will have seen porn before they have sex.

This must affect their perceptions of what sex is. If they've already got preconceptions of what sex is, well if both parties have preconceptions, what's expected of them, things like choking, that's what's expected. I genuinely don't know what to do. I feel like I can manage a lot of things as a parent, but that just feels like too far for a parent to be talking about. It just feels like a worry that they might develop preferences for things that are not okay. This isn't a comfortable place for parents to be talking about. If I don't feel it's appropriate, how do I prevent access? How do I respond?

(Group chat 19)