

For educators

A guide to teaching about sexually explicit content online: The basics

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Introduction

This document was created to provide you with the most up-to-date research about sexually explicit material online as it relates to youth in a relatively objective manner. Much information about this topic is biased, rooted only in opinion, speculation, and/ or political or religious beliefs. It is not the aim of this document to identify sexually explicit material as “good” or “bad,” but rather to provide you with tools and facts so that you can begin educated discussions with young people about the information that they may be exposed to in the media (we feel that is important and express our bias there). It can also be used to bring up the importance of addressing this topic in schools when talking with parents or school administrators. We provide a list of resources at the end to get you started.

Note: We have chosen to use the term “sexually explicit material” as opposed to “pornography.” This is because the word “pornography” has many connotations and attitudes associated with it. For this reason, we decided to choose the more literal, and hopefully neutral, “sexually explicit material.” The one exception to this wording choice is when we discuss legal issues. Since laws and policies discuss pornography, we use that term in those contexts.

Almost all young people are online: Some are being exposed to sexually explicit material

Youth today spend more time interacting with multiple forms of media, including the Internet, than with any other activity. Almost all young people are online (95%), and the majority of youth (74%) are able to access the Internet from a mobile device such as a phone or tablet.^{4, 13}

Just as Internet use has increased significantly over the past decade, so too has the availability of sexually explicit material online. As a result, a significant number of youth have either deliberately accessed or been unintentionally exposed to this content on the Internet. Youth can be exposed to online sexually explicit material through pop-ups, unsolicited links, email attachments, chat rooms, instant messages, and/or while searching for other information.

Studies have shown that children are first exposed to sexually explicit Internet material as young as 10 and 11. Research out of the University of New Hampshire’s Crimes Against Children Research Center differentiates between unintentional and deliberate exposure to sexually explicit material. Approximately one in four (23%) of American youth between the ages of 10 and 17 have been exposed to unwanted sexually explicit material.¹⁰

Age and gender matter

Gender

Studies of youth ages 13 to 19, have found that boys and young men are more likely to access sexually explicit material and do so more often than girls and young women.⁸ A study of young people, ages 13 to 18, done in the United States, found that 40% of males reported deliberately accessing sexually explicit Internet material compared to only 13% of females.¹ Boys and young men are also more likely to report positive attitudes toward sexually explicit material, whereas girls and young women report higher rates of discomfort and unwanted exposure.⁸ In a Swedish study of 15 to 25 year olds, 61% of females compared to 29% of males viewed sexually explicit material negatively, and 46% of females and only 23% of males described the material as degrading.¹⁹

Age

An online survey of parents and youth ages 9 to 16 administered in 25 European countries found that older youth were more likely to have seen sexual images online than those who were younger. Findings from the survey indicated that 5% of 9 to 10 year olds had been exposed to sexually explicit material on an Internet website compared to 8% of 11 to 12 year olds, 16% of 13 to 14 year olds, and 25% of 15 to 16 year olds. Images seen by older youth are more likely to be more graphic or sexually explicit.¹¹

Young people view sexually explicit material for a variety of reasons

The reasons young people access sexually explicit material on the Internet are as varied as the youth themselves. However, research has identified some key motivations:⁸

More common reasons:

- Curiosity
- Sexual arousal and masturbation
- Information/education

Less common reasons:

- Humor
- To develop sexual skills and sexual confidence
- To break the rules

Overall, sexual curiosity is normal and natural and trying to find accurate information about various aspects of sexuality, sexual health, and relationships is healthy.

Sexual material available on the Internet is often graphic and not sexually healthy

Even though seeking out information about sex and sexuality is normative for youth, not all sources are created equal when it comes to educating youth about sexual health and healthy relationships. The type of sexually explicit material that young people are exposed to online remains unclear, but there is a wide and diverse selection of sexually explicit material available on the Internet, and much of it is available for free. Depictions of sexual acts are portrayed through still photographs, live webcams, and recorded movies. Those involved in the making of sexually explicit material for the Internet may be amateurs or professionals and engage in a variety of sexual acts including masturbation; oral, anal and vaginal sex, and; threesomes and group sex. Ejaculation on the female, often her face, was found in 45% of free online content analyzed in one study.⁷

The sex depicted online often does not reflect good sexual health. Performers are rarely shown practicing safer sex methods such as using condoms, or seeking active consent to engage in sexual behaviors. One study found that only 11% of sex scenes in sexually explicit films showed condoms being used, and only one scene in over 300 movies included discussion about pregnancy and STIs.²

The bodies of many sex performers are not realistic images of the typical human form. Male performers often have larger than average penises and women are typically slender, with large breasts, and little to no pubic hair. Also, the sexual performances depicted in sexually explicit stories are not typical; sexual acts last significantly beyond the norm which may influence sexual insecurities among young people.¹⁵ It is common for sexually explicit material online to degrade women through its representation of sexual acts. Some more extreme sexually explicit content portrays women as victims of violence and rape, although these instances are rare in more accessible forms of online sexually explicit materials.⁷

Research finds that there is an association between exposure to sexually explicit materials and sexual attitudes, behaviors, and relationships[1]

To date, *research has not shown that viewing sexually explicit material causes changes in sexual attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors in young people.* The research does, however, suggest a relationship between the exposure to sexually explicit material and the sexual attitudes and behaviors of youth. But it is not known if certain sexual attitudes and behaviors in young people cause them to view sexually explicit material, if the viewing of this material causes young people to have certain sexual attitudes and behaviors, or whether another characteristic (e.g., poor impulse control) causes young people to have certain sexual attitudes and behaviors and view sexually explicit material. Also, *viewing*

sexually explicit material has not been linked to sexual aggression for the majority of males. There is some evidence that viewing sexually violent material is associated with sexual violence.²⁰

Despite the fact that the direction of causality is not known, the following characteristics are associated with the use and consumption of sexually explicit materials:¹⁵

Attitudes and beliefs

- Unrealistic attitudes about sex and relationships; Inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality
- Preoccupation with sex
- Sexually permissive attitudes
- Positive attitudes about casual and recreational sex
- Belief in traditional gender roles; including views of women as sex objects

Sexual behavior

- Studies are contradictory. Whereas some find an association between viewing sexually explicit materials online and increased sexual behaviors, such as oral sex, group sex, anal sex, and using drugs and alcohol during sex,¹⁵ other studies find no associations.¹²

Self concept and body image

- Insecurities about body image in females
- Insecurities about sexual performance in males

Sexual aggression

- Sexual harassment
- Sexually explicit material is *not* linked to sexual aggression for the majority of males.
- Sexually violent material has been linked to sexual violence in young people.²⁰

Social development

- Behavior misconduct at school
- Social maladjustment
- Symptoms of depression

We can allow sexually explicit material online to be the sexuality educator of youth today or we can be sexuality educators and teach youth about it

Whether the characteristics mentioned above cause youth to seek out sexually explicit material or exposure to this material contributes to these types of sexual attitudes and

behaviors is yet to be determined. Nevertheless, education about this topic has become necessary. Sexually explicit content is prevalent online; 12% of all websites are sexually explicit and 70% of men ages 18-24 visit a sexually explicit site at least monthly.¹⁸ One of six teens state that “pornography” is one of the top three places they learn about sex and relationships, yet more than seven in ten believe that it can have “damaging impact” on those relationships.¹⁶ Mobile phones are becoming the primary means of accessing sexually explicit material.⁸ This use of mobile devices has decreased parents’ abilities to monitor their children’s online activities; 37% of teens have smart phones and 25% of teens say that they access the Internet primarily on their phones.¹³ Avoiding conversations about sexually explicit material available online will not make the industry disappear and young people will continue to access sexually explicit content. Providing youth with tools to critically analyze the material they may encounter online will better prepare them to engage in respectful, healthy, and happy relationships, sexual and otherwise.

Currently, most sexuality education offered in the United States is limited in content and scope, and stresses abstinence as the best, if not the only, viable option for youth – despite the fact that 63% of young people become sexually active in high school.³ As a result, youth are left to “learn about sexuality while dealing with polarized cultural expectations: restricted information at home and school and uncensored information in the media.”¹⁷ Research from the U.K. indicates that young people are unhappy with their sexuality education and are increasingly turning to sexually explicit material online as a resource for education and for understanding sexual norms.⁸ Experts believe the same is happening in the US. It is essential that educators provide comprehensive sexuality education rooted in the current and lived experiences of 21st Century youth; exposure to sexually explicit material online and in other media is part of that reality. Education allows misinformation received by watching this material to be corrected and potential anxieties to be addressed.⁵

Materials are being developed around the world to begin educating youth about sexually explicit material online: Here are some recommendations from what is already being done

Having conversations with youth about more difficult and controversial topics such as sex in the media, including sexually explicit material, can be challenging for educators. There are a variety of ways to approach the topic of sexually explicit material. It is recommended that it be included as part of a discussion about the general sexualization of the media, as opposed to a lesson purely on pornography.⁵ In comprehensive sexuality education programs, lessons about sexually explicit material can be appropriately included when discussing topics such as healthy relationships and media literacy. Professionals in both the U.K. and Australia have been working to

develop curricula primarily for middle school and high school students that address sexually explicit material as part of sexuality education (The Sex Educational Supplement, Additional Resources I, includes lesson plan ideas for almost all age levels). The following recommendations were taken from resources already being used in these countries. When a teacher introduces these materials will be dependent on student age, perceived need, and community contexts (see Additional Resources IV for a brief list of developmentally appropriate sexuality education topics divided by general grade level).

Things to consider before getting started

To safely and effectively broach the topic with youth, it is first important for educators to think about their own knowledge and attitudes about pornography and sexually explicit material. Educators should consider how their own opinions and attitudes may influence their teaching and determine if they feel qualified and comfortable to lead a discussion and answer questions about this topic. It may be that experienced sex educators are better suited.

It is important for educators to address issues about sexually explicit material in the media in a neutral, unbiased manner. When discussing sensitive topics, educators should maintain a respectful environment where young people do not feel judged and feel safe to discuss all aspects of sexuality. It is recommended that educators acknowledge that it is not the norm for most young people to have seen sexually explicit material, but that it is also not uncommon for young people to have been exposed to such material online or via other media.⁵ It is also important, however, to let young people know that in the US it is illegal for people under age 18 to view pornography.

Core components of a lesson on sexually explicit material

Ideally, a lesson on sexually explicit material would include a series of interactive activities aimed at the development of a working definition of pornography, a discussion on the law, a section on media literacy (differentiating between “real” sex and “porn” sex), and a discussion about how youth feel about the use of and exposure to sexually explicit material.

First: Create a safe environment in your classroom

Before beginning any discussions about sexuality, never mind sexually explicit material, it is important to make sure that you have made your classroom a safe environment for all your students. Discuss self care strategies for young people who may feel uncomfortable during discussions; remind students of school counselor hours and/or

provide hotline numbers. Establish ground rules so that different viewpoints are listened to, yet do not force a student to speak up in class if they do not want to. Keep side conversations or off-track comments to a minimum.

Provide a question box so that students can ask questions they otherwise may not ask (you may even require all students to put in a question or at least a blank piece of paper so it looks like everyone is participating). It also provides teachers an opportunity to seek answers to questions that they do not know and/or to determine ways to objectively address more sensitive, difficult topics that may arise.

Second: Clearly define pornography and/or sexually explicit material

Research has shown that young people have a hard time defining pornography or what it means to be “sexually explicit”.⁸ One way to begin a conversation about the topic is to involve students in developing a definition of either term. A sex and relationship education curriculum from Australia, called *Fantasy vs. Reality*, defines pornography as follows:

“Printed or visual material containing the explicit description or display of sexual organs or activity intended to stimulate sexual excitement.”⁵

This is one of many definitions. Educators may choose a definition that works best for them, their classroom, and their community.

Third: Discuss pornography and the law

It is important for youth to understand the law and pornography. It is illegal for young people in the US under age 18 to view pornography online, but it still happens. Additionally, it is important for youth under 18 to understand, that if they view or possess pornographic images of anyone under 18 and/or create and share sexually explicit images of themselves or others via sexting, Instagram, YouTube, etc... that such acts are illegal, and that they could be prosecuted as sex offenders for such behavior depending on the state they live in.

Fourth: Differentiate between “real” sex and “porn” sex (media literacy)

Engaging students in activities that encourage them to critically analyze the information that they see in the media is another effective way to begin addressing pornography. There is an excellent activity for high school students on page 312 of *Sexuality Education Matters: Preparing Pre-Service Teachers to Teach Sexuality Education* (see Additional Resources II) aimed at engaging pre-service teachers in

conversations about the differences between “real” sex and “porn” sex. The exercise aims to encourage students to critique the ways in which gender and sex are portrayed in sexually explicit media and to encourage reflection on how these portrayals differ from respectful, healthy relationships. This is done by having students categorize statements (provided on pages 317-320) such as “Women always want sex, even if it doesn’t seem this way initially” to “Unprotected sex is a health risk” as being in the “Porn World,” “Real World,” “Both,” and/or “Neither.” The same activity can be done with “Media World” as opposed to “Porn World.”

It is recommended that this exercise be followed by activities to build skills and the confidence to make healthy decisions, such as the one on page 323 of the same document. This activity has students provide the endings to sexual relationship storylines (provided on pages 325-327), then discuss the risks and benefits of each ending and choose the best possible scenario.

Fifth: Allow youth to reflect on their own attitudes about viewing sexually explicit material and healthy relationships

Another resource from the U.K. identifies a series of questions to help educators engage youth in conversations about their personal attitudes and values surrounding sexually explicit material. Sample questions from this resource are:⁹

- Is pornography healthy? How could it damage a relationship?
- How might the use of pornography by one partner make the other partner feel?
- What do you think about the accessibility of pornography?
- Is pornography okay or is it harmful?
- Does it realistically depict sex? If not, why?
- How might pornography affect the person watching it?
- Is viewing pornography a good way to find out about sex?

Now: Use this material as you see best

You are the one who knows your school and community the best. We hope you find the information and resources useful when collaborating with parents, colleagues, counselors, and administrators to determine the best way to talk to young people about sexually explicit material online. A good resource for concerned parents whose child is viewing sexually explicit material can be found here: <http://www.connectsafely.org/so-your-kid-is-looking-at-porn-now-what/> (Additional Resources V); this may also help you if a student discloses s/he is viewing such content.

Additional Resources: Curricula and lesson plans available here

1. The Sex Educational Supplement, Volume 1, Issue 1, The Pornography Issue at <http://www.flipsnack.com/flip-preview/fdtps1uz>
2. Fantasy Vs. Reality: A Sex and Relationship Education Resource for Key Stages 3 and 4 at <http://www.school-portal.co.uk/GroupDownloadFile.asp?ResourceId=4097151>.
3. Sexuality Education Matters: Preparing Pre-Service Teachers to Teach Sexuality education at <http://www.deakin.edu.au/arts-ed/education/teach-research/health-pe/project/sexuality-education-matters-april-2013-online.pdf>.
4. Age/Developmentally Appropriate Comprehensive Sexuality Education Guidelines
<http://www.ode.state.or.us/wma/teachlearn/conferencematerials/sped/2012/agedevaprotopicguide.pdf>
5. So your kid is looking at porn. Now what? Written by Larry Magid for ConnectSafely at <http://www.connectsafely.org/so-your-kid-is-looking-at-porn-now-what/>

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[1] *Note: This information has been taken from the findings of a growing body of global evidence. Studies from the U.K., Sweden, Holland, Australia, Taiwan, Canada, and the U.S. are primarily responsible for the information provided in this section. Cultural differences, as they relate to perceptions about sex and sexuality have not been accounted for in the compilation of this information as published in a review by Owens and colleagues in 2012 (see References).*

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