

Let's Talk – Pornography

There's no doubt that our children understand technology and how it works better than most adults. While it's often good they seek out information, it can also mean they'll come across confusing and harmful sexually explicit material.

Research says that, on average, children are first exposed to online pornography around the age of 11. A study of 13–16-year-olds in Australian schools found that 93% of males & 62% females had seen pornography online (*Safety in Cyberspace, 2006, Fleming et al*).

The main question for parents to ask is: do I want my child to be educated about sex and relationships from pornography? Online pornography doesn't come with values, ways of thinking, or tools for critical analysis. Instead, it can make children confused, scared, and fearful of sex and intimacy.

A conversation about pornography might be a bit awkward, but it's a conversation we need to have. It's important that children understand that no topic is off limits, and that they can come to parents and carers for help and advice. If we don't talk, we risk allowing pornography to shape our children's ideas and attitudes about sex, and seeing it might make them feel confused, worried, ashamed or guilty.

Some parents challenge the idea of needing to have a conversation with children about pornography because there are filters that block websites and pop-ups. But nothing is 'porn proof' and children don't live in a bubble. It's impossible to monitor every screen they see, or filter what they hear from peers and older siblings.

We aren't always going to get things right. But every conversation we have demonstrates that we're there for them. If we don't get it right, we can always circle back and try again.

Pornography:

- is almost impossible to avoid
- can be intentional and accidental
- can create fear and confusion
- can shape ideas and attitudes

Ask your child what would they do if...

- something pops up on the computer that you've talked about
- a friend shows them pornography on a computer or device
- someone shows or tells them about a site to look up and what they see is not meant for children

Some tips to minimise exposure (but not a reason to avoid a conversation):

- install filters on all devices at home
- keep the device in a shared space where you can monitor what they're viewing
- when children are just starting to use the internet, tell them to ask before putting any words into a search engine
- never click popups, links or ads, competitions, or special offers without asking an adult first
- if they do see something, click off/look away immediately and tell a trusted adult
- if someone shows them something that is not age-appropriate and/or something that makes them feel uncomfortable, yukky or unsafe – tell a trusted adult immediately

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What can you do if your child sees something?

- stay calm
- praise them for telling you (if they have told you)
- let them know they're not in trouble
- if you've found out because you've seen them looking or noticed things in their search history — remain calm, don't make them feel guilty or ashamed
- ask them how they came to see it (has another person shown them or suggested they look it up?)
- ask them what they think about what they've seen or how it made them feel — be curious and listen, but don't interrogate
- explain that it's not meant for children and can be scary, confusing and upsetting, or might make them excited or curious
- if they looked something up, let them know it's normal to be curious, but remind them that they can ask you questions, and that you can find age-appropriate materials if they want more information
- if the young person is a teen, talk about the essential things missing from pornography and how it differs from real life i.e. realistic and diverse bodies, safe sex, consent, mutual pleasure, respect, respecting boundaries, etc.

'Thanks for telling me. I'm so pleased you did; you're not in trouble. What you saw is meant for adults, not children. It's not how people who love and respect each other act in real life. Let's chat if you feel like it, or we can talk about it later.'

Conversation starters

Below are some conversations starters which you can modify according to your comfort level and your child's age and personality. As psychologist Jillian Roberts says in her book *Kids, sex and screens* (2019): 'A child who knows that they might come across explicit material can process it and make better choices than a child who has no idea what they're seeing and why.'

8–10 Years:

'We've talked about rules for touching and seeing private body parts. I also want you to know that if you ever see pictures or videos of people that show or talk about private parts on the internet you should tell me straight away. You will never get into trouble.'

'There are things on the internet that aren't for children. Sometimes there are videos of people with no clothes on. They might be hurting each other and making strange sounds. If you ever see anything like this, look away immediately and tell a trusted adult straight away.'

From 11–14 years

'I want to talk to you about something which might be a bit awkward but I think it's important. Is that okay? Have you heard about pornography? What do you know about it? Is that a good place to learn about sex?'

'Do any of your friends talk about pornography? I am concerned about the messages it gives about what is real and what is not. Could we have a chat about this? I think it's important.'

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