Pornography is widely available and readily accessible. Fifty percent of parents underestimate how much porn their teens have seen. A lack of accurate information and robust conversations with supportive adults means that for many developing youth, pornography has now become their main “go to.”

Many parents and caregivers struggle to talk about the basics of sex, and cringe at the thought of discussing pornography with their middle- or high school-aged children. It is common for school health classes to only cover the basics, so it is unlikely that the effects of pornography on developing minds and bodies will be addressed. With this information void, where can kids and teens turn to?

This training tool helps bring parents up to speed on the harms of pornography, including how it affects the brain and healthy sexual development. It provides tips for conversations, and suggested websites for managing technology and places to find support. It also provides parents with much needed encouragement to speak with younger children, helping them understand how to avoid pornography and why it’s harmful.

The vast majority of mainstream porn sites, webcams, amateur porn sites, and porn app-based video games don’t have age restrictions or warning mechanisms. Once a child has landed on these platforms, the most watched (often extreme) videos are the first they will see. Kids may be confused about their body’s physical reaction to seeing this content, and their brains may automatically release chemicals that make them feel like they want more. Without adult guidance, it is very difficult for children and youth to physically or mentally handle what they will see or know how to respond in a way that supports their integrity.

Statistics vary, but recent research indicates that at least a third of young people have seen porn before the age of 12.

Four out of five young people (81%) aged 14 to 18 who have seen porn, have been exposed unintentionally—either accidentally seeing it online or receiving it unsolicited.

While home filters and device apps are recommended, there’s no guarantee that kids will avoid seeing porn - it’s everywhere. Websites, social media sites, innocent searches on Google, pop-ups, spam emails, apps, peers sharing among peers—sexual content is the wallpaper of kids’ lives, which is why conversations are so important.

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PORN AND VIOLENCE

Online pornography is most often aggressive, and without providing purposeful critique and alternative messages around sex and relationships, regular porn viewing can result in physical, psychological, and relational fallout.

Public health advocate Culture Reframed points to important research on porn:

- In a content analysis of best-selling and most-rented porn films, researchers found that 88% of analyzed scenes contained physical aggression: gagging, choking, spanking, and slapping.
- A meta-analysis of 22 studies between 1978 and 2014 from seven different countries concluded that pornography consumption is associated with an increased likelihood of committing acts of verbal or physical sexual aggression, regardless of age.
- A meta-analysis found “an overall significant positive association between pornography use and attitudes supporting violence against women.”
- In a study of U.S. college men, researchers found that 83% reported seeing mainstream pornography, and that those who did were more likely to say they would commit rape or sexual assault -- if they knew they wouldn’t be caught -- than men who hadn’t seen porn in the past 12 months.
- A survey from the UK found that 44% of males ages 11–16 who consumed pornography reported that online porn gave them ideas about the type of sex they wanted to try.

PORN AND SEX TRAFFICKING

The normalization of violence in sex depicted in mainstream pornography is a form of sexual exploitation and has a direct connection to demand for commercial sex.

- Some of those exposed to pornography along their developmental journey may eventually progress from online consumer to sex buyer, paying a prostituted person to carry out acts seen on screen.
- Nearly all survivors of prostitution report that pornography was used in their grooming process and during paid encounters with customers.
- For many, sex acts are filmed and then used as a means of control, trapping them in a cycle of exploitation out of fear that pornographic videos would be shared publicly.
- The porn industry reports that top online pornography search terms include “teen” “massage” “Asian” “Ebony” “Latina” and “Black,” which are also the most common online prostitution search terms. These searches relate to depictions of rape and fuel the illicit massage and commercial sex industry.
- The porn industry is constantly creating new and shocking content to drive demand for their product. They also rely upon people uploading and sharing amateur video content. There is no way to know for sure if the performers are freely giving their consent to carry out sex acts, or if they have been coerced, exploited, or trafficked into the production of these videos.

This online universe is filled with graphic content of women being raped, bound, gagged and choked. Many porn videos show intense verbal and physical abuse, and include fantasies about rape, incest and other disturbing content.
MINORS AND THE CREATION OF CHILD PORN

Today’s kids are growing up in an X-rated world and pornographic images have been normalized. The vast majority (92%) of young women who share nude images of themselves feel pressured, harassed, and coerced by young men. These images are sometimes referred to as “nude pics” or “sexts” and are considered to be child pornography if the image is of a minor.

Sexting is a highly risky behavior and illegal in most states. **Almost 90% of sexual images of minors uploaded online are harvested from the original upload location (e.g., Snapchat or other social media sites), and redistributed on third-party websites (such as predatory-focused sites).** The consequences of young adults having to register as sex offenders are serious. All parents must be vigilant in helping their children and teens understand the legal, emotional, and social impacts of asking for and sharing sexual images. It’s especially important that young men understand that it’s never okay to pressure, threaten, or harass young women to take naked images of themselves. Sexting contributes to the never-ending cycle of online and offline sexual exploitation.

PORN AND THE BRAIN

Developing brains are not equipped to process the violent sexual images and disturbing content they encounter online. Rather than process information with the prefrontal cortex (the rational part), teens process information with their emotional center, or amygdala. The rational part of a teen’s brain—the part responsible for good judgment and awareness of long-term consequences—isn’t fully developed until the mid-20s or later. Regular porn use can hijack the healthy development of the prefrontal cortex and can further impact decision making and self-control. Studies have also found that frequency of porn use amongst young people also correlates with depression, anxiety, stress, and social problems.

“After being exposed to pornography, men reported being less satisfied with their partners’ physical appearance, sexual performance, and level of affection and express greater desire for sex without emotional involvement.”

Pornography can lead to behavioral addiction because it activates the reward circuit in the brain and increases the neurotransmitters that produce feelings of pleasure, ultimately producing cravings. In order to get the same high or sexual release, the user becomes more tolerant or “addicted,” often seeking novelty through more extreme content.

“The sexual education that youth receive from porn makes it hard for them to connect with real romantic partners when they’re ready, and they find themselves unable to be turned on by anything other than images on a screen.”

Pornography use can undermine positive relationships and inhibit sexual function. Porn-induced erectile dysfunction is a real and growing problem among younger and younger men, with all indications suggesting that the cause is regular porn use.

“It’s hard to know exactly how many young men are suffering from porn-induced ED, but it’s clear that this is a new phenomenon, and it’s not rare.” - Dr. Abraham Morgenthaler, Director of Men's Health Boston, and professor, Harvard Medical School

Girls are also watching porn, and for many of the same reasons boys watch porn - curiosity, information, to develop sexual skills or confidence, for masturbation, or just to break the rules. They are also affected by its prevalence because the boys in their lives may have distorted views of sexuality; in addition, young women are also experiencing reduced libido and lower sexual desire from watching pornography.
Porn sex is not the same as relational sex.

- With equal focus, all young people must be taught about consent; one person should never pressure or coerce another for their own gain.
- Every person has the right to say “no” to any sexual activity, change their mind, and set boundaries.
- The pornographic fantasy of a man dominating a woman is unhealthy and misogynistic, and many other genres in porn also display extreme acts and power imbalances that are not part of most people’s regular sex lives.
- Healthy sex is never violent or painful. Healthy sex is mutually pleasurable, and any scenario of someone being disrespected, called names, abused, or raped does not represent respect and equality.

"I’m not interested in a world where men really want to watch porn but resist because they’ve been shamed; I’m interested in a world where men are raised from birth with such an unshakable understanding of women as living human beings that they are incapable of being aroused by their exploitation.

- Jonah Mix"
Safe adults can help younger children to develop discretionary skills to understand the difference between what is safe and what is unsafe online behavior. Teach your child that if they stumble across a website accidentally that shows nudity or someone getting hurt, that they should look away or turn off the device right away. Let them know that they can speak with you about it and ask any questions if something confuses them.

It’s always better to be proactive rather than reactive.

Culture Reframed explains that before children become tweens (ages 9-12), important foundational learning related to wellness, safety, and autonomy includes:

- Gaining an understanding of private body parts and public/private behavior
- Awareness of good and bad experiences (listening to their body as a way to stay safe)
- Knowing that some people are not good and may do unkind or violent things to others
- Knowledge of what to do, who to speak with, and where to go in order to feel safe
- Awareness of healthy boundaries
- Developing relationships in a positive, sustainable way
- Exercising responsibility for self and showing respect toward others

Provide them with reasons why pornography is harmful:

- Often pornography shows people doing hurtful things to one another, and that watching it gives people the wrong idea about how to relate to one another.
- Let them know that it’s really important not to copy what they see, or let anyone else convince them to do the things that are in pornography.
- Let them know that pornography can impact their healthy brain development, and change the way that they think about relationships.

All children should be encouraged to tell their parents or a trusted adult immediately if they are sent images or videos, even from a fellow student. Ask your child what they will do if it happens, so they can be an active part of the solution. All children must feel empowered to say “no,” if something feels wrong or goes against their values.
OLDER KIDS: AGES 11 AND OVER

Teens will benefit in knowing how pornography contributes to a cycle of sexual exploitation, impacts relationships, affects the brain, and reduces sexual satisfaction.

Culture Reframed suggests four guidelines that can be successful in building teens’ resilience and resistance to these images. They are:

1. Open and regular communication that encourages questions and supportive conversations, rather than shaming or blaming.
2. An awareness of the harms of hypersexualized images and porn on teens’ emotional, cognitive, and sexual development.
3. An understanding of how porn shapes and influences the broader culture.
4. Reducing teens’ access to hypersexualized media and porn by directing kids toward healthy friendships, and activities that build peer communities.

Culture Reframed also suggests that ongoing conversations are essential to teens’ ability to critically analyze the images they consume. Conversation starters include:

- Pornography doesn’t represent “real sex.”
- Porn can trigger a range of feelings: curiosity, confusion, disgust, arousal, and guilt.
- Porn often depicts a power imbalance in which women are the object of degradation and violence.
- Just because something is arousing or pleasurable doesn’t mean it is good.
- You can’t unsee pornography.
- Porn does not portray emotional intimacy, connection, and sensuality — qualities that are central to healthy sexuality.

Young people can also be taught positive and relational sex is never violent or hurtful, and always includes consent. Using examples from advertising and movies to have conversations about objectification, gender power imbalances, gender equality, consent and boundaries will help to counter the negative influences of pornography.

YOUNG PEOPLE SHOULD ALSO BE TAUGHT NEVER TO TAKE A NUDE PHOTO OR PRODUCE THEIR OWN VIDEO AND SEND IT TO ANYONE ONLINE, OVER THE PHONE, OR THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA.

TALKING TIPS:

Try having conversations in the car on the way to or from school or after-school activities, or while doing an activity together. Conversations can be inspired by talking about song lyrics, advertisements, or scenes from a favorite TV show. Be prepared to revisit the topic of pornography at different times from different perspectives.

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WARNING SIGNS OF PROBLEMATIC USE

When parents discover their child or young person has accessed pornography, it can be overwhelming. The important thing is to remain calm and move through your response in a rational manner. The Compose Yourself model by Culture Reframed may assist. If you think your child is developing an addiction to pornography or has negative attitudes toward themselves or others as a result of watching pornography, regular conversations become all the more important. If parents feel overwhelmed or identify ongoing concerns such as withdrawing from activities, shutting down devices suddenly, noticeable changes in language, demeanor, or behaviors, spending long periods of time in the bathroom, toilet, or shower, laughing about or minimizing rape or other sexual harms, or exhibiting signs of depression and/or anxiety, it’s important to seek professional help. Various websites, filters, forums and apps can also provide additional support.

PRACTICAL RESOURCES

What are your household rules for mobile phone and social media use? If this is something you have yet to establish, the Culture Reframed Social Media and Mobile Phone Contract is a good place to start, along with their free online Parents Program - a complete best-practice toolkit, which gives parents skills and knowledge to raise porn-resilient kids.

The more open parents are in talking with their kids and teens about sex and porn, the more their kids will be supported in having positive, shame-free, thriving relationships in the future.

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TRUST is a grant funded project whose mission is to provide education, resources and collaborative engagement on issues involving sexual exploitation and human trafficking in Arizona. Please visit the TRUST website for more information and resources on these issues. www.trustaz.org

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**Sources:**


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**Additional resources to find information and support about pornography include:**

**Common Sense Media**
https://www.commonsensemedia.org

**Culture Reframed**
https://www.culturereframed.org/

**Educate Empower Kids**
https://educateempowerkids.org

**Fight the New Drug**
https://fightthenewdrug.org

**National Children’s Alliance**
http://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org

**Protect Young Minds**
https://protectyoungminds.org

**The Reward Foundation**
https://www.rewardfoundation.org

**Your Brain on Porn**
https://www.yourbrainonporn.com

**Thank you to Culture Reframed for sharing their knowledge and expertise on this brochure. Without their help we would have not been able to bring awareness and education to the effects of children viewing pornography.**