

Protecting children from online pornography

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How to start a conversation and manage what your children see online

When should you start a conversation?

By the age of 15 children are more likely than not to have been exposed to online pornography so, talking to them early on can equip them with the right coping strategies to deal with it.

And of course the conversation about where babies come from could also be a good trigger to start an age-appropriate conversation about their bodies and what healthy relationships look like.



How to have conversations with children about online pornography

Be natural and straightforward

If you seem embarrassed to talk about sex and pornography your child will also feel uncomfortable and will be unlikely to let you know if they have seen sexual images.

Try techniques like getting them to write things down, or start conversations when they don't have to look you in the eye, for example when in the car.

Be on the lookout for teachable moments

Talking about issues as they come up on TV, in movies or online can help you kick start a conversation and give you the opportunity to talk about your values and beliefs on the issues.

Find out what they already know

Children may hear or see things at school which they have questions about. Use this as an opportunity to ask them more about what they know, dispel any myths and give them the right information.

Give them positive messages

Talk to them about loving sexual relationships and how to have respect for themselves and their boyfriend, girlfriend or partner.

Talk to them about their experiences

A deep discussion on pornography isn't recommended for younger children. However, whatever the ages of your children make sure that they know they can come and talk to you – and that you won't overreact or be shocked by whatever they tell you.

Take a no-blame approach

Recognise that children are naturally curious about sex and like to explore. An interest in sex is a normal part of a child's development.

If your child is young and has come across pornography by mistake, they are much more likely to need reassurance and support.



What to talk to them about

Based on their age, here are some things you might like to discuss with them as they grow:

Young children (5 and over)

Puberty

- Be reassuring when talking to them about the changes they will experience, try to relate it to your own experience
- Make sure they know you are there to answer any questions they have if they are concerned
- Using a good book could help illustrate the more technical parts of puberty

Healthy relationships

- Share your values on what a good relationship looks like, i.e. it must have trust, honesty, respect, communication, and understanding
- Talk with your child about what it means to be a good friend
- Be a good role model and give examples of some of these that they can recognise

Consent

- Talk to them about respecting boundaries and what is and isn't appropriate when it comes to touching
- Make sure they know that they have a say over their own bodies
- Talk to them explicitly about when it's appropriate to be naked and why certain areas of the body are private and shouldn't be touched by others
- [The NSPCC PANTS](#) activity guide is a simple tool to help you discuss this with your child

Critical thinking

- Make them aware that not all the images and content they see online is real
- Encourage them to question what they see and not take anything at face value online
- Ask them to consider who posted the content and why and how they felt about what they read or saw



Tweens (11 and over)

Puberty

- Make sure they know the basics about biological changes of puberty so they know what to expect
- Be open and prepared to answer questions about the physical and emotional changes they'll go through
- Reassure them if they feel insecure about any changes they experience

Relationships

- Re-affirm what a healthy relationship looks like and the importance of having love, respect and trust prior to physical contact
- Talk about how to recognise unhealthy relationships to ensure they can spot the signs and seek support

Body image

- Talk about positive body image and any concerns they have about their own body
- Be a role model - children will often mirror what they see, so promoting good eating habits and being accepting of those of all shapes and sizes can help children have a positive body image
- Encourage them to be critical of media messages and images that promote thinness or unrealistic ideals



Sexual Health

- Discuss what sexuality is, i.e. everything from their biological sex, gender identity and sexual orientation, to pregnancy and reproduction
- Talk about how online pornography and its portrayal of women, consent and extreme sexual behaviours can have a negative impact on them
- Have regular conversations about the importance of consent

Peer pressure

- Talk to them about ways to stand up to peer pressure that may put them at risk i.e. as pressure to send nudes or to take part in sexual activity
- Share your own experience of peer pressure to help them relate and feel more confident to make smarter decisions

- Re-affirm that although it may seem like 'everyone' is doing it, it's often just talk
- Children will seek out boundaries of what is acceptable behaviour so set clear boundaries for behaviour on and offline, taking the time to clearly explain why it's beneficial for them (even if they don't agree)



Teens (13 and over)

Sex and Healthy relationships

- Have an open conversation about their values and attitudes towards sex and relationships to be aware of what they believe and give them the right information
- Emphasise the importance of having love, respect and trust in a healthy relationship and give them examples that they can look to
- Discuss the importance of 'safe sex' and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases
- Help them develop coping strategies when it comes to dealing with pressure from friends to watch porn, have sex or send nudes
- Talk about what consent looks like in a relationship

Pornography - Risks and concerns

- Discuss the fact that porn doesn't often show what sex is like in real life and should not be used as a source of 'sexual education'
- Talk about the ways that it may pressure others to look or behave in a certain way
- Talk about how extreme porn can lead them to develop unrealistic expectations of sexual behaviours
- Talk about the importance of consent and the way women are portrayed

Body image

- Encourage them to challenge unrealistic ideals on body image and be critical about images they see online and in the media
- Discuss their thoughts on body image and any concerns they may have about themselves
- Help them to accept bodies of all shapes and sizes and not to subscribe to an unrealistic body image ideal
- Be a role model by accepting your body and maintaining a positive attitude towards food and exercise



Use parental controls to block adult content

In addition to having conversations, you can use parental controls on your broadband to block adult content and create a safety net for young children.

If they have a mobile phone you can also contact their network provider to apply a Content Lock to stop them accessing adult content on their device.



Set filters on the most popular search engines

Safe search settings can also be activated on Google and Bing. For other search engines, go to their safety settings page. Don't forget to opt for the safety mode on YouTube, iTunes and Google Play.

Resources that can support you and your child

- [Childline](#) offer a confidential helpline (0800 1111) and forum where children can talk to counsellors
- [AMAZE.org](#) provides age-appropriate information on puberty for young people and parents
- [Thinkuknow](#) provide advice on sex and relationships to protect your child
- Set parental controls and privacy settings on devices, apps and platforms with our how-to guides, visit internetmatters.org/setupsafe

What to do if they've seen pornography

If your child has accidentally come across pornography or actively sought it out by searching for it, it will prompt questions about what they have seen.

For young children, try to answer any questions that they have simply and explain that there are some videos online that we shouldn't be watching, all along reassuring the child they didn't do anything wrong.

For older tweens and teens, use it as a moment to start or continue to have conversations about sex and relationships explaining that what they see online doesn't reflect its true nature. In doing so, you'll create an environment where they can be open about asking questions to you or a trusted adult.



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