

TALKING TO YOUR KIDS ABOUT PORNOGRAPHY

It is natural for adolescents to be curious about sex: MediaSmarts' research suggests that one in six grade 7- 11 students use the Internet to look for information about sexual health. Twenty percent of kids that age look for pornography online, but a third see it without looking for it – and close to half take steps to keep from seeing it.

- **Talk to your kids about sex, relationships and consent from a very early age.** Kids are being exposed to sexual images in various media so you need to establish an open and honest dialogue with them so they will come to you with their questions. The biggest worry about porn is that it will influence kids' "sexual scripts" – their idea of what they should do, or what their partners will expect them to do, when they have sex. That's a lot less likely to happen if they've already got good information about sexuality and healthy relationships.
- **Have an ongoing dialogue:** The best approach for tweens and teens is to acknowledge that their interest in relationships and sex is normal, and help them develop the critical thinking skills they need to make good online decisions. While less than half of kids say that a trusted adult has talked to them about porn, three-quarters of those who have say the conversation helped them.
- **Discuss the sexual messages in various media.** Help your kids understand the harmful effects of images that degrade and exploit women or girls, or that pressure boys to conform to a male-gendered model centred on sexual attractiveness and prowess.
- **Help them critically engage with it.** While it's important to help kids understand that pornography is a performance rather than reality, it's not enough for them to know that porn is not real because they often think that other kids believe it is. To help deal with this, ask them:
 - "What do you think other kids your age believe about porn?" (Tell them that most young people do know that porn isn't real and don't expect their partners to do the things you see in porn.)
 - "What do you think someone younger than you should know about pornography before they first see it?"
 - "What kinds of bodies are shown in porn? How do you think that makes people feel?" (You can ask this about other kinds of sexualized media, like social media, advertising or music videos, as well.)
- **Direct your kids to good-quality information:** It's natural for teens to be curious about sexuality, but if the only information your kids are receiving about sexuality is from porn sites you have a problem. There are a lot of great websites that provide information for youth on sexuality and health, such as [Sex&U](#) from the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada. Explore with them the differences between normal, healthy sexual expression and the exploitive activity that is so prevalent online.
- Help them manage their online experience. Younger kids often see inappropriate content in

ads, so you should install ad-blocking plugins or apps such as Privacy Badger or Blokada on all browsers and devices. Teach them to set content filters and limit search terms on search engines, online games and other platforms.

- **Teach older kids “click restraint.”** Unlike in the days of magazines and video stores, it’s very easy for kids to be exposed to content that is more extreme than what they’re looking for, so teach older kids to check things like a video’s title, thumbnail, comments or tags before playing it (you can practice this with YouTube, although tags on that site are not visible to users.) Using content filters can also significantly reduce the number of sexualized videos that they see on social networks such as TikTok or Instagram.
- **Establish clear rules about visiting pornographic sites:** MediaSmarts’ research shows that if there is a rule in the house about what kinds of sites are appropriate to visit, kids are less likely to look for porn and those that do, do it less often. (Keep in mind that computer-savvy kids know how to erase their Internet tracks: open, honest communication is always preferable to invading their privacy.)
- **Tell them that nobody should ever make them watch porn without their consent.** Whether it’s somebody sending them a nude picture, a friend sending a link to a pornographic video, or somebody showing something on their phone, tell kids always have a right to say ‘no’ if they don’t want to see it. If someone doesn’t take ‘no’ for an answer, kids should block them and tell you what happened.

Research with young people suggests that the tween and early teen years (11-13) are the best time to start talking specifically about sexualized media, including pornography, but you can talk to younger kids about things like consent, gender stereotypes, managing online content and healthy relationships.

WHAT IF I FIND OUT MY KID HAS SEEN PORN ONLINE?

If you learn that your child has watched porn, don’t make assumptions about how it happened: they might have sought it out intentionally, but they may have found it while looking for information on sexuality, they may have seen it accidentally as an ad or on a social network, or someone may have sent it to them. Ask them how it happened before planning your next step:

- If it happened accidentally, talk about ways that they can stop that from happening again, like using content controls, turning off autoplay, or not clicking on unknown links.
- If it was on purpose, the tips above will help you have a conversation about what they’ve seen and how it made them feel. But you don’t have to wait until kids have seen porn to talk about it!
- Either way, reassure them anything they’re feeling is normal and that they can talk to you if they have any questions or if they were disturbed, upset or confused by anything they saw.

You can see our website article (<https://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/digital-issues/pornography>) for more tips and information.