

Young People and Pornography

A Briefing for Workers

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1. Introduction

This briefing is the result of discussions and “think tank” events that brought together a number of individuals, academics and national organisations with an interest in sexual health and young people, organised by a working group consisting of **Brook**, the **Centre for HIV and Sexual Health**, **FPA**, and **The National Youth Agency**.

These discussions were prompted by increasing questions and concerns from youth workers, clinicians and other staff in contact with young people about a perceived increase in the nature and extent of pornography available to young people and reports from young people themselves of pressure to conform to sexual behaviours, attitudes and values seen within pornography.

The aim of this paper is NOT to give detailed guidance but rather to support workers to discuss the issue of pornography with young people within a clear context.

This briefing will:

- Give information about what young people tell us
- Give a context and rationale for working with young people on issues relating to pornography
- Provide some suggestions on how to incorporate discussion on pornography into work with young people
- Give information about pornography and the law (see Appendix 1)

The working group spent some time trying to clarify what is meant by “pornography”. The Collins English Dictionary defines pornography as ‘writing, pictures, films, etc designed to stimulate sexual excitement’. There is a very wide continuum of understanding of the term from mildly erotic photographs through to exploitative images of abuse involving, for example, children and animals. Helping young people to think about definitions of ‘pornography’ is one of the tasks workers have when engaging in discussions on this topic.

2. What young people tell us

Anecdotal reports from a range of professionals who work with young people tell us that whilst many young people see pornography in negative terms as degrading and leading to pressure to take part in unwanted sexual practices, there is also an acknowledgement that, because of its explicit nature, it is used to gain greater knowledge of sex.

In a survey for the Channel 4 programme Sex Education versus Pornography:

- Two thirds of 13-17 year olds said that they have viewed pornography
- 60% of teenagers said that pornography has an impact on their sex lives and affects their self-esteem and body image

In a survey of over 400 young people carried out by the working group, the majority of the respondents said that adults should raise the issue of pornography with young people by talking, listening and discussing the issue with them.

Pornography as an issue is a legitimate subject area for workers to discuss with young people because of the effect it can have on young people’s sex and relationships education, their understanding of sex and sexual health and the impact on their self-esteem and body image.

3. Context for workers

Pornography in one form or another has been around for centuries, and generations of adolescents have used pornographic images and stories as part of their normal growing sexual curiosity. However, the rise of electronic communication through the Internet, mobile phones,

video, mp3 devices and DVDs has increased the quantity and altered the nature of the available material in recent years. Whilst previously it usually required cash or a credit card to access materials, there is now a multitude of free sites offering pornographic material, and there is increased opportunity to share this through social networking sites, open access webcam sites and Bluetooth.

With this has come a steady rise in broader sexualised images within advertising, print media, on TV and in films leading perhaps to a greater acceptance of sexual depictions of people within mainstream culture.

Whatever our feelings as individuals, it is clear that censorship, denial or judgemental condemnation are not effective tactics in dealing with the issue with young people. Whether we approve or not, most young people will be coming across pornography in one form or other, whether or not they are actively looking for it. According to the UK Council for Child Internet Safety, 90% of young people said they have viewed pornography, albeit some accidentally.

Some young people will come across pornography accidentally or whilst in the presence of others. Some will be curious and seek it out (including as a source of information about sex in the absence of comprehensive Sex and Relationships Education). Some will become regular users of pornography. For a few it may become an addictive behaviour.

4. Working with young people in educational and youth settings

4.1 Why we should work with young people on issues to do with pornography

- Young people have expressed concerns about and want the opportunity to discuss the impact of pornography
- Through improved knowledge and attitudes young people are more likely to be able to resist the messages of pornography, and any pressures to participate in sexual behaviours that they are not happy with
- Some young people are getting inaccurate information about sexual behaviour from pornography which needs to be corrected

4.2 Requirements when working with young people on issues around pornography

- It is essential to have an organisational policy in place to cover both responding to child protection/safeguarding issues involving pornography and to incidents with young people where pornography might have been involved
- It would be good practice to include discussion of pornography within your SRE policies
- It is important that questions and discussions about pornography are dealt with appropriately so that young people are supported to develop the skills, knowledge and confidence they need to make informed decisions about their own sexual behaviour and relationships, including placing any pornography they might see in an appropriate context
- Questions or issues about pornography may arise in a variety of settings and contexts and professionals need to feel confident about addressing these when they arise
- Ideally, professionals working with young people should be able to access appropriate training to gain the confidence, skills and knowledge to tackle issues around pornography

4.3 Aims of working with young people on issues around pornography

- To enable young people to critically analyse messages from pornography
- To help young people understand that pornography does not reflect reality
- To facilitate discussion about definitions of pornography
- To enable young people to develop the skills to resist pressure to engage in unwanted sexual activities
- To promote a positive view of sex and relationships which includes mutuality, pleasure, and the importance of negotiating and using contraception and having safer sex

4.4 How to raise the issue with young people

As with any group work with young people, especially around sensitive topics, it is important that good ground rules are in place with the group. For example, workers could explore with young people what their knowledge and feelings are around pornography but should not ask them directly if and how they access or use pornography.

Pornography itself should never be used to promote discussion with young people.

There are a range of appropriate ways of approaching the topic of pornography and associated issues. Whilst we can always take the opportunity to discuss the issues with young people on an ad hoc basis (and this may be the only possibility in clinical settings), a proactive approach is most effective within a high quality, comprehensive programme of Sex and Relationships Education (SRE). This can take place in school and non-formal learning environments.

Effective SRE helps young people learn about:

- The qualities of relationships/partnerships
- Respect and caring for self and partner
- The importance of consent and resisting pressure
- The fun, pleasure and fulfilling aspects of sex as well as the inherent risks
- The biology of sexual arousal and behaviour
- Body image and self esteem issues
- Gender roles and stereotypes
- Alternatives to sex for meeting comfort, affection and affirmation needs

It also enables young people to develop skills in:

- Assertiveness and confidence building
- Discerning fact from fiction

The methods suggested below can enable facilitated discussion about pornography, raising issues such as:

- What is pornography and does everyone have the same views about it?
- Is some pornography acceptable and some unacceptable?
- What is the place of pornography in society? For example - Is it entertainment? Is it educational? Is it therapeutic? Is it damaging? Is it degrading or exploitative?
- Does pornography relate to real life? Is what's shown in pornography what 'real' people look like and how 'real' people behave?

A number of methods can be used to address these issues with young people within a wider context of Sex and Relationships Education, such as:

- True/False quizzes
- Values or Agree/Disagree continuums to encourage debate
- 'Dilemma' scenarios and case studies. For example, a 15 year old whose partner wants to take pictures of them having sex to show their friends
- Discussing real life images against airbrushed/perfected photos
- Using the media in popular culture to look at and discuss a variety of issues including body image and how sex is 'used' in many contexts

5. Conclusion

There is often a fear of triggering an adverse reaction from parents and communities when considering the inclusion of pornography as a topic for discussion with young people. However, we hope that this briefing gives reassurance that it is professional and ethical to raise and discuss the issue, with some suggestions as to how this can be done within an appropriate context.

Appendix 1

Pornography and the law

The details included in this appendix are for information purposes only. While every effort has been made to ensure this information is accurate and up to date, it does not, and is not intended to, amount to legal advice

In general, owning or viewing pornography that involves people 18 years old and over is not illegal. A child or young person under the age of 18 watching pornography is not committing an offence (although clearly there may be safeguarding implications). Producing or publishing pornography (as opposed to owning and viewing) is an offence under the **Obscene Publications Act (1959/1964)** if it is likely to “deprave and corrupt” those viewing it.

Recent legislation has made it illegal for anyone to possess “Extreme pornography” – a term introduced in Part 5, Section 63 of **the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008**, which made possession of such images a criminal offence from 26 January 2009. It refers to pornography which is *“grossly offensive, disgusting or otherwise of an obscene character”*, and portrays any of the following:

- (a) an act which threatens a person’s life
- (b) an act which results, or is likely to result, in serious injury to a person’s anus, breasts or genitals
- (c) an act which involves or appears to involve sexual interference with a human corpse
- (d) a person performing or appearing to perform an act of intercourse or oral sex with an animal (whether dead or alive)

The Protection of Children Act (1978 and amendments) makes it illegal to take, make, distribute, show or possess an indecent image of a child. A child is defined as a person who has not reached the age of 18, although the offence now includes images of people “who appear” to be under 18, and also includes “pseudo-photographs”. Accessing an indecent image is considered to be “possessing” the image, meaning that a defendant can be charged if he or she accessed an image online even without saving it. Marriage or being in an “enduring family relationship” could be a defence against this offence as long as the photograph is not shown to a third party. So, for example, a 17 year old young man showing someone a topless picture of his 17 year old girlfriend, or wife, would be committing an offence.

The Sexual Offences Act 2003 (and amended) – as well as making illegal a range of sexual activity with children and young people under 16, the Act includes a number of clauses which have impact on young people and pornography.

Section 12 makes it an offence to cause someone aged under 16, to watch a third person engaging in sexual activity or to look at an image of a person engaging in sexual activity. Where the young person is aged 13 or over but under 16, the prosecution must prove that the defendant did not reasonably believe that the young person was 16 or over. Anyone, then, who shares any pornographic film or image with a young person under 16, would commit this offence.

Section 47 makes it an offence to pay for the sexual services of a child (in this case someone under 18). Whilst the clause is designed to stop child prostitution, there are cases, for example, of young people engaging in sexual activities (such as stripping) on webcam in return for mobile phone credit. This would constitute an offence for the onlooker, regardless of their age.

Section 48 covers causing or inciting child pornography. Again the age of a “child” is anyone under 18, and there is no requirement for there to be any financial gain, so any filming on a mobile phone of sexual activity, say at a party or indeed within a sexually active couple under 18, could be classed as an offence

NB: While the police may not pursue investigations into the activities of young people of similar ages taking pictures of one another where this is consensual, it is nonetheless illegal. It can be a useful input into discussions with young people to highlight that offences associated with indecent images of children relate to young people up to the age of 18 and that what they might consider normal flirting activity on webcam or in a chatroom could be classed as a sexual offence.

Further information

www.parliament.uk

www.homeoffice.gov.uk

Sexual Offences Act 2003 Access on-line

www.cps.gov.uk/legal/s_to_u/sexual_offences_act/

www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2003/ukpga_20030042_en_1

Appendix 2

Findings from Sex Education versus Pornography – Channel Four programme, March 2009

Statistics from the programme relating to young people and pornography

- Two thirds of 13 – 17 year olds in a Channel Four survey said they have viewed pornography
- Other studies show that 90% of young people say that they have viewed pornography, some of those accidentally (UK Council for Child internet Safety)
- The age most young people say that they first viewed pornography is 11 years old (UK Council for Child internet Safety)
- One third of young people in the Channel Four survey said that they learned about sex and women's bodies from pornography
- The average teenager watched 90 minutes of pornography a week
- 60% of teenagers said that pornography impacts on their sex lives and affects their self esteem and body image
- 77% of teenagers said that they think their parents are unaware that they watch pornography

Statistics from the programme relating to the Internet and pornography

- 65% of British homes (16 million households) have Internet access and 25% of all 5 year olds have their own computer
- There are 420 million pages of pornography on the web and approximately 50% of all Internet traffic is sex related
- British and Irish people search for pornography on the Internet more than any other nation, and 12 – 17 year olds are the biggest group of searchers
- When the programme's presenter typed in 'porn' on Google, it took 0.16 seconds for 245 million pornography sites to be displayed, most of which were free to access. Some sites came up automatically with instant messaging where you could talk to others, and in less than 1 minute a site showing abusive images of children came up that the presenter had not clicked on

Statistics from the programme relating to young people, body image and pornography

- 45% of young women were unhappy with their breasts and 20% said they would consider surgery
- Two thirds of young women said that they waxed or shaved their pubic hair
- There has been a 300% rise in labioplasties (labial reduction surgery) in the UK in the last 5 years – it is the UK's fastest rising plastic surgery. British people spend £1 billion a year on plastic surgery
- 27% of young men said they were concerned about the size and shape of their penis

Most young people said that they were not getting enough sex education

For further information go to:
www.channel4.com/sexexperienceuk

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