**FREE EDUCATION RESOURCE PACK**

**Educating young people about the impact and influence of online pornography**

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Whether you feel angry, shocked, or embarrassed at the very mention of the word ‘porn’ or are one of the millions that legally enjoy it, most adults agree that when it comes to children and young people, pornography is not the best form of sex education. Yet research repeatedly shows that this is exactly where many young people are educating themselves[[1]](#footnote-1), freely choosing from a self-selected curriculum of online porn and video clips shared via social media.

These easy to use activities can help educators explore an emotive topic in an engaging and non-judgemental way. Complete with facilitators notes, they give credible information, explore values and attitudes and help develop the critical thinking skills of young people aged 13-19 years old.

Learning outcomes

* That porn sex is not representative of real life sexual relationships.
* That porn can influence how young people feel about themselves and others.
* That consent is of paramount importance in any sexual activity.
* That it is illegal for under 18’s to access porn and/or engage in image based sexual abuse.

**Facilitator notes**

These activities are written with reference to the National Curriculum for Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and The Sex Education Forum core values for good quality RSE, which are:

* Mutual respect
* Loving and happy relationships
* Rights to information, safety and health
* Equality; particularly on the basis of gender and sexual orientation
* Responsibility for oneself and others[[2]](#footnote-2)

Please note, the correct anatomical terms for body parts are used throughout, along with the term ‘partner’ rather than specifying gender. ‘Sex’ in this context includes any sexual activity regardless of sexual orientation. The message underpinning everything is that any sexual activity, from kissing to penetrative sex, must be consensual.

Finally, before use please assess the maturity, different learning needs, and cultural diversity of young people to ensure that the content is appropriate.

Setting Ground Rules

To create a safe learning environment that encourages positive conversations set clear boundaries, or ground rules, before starting. These should be reinforced at the start of each activity and could include:

* Respect
* Confidentiality (within professional safeguarding boundaries)
* Listening to each other
* Not asking personal questions (of each other or the facilitator)

The law – a quick guide

In the UK most pornography is legal for adults over the age of 18 but it is illegal for anyone under 18 to buy or view porn, e.g. buying films rated 18R (the ‘R’ means restricted) or setting up an account with a free online porn site. It is also illegal to take a sexually explicit photo or to film anyone naked (or engaging in a sex act) under the age of 18 and/or ‘incite’ an under 18 to watch porn or take sexually explicit pictures or films, including in the guise of a loving relationship or where the child appears complicit. The law is further broken if this material is shared with friends, e.g. via text, or posted online and the perpetrator could be charged, even if they are under 18 too.

**Activity 1**

Time: 20 minutes

How to do it

This ‘feet first’ activity explores values and attitudes to pornography. Allocate the left side of the room the “Agree” zone; the right the “Disagree” zone, and in the middle a zone for those who are “Undecided”.

In turn read out the series of statements below, asking everyone to move to the zone that best reflects their opinion. Leave space between statements to discuss, ask questions, and debate any issues before moving on.

Conclude that porn sex and real life sex are two very different things*.* Whilst people have different views on the ethics of porn, ranging from harmless fun to those that believe it is dangerous, immoral or degrading, in the UK pornography is regulated by law. This is to protect children and young people from harm and exploitation, including online grooming and image based sexual abuse, sometimes referred to as ‘revenge porn’.

**Porn statements**

1. **Everyone will see a pornographic image at least once in their life, it’s unavoidable.**

*Whilst it is true that accessibility to porn and explicit images has never been easier, some people will do everything they can to avoid it. This can be for lots of different reasons, including faith and culture, as well as because they don’t enjoy it or think it is exploitative of women.*

1. **Watching porn is just a bit of fun that doesn’t mean anything.**

*Again, this may be true for some people, but not all. Research suggests that porn can impact on real life relationships and influence how people view themselves and others.*

1. **Pornography teaches you important things about sex that sex education leaves out.**

*Porn sex is not the same as real life sex, therefore educating yourself about it by watching porn is about the same as trying to learn about real life from a superhero’s movie. Some things might look familiar, but the superhero is a fantasy version of a human, doing things that would harm in real life.*

1. **There is social pressure on males to say they enjoy watching porn, whether they do or not.**

*Not everyone likes porn, and first experiences can vary from people saying they thought it was funny, shocking, disgusting or even a bit scary. Some experience peer pressure to watch porn. Be an upstander, not a bystander, if you see someone being pressured.*

1. **Consent is always clearly shown in porn.**

*All porn is fantasy sex and if consent is not central to the plot, it is often not shown. If it is a porn industry film, the paid actors sign a contract agreeing to what happens. Producers of the more extreme end of the legal porn market, depicting sexual acts where physical harm could occur, have begun to feature a clip at the start where everyone in the film states they have consented. However, much of the content uploaded to the big online sites is ‘homemade’ so it can be impossible to know if what is being watched is consensual or if it is in fact sexual assault or rape.*

1. **Most porn promotes a certain type of body as ‘normal’, for example women with large breasts or men with a large penis.**

*Breasts and penises are usually smaller than those in porn, where some performers have been chosen for their extreme size. For example, the average penis size in porn is 9-10” but the average size penis in the UK is 5-6”.*

1. **Porn typically focuses on male pleasure.**

*In real life each person’s feelings and arousal are equally important, but sex in heterosexual porn is often focussed on women gratifying male desire. This can reinforce stereotypes about males being sexually dominant and females as submissive, which is unhelpful.*

1. **Pornography objectifies women by showing them as sex objects.**

*Many people, regardless of gender, believe this to be true. Ethical porn challenges by promoting equality, more representative body shapes and showing different genders and sexualities. However, unlike most porn content available from the big sites, ethical porn is not free of charge.*

1. **Watching lots of porn from a young age can lead some men to have problems getting an erection with a real life partner.**

*Porn can cause physical changes to the brain over time. There is some research to suggest that early exposure to porn can desensitise the brain, meaning that you need to see more and more extreme forms of sex to arouse you. This can mean that some men find it harder to get an erection with a real life partner.*

1. **Watching porn can make people more sexually aggressive.**

*Australian research found that adolescents who consumed violent pornography were six times more likely to be sexually aggressive compared to those who viewed non-violent pornography or no pornography.[[3]](#footnote-3)*

**Activity 2: Porn bodies Vs Real Life bodies**

Time: 30 minutes

How to do it

Divide into small groups of 3 or 4, with large sheets of paper and coloured marker pens. Explain that their task is to create a body map of the ‘perfect’ body. It is up to the members of each group to decide the gender of their perfect body. Words can be added to the drawings to give more detailed descriptions of size, shape etc.

After ten minutes drawing time, invite each group to present their picture in turn. The pictures should be stuck up on the wall to form a ‘gallery of perfection’.

Together review the pictures, using these prompt questions to facilitate a discussion as you compare what has been drawn:

1. How did you define ‘perfect’?

*For example, is the focus on being healthy, sexually attractive or something else?*

1. When putting together a composite of the ‘perfect’ body, where did you get your inspiration?

*For example, real life, social media, porn etc.*

Point out that very few people look like the photos of celebrities on social media, including the celebrities themselves without the use of filters or when they are not at work. Suggest that unlike mainstream celebrity pictures, porn enables the viewer to see different body parts closeup, and continue the discussion by asking:

How might pornography contribute to body image stereotypes?

*For example, perpetuating stereotypes about large breasts, big penis etc. Porn also provides a drop down menu of genres that narrow this even further, arguably reinforcing cultural and ethnic stereotypes. This can make people think that the idealised bodies seen in porn are ‘normal’ and anything else ‘abnormal’.*

How could this impact on a young person’s body confidence?

*For example, many young people see naked bodies in porn before they see them in real life, which informs their understanding of the ‘average body’. They can then judge both themselves and others harshly against them, which could impact negatively on body confidence. Alternatively, if their own body does reflect those seen in porn, they may place a higher value on this than the other skills and qualities that are important in a real life intimate relationship, like trust, kindness, and respect.*

Conclude that pornography tends to show an idealised erotic version of bodies. In real life people find different things attractive and there is far more emphasis on personality, shared values and things that can only be discovered by getting to know someone. For example, a beautiful face does not guarantee that you will get on with someone, or even like them.

**Activity 3: Positive Relationships**

Time: 30 minutes

How to do it

Working in small groups again, give out sets of the Activity 3: Positive Relationship Cards. Explain that the group task is to discuss each of the 21 cards in turn and then select the 10 they think form the components most important in a healthy, loving, intimate relationship.

From here the young people can build a group pyramid that ranks cards from the most important card at the top, the next two forming the next layer and the four considered of lesser importance forming the bottom row along the bottom. There is no definite right order, it is for them to decide for themselves.

Allow up to 15 minutes for discussion and to reach agreement and bring everyone back together. Invite each group to share their pyramid, asking them to explain their choices and the order they were placed in. Where there is a difference of opinion facilitate discussion to hear everyone’s point of view.

Point out that pornography depicts lots of different types of intimate sexual relationships and that many people say they learn about sex from watching porn. Thinking back to the discussions about the things most important to them in a relationship ask:

1. **How are the things your group ranked as highly important in your pyramid represented in pornography?**

*The point of pornography is sex rather than showing the emotions and feelings associated with an intimate relationship. Critics are also concerned that consent is not always explicit in porn.*

1. **What other things might be seen as important instead?**

*Some sex in pornography is criticised for being aggressive, forceful and even dangerous if copied in real life. It has been argued that heterosexual porn perpetuates gender stereotypes and is usually filmed from the male perspective.*

1. **How might learning about sex and intimacy from watching porn impact on expectations of a relationship in real life? Are these positive or negative?**

*Encourage some balance in the discussion, for example negative unrealistic expectations could be formed about body size and shape, frequency of sex and how long it lasts etc. Positive could be that people seem body confident and some appear to enjoy sex. Again, discuss as you go along to consider different opinions.*

Conclude that whilst there is no clear benchmark for what constitutes ‘normal’ sex, pornography can impact on expectations about sexual behaviour in the real world. This can potentially put pressure on people to engage in sexual activity they either don’t feel ready for or don’t want. Point out plenty of intimate relationships do not include penetrative sex for reasons including wanting to wait for marriage, faith or cultural expectations. Understanding that the sex seen in porn is intended to entertain, arouse and keep viewers watching, rather being representative of what happens in real life can help keep things in perspective.

Activity 3: Positive Relationship Cards

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Good body** | **Kindness** | **Communication** |
| **Consent** | **Trust** | **Respect** |
| **Understanding** | **Boundaries** | **Love** |
| **Compatibility** | **Friendship** | **Commitment** |
| **Equality** | **Exclusivity** | **Honesty** |
| **Emotional connection** | **Patience** | **Sexual attraction** |
| **Mutual pleasure** | **Fun** | **Affection** |

**Activity 4: Communicating Consent**

Time: 45 minutes

How to do it

Ask young people to share with a partner a time when they have misunderstood the meaning of a text or message sent to them.

a) what happened

b) how the misunderstanding occurred

c) how it was resolved

Then invite comments on how it feels to get it wrong or misunderstand the intentions of another. This could include feeling amused, embarrassed, angry, ashamed, or confused. Empathise that it can be easy to misunderstand the meaning behind digital messages, especially when the number of characters is limited. Acknowledge that this can be funny but could also be harmful to relationships.

Suggest that misunderstandings can happen in intimate situations too, which is why it is so important to have consent before starting any sexual activity. If consent is not freely and actively given, or is withdrawn at any stage, then whatever is happening must stop.

Divide the young people into groups of four and allocate each a set of Consent Cards, a sheet of paper and a marker. Ask for a volunteer from each group to take a marker pen and draw a straight line down the centre of the page.

The task is to discuss the scenarios on the cards and then place them either to the left of the line, which means that consent was given, or to the right of it meaning that the sexual activity was non-consensual.

Allow up to 20 minutes for discussion to reach agreement and then facilitate a feedback session, spending time reviewing any that differ and reinforcing that sexual activity without consent is sexual assault and penetrative sex (vaginal, anal or oral) without consent is rape. More complicated than a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’, it’s important that everyone understands that someone must have the freedom and capacity to be able to consent.

Messages to reinforce include:

* Any sexual touching or activity requires consent
* Only you can decide when you are ready to have sex
* If someone says ‘no’, including you, they do not mean ‘yes’
* The way someone looks, dresses, talks or acts is never an invitation for sex
* The absence of consent doesn’t mean ‘yes’
* Consent to sex once does not mean consent to sex every time
* If someone is asleep, unconscious, drunk or drugged, they cannot consent to sexual activity
* If someone is being exploited, bullied, coerced, blackmailed or tricked, they cannot consent to sex
* No is always no, whatever the context.

Move on to ask:

‘If you are watching porn, how do you know if the sex you are seeing is consensual?’

Round off the discussion by reflecting that consent in porn is often not shown or is unimportant to the ‘story’. Point out that whilst some porn actors make it clear at the start that they consent to what happens in the film, not all online porn is so transparent. This means that it can be hard to know if what you are watching is consensual, or if you are witnessing sexual assault and/or rape. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that some content has been uploaded to porn sites without people knowing. Whilst this is illegal, it can be hard to trace, and some victims only know about it because someone they know sees it and tells them. They then have to ask the site to take it down, but they will never know how many times the video has been shared, downloaded, reposted etc. This can impact negatively on mental health and wellbeing, as well as potentially damaging other areas of their life, including future relationships.

**Activity 4: Consent Cards**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| You have been sexually touching someone, but it’s late and they fall asleep. You want to continue, and they don’t say ‘no’, so you carry on. | Your partner says they are not in the mood for sex. After 30 minutes begging them to reconsider, they stop saying ‘no’ and give in. | You want to have sex on a first date but your partner refuses. You remind them that you paid for the date, and they finally agree to oral sex to say thank you. |
| Your partner wants sexual intimacy, but you aren’t ready for it. Every time they touch your genitals, you push their hand away. | You ask someone you fancy to watch porn with you. They refuse so you send it to their phone. You’re sure they will enjoy it if they see it. | Your partner threatens to tell people you’re useless in bed unless you have sex with them. You do it but feel bad afterwards. |
| Your partner agrees to sex but changes their mind just before penetration. You feel disappointed but stop anyway. | Your partner is drunk. When you initiate sex, they just lie there. You’re sure if they didn’t want it to happen, they would have said so. | You tell your partner that your ex was better looking. You hope this will make them jealous enough to have sex with you. |
| You threaten to split up every time your partner says they don’t want to have sex. This makes them feel insecure, so they say yes. | You ask someone to send you nude pics. You know they fancy you so you tell them you will go out with them if they do. | Your partner gets aggressive and forceful during intimacy. You don’t enjoy it but don’t know how to tell them. |

1. BBC3 ‘What’s the harm?’ 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.sexeduc>ationforum.org.uk [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/effects-pornography-children-and-young-people-snapshot> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)