

ADDRESSING PORNOGRAPHY THROUGH PSHE EDUCATION

This briefing draws together key research into effective education about pornography within a wider relationships and sex education curriculum. It is intended for PSHE leads and teachers who are beginning to teach about pornography and its potential harms to young people, or who are reviewing their existing PSHE education curriculum content.

Why teach about pornography in relationships and sex education?

Statutory requirements

PSHE education teachers have a clear duty to teach about pornography under the new statutory requirements for the subject.

The Department for Education's statutory guidance for [Relationships education, Relationships and Sex education and Health education](#) outlines PSHE content that all schools in England will be required to cover from September 2020.

Within the secondary phase (under the heading of Online and Media – pg. 28) the guidance specifies that pupils must know:

- *the impact of viewing harmful content*
- *that specifically sexually explicit material, e.g. pornography, presents a distorted picture of sexual behaviours, can damage the way people see themselves in relation to others and negatively affect how they behave towards sexual partners*

The guidance also makes reference to pupils' understanding of the law (pg. 30):

- *Pupils should be made aware of the relevant legal provisions when relevant topics are being taught, including for example... pornography.*

Within the primary phase, teaching focuses on a foundational understanding that prepares pupils for education directly addressing the potential harms of pornography in the future. This includes:

- *the rules and principles for keeping safe online, how to recognise risks, harmful content and contact, and how to report them*
- *practical steps pupils can take in a range of different contexts to improve or support respectful relationships*
- *the importance of permission-seeking and giving in relationships with friends, peers and adults*
- *what kinds of boundaries are appropriate in friendships with peers and others (including in a digital context)*
- *that each person's body belongs to them, and the differences between appropriate and inappropriate or unsafe physical, and other, contact*

Are children and young people watching pornography?

Online pornography is easily accessible and often free. Research continues to demonstrate a growing number of young people accessing pornography, and at a younger age, with children as young as seven accidentally encountering pornography online¹.

A recent BBFC report, found that:

51% of 11 to 13 year-olds

66% of 14 to 15 year-olds

79% of 16 to 17 year-olds

had seen pornography.

This research also highlighted that in the majority of cases, young people's first time viewing pornography was accidental. Over 60% of children aged 11-13 who had seen pornography said their viewing of it was unintentional.

Only 18% of 11-13 year olds who had seen pornography had looked for it intentionally – increasing to 29% by ages 16-17.

The most common unintentional routes include:

- accidentally typing words into search engines such as 'sex' or 'porn' without knowing what they mean
- receiving links from friends to pornographic websites without knowing the content
- adverts or pop-ups from other websites (often streaming, sports or games websites)
- being shown content on a friend's phone

What's the aim of teaching about pornography?

The principal aim of teaching young people about pornography is to keep them safe from harm.

¹ British Board of Film Classification: Young People, Pornography and Age Verification (2020); Martellozzo, E., Monaghan, A., Adler, J.R., Davidson, J., Leyva, R. and Horvath, M.A.H. (2016) I wasn't sure it was normal to watch it. London: NSPCC

As with other potentially harmful commodities, such as junk food, alcohol and illegal drugs, young people are likely to encounter pornography and some will go on to view and use it regularly. This does not mean they will necessarily suffer harm, but there are real risks. Young people therefore have a right to the knowledge and skills they need to manage situations involving pornography.

PSHE education aims to do this by supporting young people to act autonomously, that is, to make decisions in line with their deep interests, values and goals. These are likely to be decisions that will make them safer, healthier and happier². Importantly, such decisions are ‘theirs’ and not experienced as governed or controlled by external forces.

With regards to pornography, this means young people should be able to make decisions that are fully informed, not only with knowledge of potential harms, but also with consideration of whether pornography fits with their values, goals and desires for their lives. They should understand what influences people’s decisions to use pornography and how such influences might be in conflict with their best interests.

To do this they need opportunities to explore the impact pornography can have on attitudes, behaviours and relationships. They should know the potential harms and understand the strategies employed by online pornography companies to affect the behaviour of their users. They should also be able to recognise when pornography becomes problematic for them and others, and how and where to seek help.

What are the harms?

Pornography is often presented as a question of freedom of choice, simply part of people’s freedom to pursue their sexual lives without interference. And this can be debated in relation to adult use of pornography, but large numbers of children are being exposed to pornography at a point at which their understanding of sex, sexuality and relationships is developing. They need high quality relationships and sex education and at best pornography is a poor sex educator, at worst it is a corrosive one.

Importantly, accessing pornography online is different to offline in terms of the volume and range of content young people will encounter. Online pornography also differs in how it is presented to young people – often supported by algorithmic targeting and persuasive design

techniques. Research shows that online pornography can cause real harm and put young people’s freedom to develop meaningful, intimate relationships at risk. These research findings include:

- Watching pornography can make real-world sex less enjoyable.
- Pornography can make people feel less happy in their relationships.
- Pornography can lead people to think about sex a lot more. This can make it harder for them to enjoy their friendships and other interests.
- Pornography can lead to people viewing others, especially women, as ‘sex objects’ and not as people with intelligence and feelings, meaning they are respected less.
- Over time, pornography can shape the types of things people are aroused by, and this may lead to an increased interest in extreme or violent pornography.

For more information on the research into the harms of pornography, see [What is the impact of pornography on young people? A briefing for educators](#).

It is important not to see these harms as inevitable consequences. Just as we take it for granted that drug education will cover the risks and harms of drug use, we recognise that we also need to equip young people to manage internal and external forces which may affect their decision making. The same principle applies in education about pornography; if young people are aware of the potential harms, then this will support them to make more informed decisions.

What’s different about online pornography?

Online pornography is ubiquitous, free and can be accessed anonymously. These three facts alone differentiate it from offline pornography, and have driven children and young people’s increased exposure to it. A further difference, however, is the business models and technology practices of online pornography companies³. These practices are important for young people to understand given their potential influence on the choices they make.

² Ryan, R. Deci, E. (2017) Self-determination theory: basic psychological needs in motivation, development and wellness

³ Johnson, J. A. (2011). Mapping the feminist political economy of the online commercial pornography industry: A network approach. *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics*, 7(2), 189-208

Comparing top-shelf magazines with online pornography is like comparing newspapers with your Facebook news feed. The content of a news article might be the same, but the print publisher has no idea how long people spent reading it, what they read after they finished it, and whether they 'liked' it or shared it with a friend. They also have only a general sense of who their readers are, and can't say which individuals are reading the article at any given time.

Compare this to news online. Tech platforms know, based on data gathered online, who is reading an article, how long they spent reading it, what they read next, whether they shared it and with whom. They know readers' gender, how old they are, what they are interested in and potentially their current finances, emotional health, relationship status and a host of other revealing information. This intimate knowledge of users and their behaviour enables platforms to target them with content to try to keep people on the platform for longer or encourage them to share content further.

It may be assumed that online pornography companies deploy these same techniques. Just like other tech companies, they will test content on different groups to work out which thumbnail image on a video gets the most clicks, or how long to allow free access to a video before pushing users towards a paywall. They also gather data on their users to better target them with tailored content as well as advertising.

Whilst on a news site this might be tailored content related to your interests, one method pornography companies may benefit from is viewers' repeated exposure to extreme or violent content (through adverts and thumbnails) moving them from more 'typical' sexual fantasies to those which they have to pay to access. This manipulation, alongside habituation and desensitization, can disrupt viewer's typical sexual scripts and may engender within them a desire for more extreme content⁴. This can lead viewers to believe that this is what inherently 'turns them on' when in fact they have been invited and trained, even 'groomed', to find these more extreme scenes sexually gratifying⁵. Pornography also promotes sexual scripts that are impersonal and performance-oriented, presenting others as objects for an individual's gratification. For young people encountering this content at an early stage of their sexual development, this can be damaging.

Teaching about data, privacy and personal information

This use of data by tech firms has been the subject of public concern for the last few years, and teaching about it is included in the statutory guidance for Relationships, Sex and Health Education.

This provides teachers with an opportunity to incorporate facts about data use and practices into teaching about pornography, and if young people are more aware and attuned to this business model, they may find it easier to detach themselves from it. The statutory guidance for Relationships, Sex and Health Education covers data use and targeting as follows:

In the primary phase:

- **how to be a discerning consumer of information online including understanding that information, including that from search engines, is ranked, selected and targeted.**

In the secondary phase:

- **how advertising and information is targeted at them and how to be a discerning consumer of information online.**
- **how information and data is generated, collected, shared and used online.**

How can we teach about pornography effectively?

For some, teaching about pornography will be a new aspect of the PSHE curriculum. Others have taught about it for some time, but may now want to update and revisit their planning.

Whatever stage you are at, lessons should be designed or reviewed with the following guidance in mind, and taught by well-trained, confident teachers who recognise the value of this teaching.

Teaching strategies should include:

- **Start with values and expectations:** For example, with secondary pupils, consider approaches that begin by helping them to reflect on their own values and expectations of sexual encounters. Discussions about the features of a positive/healthy sexual experience or relationship should elicit ideas such as:
 - ◇ *It is consensual*
 - ◇ *It feels good for both people*
 - ◇ *The people have a good connection*
 - ◇ *Caring about the other person's needs, wants and pleasure*
 - ◇ *Both people have body-esteem and feel comfortable in front of the other person*

⁴ D'Orlando, F. (2011). The demand for pornography. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 12(1), 51-75.

⁵ Whisnant, R. (2010). From Jekyll to Hyde: The grooming of male pornography consumers. *Everyday pornography*, 114-133.

Discussions in this area could also try to move pupils away from a concept of sex as 'performative' (e.g. 'What should I look like during sex?' 'What noises should I make?' 'What positions?' 'Am I doing it right?') and focus instead on sex as interaction between people who care for one another. This might also focus on features of sexual interactions including:

- **Mutual enthusiasm:** People only do things they are both enthusiastic about, without any force, persuasion or trickery involved.
- **Equality:** Sex takes place in equal relationships, in which people are equally able to agree to, or say no to (and withdraw from) sexual activity without fear of negative consequences.
- **Empathy:** People think about, care about, and respond to their own and the other person's feelings before, during and after sex⁶.

With this values and rights based approach as a starting point, pupils can then explore how pornography undermines and erodes these aspects of 'good sex' in the real world. This could be conducted in an activity which asks pupils to consider factors of positive sexual encounters, and whether pornography undermines these factors.

- **Knowledge is key:** There is a wealth of information about the potential harms of pornography on its viewers. Young people have a right to be informed about this, but to date, it has not been widely explored in this context. Exploring these facts with young people – along with their viewpoints, attitudes, misconceptions and beliefs about pornography – is critical. Young people can't make choices about the role pornography plays in their lives, without access to the range of facts about its potential impact.
- **Exploring influences:** When teaching about the influences on young people's decisions and behaviours, explore the techniques used by the pornography industry to manipulate these decisions (for example through 'targeted content' and 'persuasive design'). This may help young people to recognise the paths that viewers are led on, and to disrupt this process. You may find it helpful to draw comparisons with other online platforms and their sophisticated methods for keeping users engaged.
- **Consider using a social norms approach (but with caution!):** Highlighting and celebrating positive views about consent and gender equality can help to promote positive social norms within the class, and to powerfully undermine the myth that 'everyone watches porn / thinks porn is OK'. This approach is most

successful when views are arrived at through structured discussion, rather than imposed by the teacher. Equally, if pupils appear to be demonstrating particularly positive attitudes towards pornography, highlighting this is likely to be detrimental to a norms approach. As with all PSHE education, pupils should never be asked directly if they have seen pornography, as this may lead to inappropriate classroom disclosures. An alternative approach might be to ask pupils what they would consider appropriate for younger children (such as their siblings), or themselves at a younger age, as this can illicit more reflective views about the relative harms of pornography.

- **Analysing pornography's impact:** A scenario-based approach can be powerful in teaching pupils about how pornography exerts its impact on young people and their relationships. For example, using scenarios where both people in a relationship feel pressure to conform to certain expectations of sexual behaviours – not because they are directly putting pressure on one another, but because of having internalised messages from pornography.
- **Support and signpost:** As with all effective PSHE education lessons, ensure support is signposted for those who might struggle with pornography use, for example by including activities such as:
 - ◇ Strategies young people can employ if they are worried about their pornography use (for example setting themselves a 'goal' to reduce the frequency with which they view pornography; writing a list of reasons why they don't want to look at pornography; considering what they can do to distract themselves when thinking about accessing pornography).
 - ◇ Scenarios which require giving advice to a friend (ensuring this is non-shaming and supportive).
 - ◇ Scenarios which encourage pupils to challenge a fictitious friend's or partner's seemingly porn-influenced behaviours or views.
 - ◇ Evaluating different sources of support and when or why they might need to be accessed in different circumstances.

⁶ Coy, M., Kelly, L., Vera-Gray, F., Garner, M., & Kanyeredzi, A. (2016). From 'no means no' to 'an enthusiastic yes': Changing the discourse on sexual consent through sex and relationships education. In *Global perspectives and key debates in sex and relationships education: Addressing issues of gender, sexuality, plurality and power* (pp. 84-99); Lamb, S. (2010). Toward a sexual ethics curriculum: Bringing philosophy and society to bear on individual development. *Harvard Educational Review*, 80(1), 81-106; Heyes, J. M. (2019). Towards a virtue ethical approach to relationships and sex education. *Journal of Moral Education*, 48(2), 165-178.

Teaching strategies should avoid:

- It is both inappropriate and unnecessary to show sexually explicit images or film in lessons on pornography. There are clear legal and ethical issues related to showing sexualised or pornographic images in lessons for any purpose, and this should be avoided⁷.
- Avoid approaches that (even unintentionally) normalise pornography. This would include messages that suggest that everyone has seen it, or that all boys have, or that all young people have high sexual interest, as this will not always be the case. This kind of language or approach supports feelings that it is 'okay' to watch it or that it is atypical for boys not to be watching pornography. Although the prevalence statistics above may be of interest to our professional understanding of the issue, they should not be used as part of teaching about pornography, and we must remember that at least half of our pupils have not seen pornography at all, and of those who have seen it, many did not choose to.
- Beware of approaches that reinforce gender norms, such as conveying boys or masculinity as somehow problematic, either due to male interest in pornography or the typical masculine behaviours shown in pornography. It is relevant to stress here that many girls are also seeing pornography (either intentionally or unintentionally)⁸, so this is by no means purely a 'male' issue. Similarly, be aware of approaches that make implicit assumptions about heterosexuality, for example, which assume that all young people are only encountering heterosexual pornography.
- Avoid limiting your teaching to a simplistic approach that centres on how pornography depicts unrealistic bodies and body parts. Whilst this is relevant and should be included, just focussing on this is insufficient for effective pornography education. Young people are likely to already know that pornography depicts unrealistic bodies, but knowing this is not enough to help them manage situations involving pornography.
- As we have explored in [What is the impact of pornography on young people? A briefing for educators](#), there is clear evidence to demonstrate that pornography can have harmful effects. It is important that this is presented to pupils. Therefore, avoid approaches that are 'light' on information and simply encourage pupils to discuss or draw their own conclusions about pornography without adequate information to do so. A neutral approach which suggests the evidence is

somehow unclear or inconclusive should be avoided as it is misleading for young people. Similarly, a 'worst case scenario' or deterministic approach which implies that anyone who views pornography is going to suffer harm is also unhelpful, as this is not true and is likely to be rejected by pupils.

- Avoid teaching about pornography as a one-off input, such as a single session, drop down day, or visiting speaker/theatre group. Whilst these approaches might supplement teaching, education about pornography needs to be embedded within the wider context of healthy relationships and sex education in order to be effective.

How to build pornography education into RSE and PSHE education

When should schools teach about pornography?

Most teaching to address the issue of pornography won't be *about* pornography. For example, teaching about healthy relationships, consent, media literacy and body image will all form the foundations upon which specific teaching about pornography can be added.

Schools retain the freedom to decide when teaching about pornography directly is most appropriate for the needs of their pupils. Schools might make these decisions using national data sources, understanding from pastoral colleagues, and baseline assessments that establish pupils' attitudes and understanding; this will help to outline pupils' prior knowledge and their potential misconceptions or gaps in understanding. However, bear in mind the research demonstrating when young people come into contact with pornography – in order to be effective preventative education, leaving any reference of pornography until Year 11, for example, is simply too late for too many of our pupils.

Should schools be teaching about pornography in KS1-2?

The primary PSHE curriculum should develop the knowledge and skills pupils will need to support education about pornography later in their education, for example teaching

⁷ Hancock and Barker, The use of porn in sex and relationships education, 2018

⁸British Board of Film Classification: Young People, Pornography and Age Verification (2020)

about personal and online safety, peer influence, conflicting feelings and emotions, as well as risk identification and management. It is also important to recognise that some primary children will encounter pornography online. Imagine an 11-year-old pupil who has seen something online that has made them feel ‘funny’ – what would we want that pupil to know, understand and be able to do in order to make sense of the situation?

The primary curriculum will also lay the foundations of key skills and attributes such as empathy, respect, communication and negotiation, and provide opportunities for pupils to clarify their own beliefs and values, develop their self-esteem and know how to seek help and support for themselves and others. Pupils will need this understanding to enjoy healthy relationships as they grow up and move into adulthood.

Developing a spiral approach

The PSHE Association’s [Programme of Study](#) for PSHE Education (Key stage 1 – 5) and [Programme Builders](#) demonstrate how schools can embed teaching about pornography into their relationships and sex education units of work, and broader PSHE education curriculum.

The Programme of Study outlines the relevant learning opportunities for each key stage, across the three core themes. The Programme Builders offer different models of how these learning opportunities can be further broken down into half termly topics for each year group, with suggested learning outcomes. The table below shows some of the relevant learning opportunities that support effective pornography education across key stages 1-5:

Key Stage 1	<p>H28. about rules and age restrictions that keep us safe</p> <p>H34. basic rules to keep safe online ... the importance of telling a trusted adult if they come across something that scares them</p> <p>R13. to recognise that some things are private and the importance of respecting privacy; that parts of their body covered by underwear are private</p> <p>R14. that sometimes people may behave differently online, including by pretending to be someone they are not</p> <p>L9. that not all information seen online is true</p>
Key Stage 2	<p>H37. reasons for following and complying with regulations and restrictions (including age restrictions); how they promote personal safety and wellbeing with reference to social media, television programmes, films, games and online gaming</p> <p>H42. strategies for keeping safe online, including how to manage requests for personal information or images of themselves and others; what to do if frightened or worried by something seen or read online and how to report concerns, inappropriate content and contact</p> <p>R23. about why someone may behave differently online, including pretending to be someone they are not; strategies for recognising risks, harmful content and contact; how to report concerns</p> <p>L12. how to ... make safe, reliable choices from search results</p> <p>L15. recognise things appropriate to share and things that should not be shared on social media; rules surrounding distribution of images</p>
Key Stage 3	<p>H3. the impact that media and social media can have on how people think about themselves and express themselves, including regarding body image, physical and mental health</p> <p>R2. indicators of positive, healthy relationships and unhealthy relationships, including online</p> <p>R7. how the media portrays relationships and the potential impact of this on people’s expectations of relationships</p> <p>R8. that the portrayal of sex in the media and social media (including pornography) can affect people’s expectations of relationships and sex</p> <p>R9. to clarify and develop personal values in friendships, love and sexual relationships</p> <p>R11. to evaluate expectations about gender roles, behaviour and intimacy within romantic relationships</p> <p>R31. that intimate relationships should be pleasurable</p> <p>R43. the role peers can play in supporting one another to resist pressure and influence, challenge harmful social norms and access appropriate support</p>

Key Stage 4	<p>H3. how different media portray idealised and artificial body shapes; how this influences body satisfaction and body image and how to critically appraise what they see and manage feelings about this</p> <p>R2. the role of pleasure in intimate relationships, including orgasms</p> <p>R8. to understand the potential impact of the portrayal of sex in pornography and other media, including on sexual attitudes, expectations and behaviours</p> <p>R9. to recognise, clarify and if necessary challenge their own values and understand how their values influence their decisions, goals and behaviours</p> <p>R15. the legal and ethical responsibilities people have in relation to online aspects of relationships</p> <p>R22. to evaluate different motivations and contexts in which sexual images are shared, and possible legal, emotional and social consequences</p>
Key Stage 5	<p>H2. to recognise how idealised images of bodies and pressure to conform, can adversely affect body image and self-esteem; strategies to manage this pressure</p> <p>H3. to understand the issues and considerations relating to body enhancement or alteration, including long-term consequences</p> <p>R1. how to articulate their relationship values and to apply them in different types of relationships</p> <p>R5. to manage personal safety in new relationships, including online activity...</p> <p>R6. to develop and maintain healthy, pleasurable relationships and explore different levels of emotional intimacy</p> <p>R7. to evaluate different degrees of emotional intimacy in relationships, the role of pleasure, how they understand the difference between 'love' and 'lust'</p> <p>L23. to set and maintain clear boundaries around personal privacy and to manage online safety in all its forms, including seeking help when appropriate</p>

Other documents to support you

Further guidance

- [Handling complex issues safely in the PSHE education classroom](#) – detailed advice about establishing a safe classroom environment for discussing complex issues.
- [Frequently asked questions on pornography and sharing of sexual images in PSHE education](#) – responses to frequently asked questions from PSHE Association members about this topic.

Quality assured lessons — secondary phase

- [PSHE Association: Guidance on teaching about consent](#) – This set of lesson plans relating to consent includes a specific lesson on pornography, sexual images and consent.
- [BBFC: Making choices; Sex, Relationships and BBFC age ratings](#) – This set of lessons for key stage 3 students lays groundwork for exploring pornography by looking at how relationships are portrayed in the media.
- [Medway Public Health Directorate: Relationships and Sex education](#) – This set of lesson plans includes a lesson on Relationship Expectations for year 9 students, exploring how pornography can impact expectations of relationships.

Quality assured lessons — primary phase

Primary education can help to lay the building blocks for pupils to help get them ready to learn about pornography in key stage 3 and 4. Some materials which help to explore relationship safety and the impact of the media include:

- [NSPCC: Share aware](#) – This set of two lessons introduces the risks of sharing explicit images.
- [BBFC: 'Let's watch a film!' Making choices about what to watch](#) – This set of two lesson explores the impact of viewing materials that are not age appropriate and how to manage pressure to watch unsuitable content.



The PSHE Association is the national body for personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education – the school curriculum subject that supports pupils to be healthy, safe and prepared for modern life. PSHE education incorporates health education, relationships education/RSE and economic wellbeing and careers.

A charity and membership organisation, the Association works to improve PSHE education standards by supporting a national community of teachers and schools with resources, training and advice.

Find out more and become a member at www.pshe-association.org.uk