

ADDRESSING PORNOGRAPHY IN THE CLASSROOM

THE GOAL OF TEACHING HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND SEXUAL HEALTH:

- To support students to live safe, happy and healthy lives.
- To support students to have safe, happy and healthy relationships with themselves and with others.
- To support students to have the information, motivation and behavioural skills to live safe, happy and healthy lives.

SHOULD PORNOGRAPHY BE ADDRESSED IN THE CLASSROOM?

Yes. Pornography (porn) is accessible and young people are watching it. By age 8, 50% of young people and by age 11, 80% of young people have seen porn of some sort whether they have sought it out or stumbled upon it. The reality is young people are engaging with porn, even in households where porn is banned or there are filters on the computers. The role of adults is to provide context about what they are seeing in an appropriate way. As Sexual Health Educators we are asked about porn on a regular basis from students in grades 4 – 12. Questions ranging from, 'what is a porn star?' to 'is it ok to watch porn' to questions about specific sexual acts seen in porn. We also get many indirect questions about bodies and sex that ultimately lead back to porn. It is clear that porn impacts young people's impressions of consent, bodies, relationships and sex.

Media literacy is the foundation of effective porn education.

Porn is made for adults and should be watched with a critical lens. However, we know young people are watching porn and therefore we know that students need to be taught critical thinking skills and media literacy.

Porn is at our finger tips as a result of the digital world we now live in. Young people have questions and since porn is easily accessible they may search for answers there. It is not young people's fault that they have questions about sex. Young people have always been curious about sex, but in past generations porn was not readily accessible. Young people turn to porn for education, not because they are evil or perverts, but because they are curious. It is important to keep this in mind and address porn without judgement.

AS A TEACHER YOUR ROLE IS TO:

1. **Differentiate between reality and fantasy.** Porn is fantasy. It is not real. There are actors, special effects, make-up, camera work, editing - just like Hollywood Movies. Watching porn can leave young people anxious and uncomfortable about the sort of sexual activities they are expected to engage in and confused about how real life relationships work. Use a cross curricular activity about media literacy to address this. Young people watch TV, movies, Netflix, You tube or play video games. Use these familiar examples to discuss and conduct activities and assignments about the differences between reality and fantasy. These types of activities can be conducted with younger children in order to build the foundation. Where age appropriate you can make the link to porn.
2. **Differentiate between education and entertainment.** Porn is entertainment. It is a billion dollar industry. Although people may learn things from porn it is not designed to educate, it is designed to entertain. There is nothing wrong with being entertained, we all enjoy some form of entertainment. However, when young people are using entertainment to learn about sex it becomes problematic. Porn is not a good source of education. It is scripted, it often lacks consent, condom use, lube use, emotional complexity, relationship building, communication between partners, discussions about birth control, discussions about what sexual activity you would like to partake in etc. These are all things that are important and essential in actual sexual encounters. It also lacks the awkwardness that real life sex often has, especially when you are young.

You may want to compare porn to the sports highlight reel. The highlight reel only shows the out of this world catches, saves, jumps, dunks etc. It makes sports seem like an easy, natural activity. It leaves out the intense practises, the rules/regulations, and all the times the catches, saves, jumps and dunks did not happen or went wrong. Porn is only showing the highlights of sexual activity and encounters. It does not depict the negotiations and discussions that happen about consent, safer sex and relationships. It also leaves out all the nervousness, laughs and fun that new sexual encounters and relationships can bring.

Young people emulate what they see in the media. They may emulate the gender roles, how you ask, or don't ask, for consent, and the behaviours they see in porn. Use a cross curricular activity about media literacy to address this. For example, use TV shows or You tube videos that students are watching, and discuss how those shows or videos are meant to entertain, make you laugh, cry etc. Use activities or assignments to look at the differences between entertainment and education. These types of activities can be conducted with younger children in order to build the foundation. Where age appropriate you can again make the link to porn as a form of entertainment not education.

3. **Address Gender roles.** Porn often portrays gender roles as stereotypically male and female with specific power imbalances. These are not the messages we wish our young people to receive about gender roles. Use a cross curricular activity to deconstruct how the media portrays gender in TV, films, You tube, video games, magazines etc. These media critiques have the potential to build the foundation to effectively critique porn. Ask the students if the images are sexual, sexy, pornographic, art etc. Ask what messages the images portray. Are they negative, positive, how do they intersect with race, culture, religion, country of origin, age, class, gender etc. (intersectional media critiques).
4. **Deconstruct relationships.** Porn does not often portray more than a sexual relationship between people; a relationship that may or may not be consensual. This is not the message we wish young people to receive about relationships. Again use a cross curricular activity to look at and discuss how the media portrays relationships. Use TV shows, You tube videos etc. they are familiar with and enjoy. Discuss portrayals of consent, references to rape, sexual jokes etc. Deconstruct and critique the way people interact, express emotions, desire, and love, how they feel about their bodies, gender and sexual orientation.

Work with popular media at every opportunity, young people are consuming it all day, every day. Parents can get on board with media literacy and critical thinking skills because they know their children are consuming this media. If you are unfamiliar with the media your students are consuming, ask them, they will be happy to tell you.

RESOURCE:

Amaze.org – Fun, animated videos about puberty, sexual orientation, gender identity, pregnancy, relationships, STIs, and personal safety (which discusses porn). Each video is accompanied by resources for educators, including discussion questions, lesson plans, books and websites.

<http://amaze.org/>

Adapted from the video, Dr. Jessica O’Rielly – Addressing Tough Topics and Parental Concerns in Sexual Education <http://thompsonbooks.com/kto12/h/huddle/ask-the-expert-dr-jess/>