



WHY ENCOURAGE HEALTHY CONTENT CHOICES?

Public Health Research Summary

Kids' bodies, minds, and relationships are influenced by their digital content consumption.

Exposure to pornography and violent media is an aspect of technology that needs to be addressed for teens and kids. Whether exposure was accidental or intentional, it is a normative experience for young people; 93% of boys and 62% of girls see online pornography during adolescence.¹ Though individual reactions vary, most youth report feeling both discomfort (embarrassment, shame, surprise, disgust) and sexual excitement.² Overall, the available research on pornography consumption shows negative outcomes and correlates for young people across key social and physiological developmental indicators.

BODIES

Viewing sexualized content conditions future sexual behavior; the body and brain learn patterns by responding cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally to sexual stimuli.³ Porn users may need to engage in certain sex acts that are popular in porn in order to maintain arousal.⁴

BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

Adolescents have heightened responses to incentives (i.e. chemical rewards for behavior), occurring in the limbic system or “feeling brain,” while impulse control and frontal lobes are relatively immature.⁵ Their brains are also hungry for stimulation.⁶ For kids and teens, repeated viewing of pornographic and violent content during this time of intense brain development can write (or rewrite) the pleasure and reward neural pathways in the brain to react to and desire this content.⁷ This rewiring happens through neuroplasticity – the brain’s ability to reorganize itself and form new neural connections in response to new situations and changes in the environment. There is overlap between brain regions involved in processing natural rewards and drugs of abuse, which may shed light on why behavioral and drug-related compulsions manifest in similar symptoms.^{8,9}

RELATIONSHIPS

The depictions of sex, sexuality, and gender in popular media and pornography is a source of concern for many. Content analyses of popular pornography reveal close to universal verbal and physical violence against women, and common portrayals of women as objects whose purpose is to sexually gratify men.^{10,11} Extreme and violent sex acts are the norm in the pornography industry, and even in “alternative” pornography that aims to challenge elements of popular pornography,

this norm persists.¹² This unmediated sexual information presents a risk to young people, who are very attracted to sexual media and whose sexual schemas are consciously and unconsciously formed by the content they consume.¹³ This means sexualized content eventually shapes young people’s judgments, attitudes, and behaviors.¹⁴ Once sexual attitudes are accustomed to what is represented in porn, users can develop greater sexual arousal and craving for this type of experience – regardless of whether or not the user is experiencing a sexual relationship in real-life as well.¹⁵

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INTERVENTION

Many young people seek pornography intentionally, for sexual stimulation or simply for information.¹⁶ In order for media literacy programs to mediate the social and physiological developmental risks that come from young people processing and mimicking the cues in pornographic and violent media, they must identify and address factors that reduce likelihood of youth adopting behavioral scripts from such content.^{17,18}

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