

Kids Being Exposed to Sexually Explicit Material

What are my kids seeing online?

With advances in technology, children can now go online and find information on just about anything. Never before has a child had such open and unlimited access to information. This progress is wonderful, but at the same time, not so wonderful. While children now have fun, informative and educational content at their fingertips, they are also easily exposed to adult pornography that is very graphic and often disturbing for even most adults to view! Although this material is legal, it doesn't mean the content is harmless to kids who view it.

While many parents believe that their children have not seen inappropriate content online, kids are saying something very different. The reality is that children as young as 8 and 9 years of age are coming across very sexually explicit material on the Internet.

How are they coming across it?

It is very common for children to accidentally come across sexually explicit content. For example, a child may incorrectly type in a website address into a web browser and find themselves on a site s/he did not intend to. This can be an upsetting experience as kids are not developmentally ready to see such graphic information, nor are they expecting to see it. Research has shown that children do not have the means to process it emotionally or intellectually.

Kids, especially during adolescence, are naturally curious about sexuality and often turn to the Internet to find information of this nature. While searching for information they can be exposed to very graphic and potentially harmful material. Adolescents want to learn about sexuality and relationships, but do not have the experience to compare with some of the graphic material they come across. The result, as research has demonstrated, is that the material can end up being a teaching tool, as the viewing of it can potentially shape and influence a child's development of values and their belief of what a healthy sexual relationship is.

They are just pictures. How can that be harmful?

Research suggests that early exposure to sexually graphic material is likely to have a negative influence and a potentially harmful impact on children. Children deal with this type of information very differently than adults do. In the past, people thought that because children didn't understand sexually graphic information they weren't affected by it. Today, we know differently. Research has shown that while children do not have the emotional maturity, experience or knowledge to understand sexual content, they may unconsciously store the experience in their brains and try to make sense of what they have seen. It can be quite stressful and they will sometimes find ways to act it out to try to make sense of it. Impact can vary depending on the child, the content viewed and the circumstances around how it was viewed.



Kids Being Exposed to Sexually Explicit Material (cont'd)

So... why is it a big deal?

The sexually graphic material found online often shows violence and the dehumanization of people in sexual scenes, especially women. According to experts, explicit pornography can form powerful, but false ideas about healthy relationships and sexuality. It often lacks details of intimacy and doesn't show the development of deep personal relationships. Rather, it encourages sexual acts without any emotional connection or concern for the dignity and respect of the other person. Human sexuality involves emotional, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions as well as physical. Research has demonstrated that all of these are required for a healthy, fulfilling relationship.

What is the possible harm to kids?

Exposure to sexually explicit material may begin to shape a child's sexual values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours:

- May prematurely sexualize a child
- May incite a child to experiment with sexually explicit behaviour to make sense of it
- May increase a child's social acceptance of high risk behaviour
- May shape a child's expectations in relationships
- May shape a child's expectations of physical appearances and certain sexual acts
- May increase a child's risk of victimization, as it may blur boundaries
- May increase a child's health risks (i.e. sexually transmitted infections, sexual exploitation, etc.)
- May increase a child's risk of problematic sexual behaviour against other children in an effort to experiment
- May interfere with a child's healthy sexual development



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Signs that your child may be experiencing stress from viewing sexually graphic information online

The following are signs that a child may be experiencing distress:

- There are noticeable changes in her/his typical behaviour patterns. The child seems easily agitated, overly sensitive and emotional.
- Your child mentions the image s/he saw is interfering with her/his other thoughts. It seems to keep “popping” into her/his head.
- Your child begins to experience difficulty sleeping.

How can I respond?

Be emotionally available and willing to listen to your child. When a child goes through a stressful experience, it is helpful for them to just have someone who cares about them to talk to without fear of judgment.

What can I do to reduce the chance of my child accessing pornography?

It is important to remember that we cannot keep children shielded within a bubble, nor would we want to! What we need to do is balance empowering children with protecting them.

Suggestions include:

- Be involved in what your child is doing.
- Set limits on what your child is allowed to watch (e.g. Internet, television and video games).
- Supervise your child when s/he is online.
- Set up parental controls on your computer.
- Talk openly to your child about the hidden negative messages in media, music, fashion and advertising (e.g. the glorification of violence, sexual harm, power and control, and gender stereotypes).
- Provide a standard of measure about healthy relationships and healthy sexuality that your child can compare to when trying to make sense of mass media messages.



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- Foster positive body images.
- Foster positive gender identities. Discuss:
 - The different types of relationships (e.g. acquaintance, intimate, sexual, etc.)
 - The difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships
 - The difference between respecting and breaking personal boundaries
 - The rights and responsibilities associated with sexual behaviour
 - The health risks associated with sexual activity
 - The importance of self-worth and dignity

