

# Talking with Teens and Preteens About Pornography

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Tips and scripts to promote healthy communication and development.

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Teens who have discussed pornography with a trusted adult say that talking made them feel better about sex and themselves.

It's normal for adolescents to be curious about sex and to want more information about it. A majority of U.S. teens recently surveyed by Common Sense had seen pornography at least once by age 13—either by accident or on purpose. However, less than half of teen respondents had discussed pornography with a trusted adult.

It's time to talk about pornography with your teen. The conversation may feel awkward or hard, but it's worth it. You can use the tips and strategies here to prepare for the

conversation, keep it positive, and—ultimately—create an open channel of respectful communication with your maturing child.

*Elementary school-age children may be exposed to pornography as well. See these tips for when—and how—to have age-appropriate conversations with your young child about pornography.*

## **Aim to be open and not judge.**

It can be a tricky balance to let teens know your rules and opinions about pornography while also respecting their sexual privacy and expressing support for their sexual identity.

As challenging as it is, set your intention to come across as open and nonjudgmental. You want to maintain the trust between you so that you can continue having open conversations about sexual and reproductive issues.

## **It might feel awkward.**

People of all ages can feel uncomfortable talking about pornography. If you raise the topic with your teen, you might be tempted to make jokes as a way to hide discomfort. Being lighthearted can keep the tone comfortable, but try not to undermine your own messages about health, consent, and the need for mature communication about sex.

## **Accept that the conversation may be brief.**

Even a carefully planned conversation with your teen may be met with a blank stare or a shrug. Sensitive teenagers can use a disengaged look to cope with awkward or stressful situations. But even when teens appear not to be listening, they've often still heard—and are processing—what adults are saying to them.

For that reason, you should accept that a conversation about pornography could be brief and one-sided. It may seem like a limited way to engage, but it's still worth the effort.

## Pick a conversation goal and prep your talking points.

It makes sense to have a series of mini-conversations over an extended period of time rather than try to cram too much into one conversation. Before talking with your teen about pornography, identify the main goal of your brief conversation and think through what you want to say.

First, state your concern, then ask a question so you can learn more about their perspective. Be careful not to get into a debate. This can make a teen feel "shut down," or as though you don't respect their point of view.

Here are scripts for five mini-conversations you might have:

- 1. Concern: Teens will think they should reenact what they see in pornography** with a partner in real life. This could include failing to get consent from a partner during sex, or assuming they have to comply with a sex act their partner wants but that isn't wanted by or pleasurable to them.  
**You can say:** "I want you to be safe and feel safe during sex, always, and pornography can give the wrong impression about whether it's acceptable to choke people, hit people, or pull their hair without consent during sex. Most pornography is not like real-life interactions, and you shouldn't try to reenact it."  
**Then you can ask:** "What have you learned about sexual consent at school? Do you think that pornography is teaching people that they don't need to ask for consent?"
- 2. Concern: Teens are getting all or most of their sex education from pornography, instead of from educational sources.**  
**You can say:** "Pornography is created to make people money or get likes and clicks. It isn't made to teach accurate lessons about how to have sex. Better places to learn what you need to know are sites like Amaze, Sex, Etc., and Scarleteen, or you could check out a book called *In Case You're Curious*."  
**Then you can ask:** "Do you feel like you are learning what you need to know about sex in school or from reliable sources? I want you to have accurate information, so how can I help get that to you?"
- 3. Concern: Teens will become "addicted" to pornography.** Most teenagers, even those who seek out pornography multiple times, do not become out of control with it. However, some people (about 3–16% of pornography users) do feel out of control with their pornography use and often need support to change their habits.

Adults with this concern should use caution. Teenage curiosity about sexual imagery is normal. By raising this concern, your teen might come away thinking that any level of pornography use is evidence of an addiction.

**You can say:** "I know it's common for teens to see pornography. If you ever saw pornography and felt out of control about it, or that you can't stop yourself even when you want to, please tell me and together we can find help."

**Then you can ask:** "Do you feel like you would be able to ask me for help if you felt out of control about pornography use, or about anything else?"

4. **Concern: Teens will develop negative body-image problems from viewing pornography.**

**You can say:** "Some people who see a lot of pornography start to feel like they or their partners are supposed to look exactly like the people they see in the videos. I want to support you if you ever struggle with body image."

**Then you can ask:** "Do you think a lot of teens struggle with body-image problems these days? What do you think can be done about it?"

5. **Concern: Some parents feel that teens should not be viewing any sexually explicit media** and want to know how to say it clearly, but respectfully, to their teenage children.

**You can say:** "I think that watching pornography is harmful. Just like we have family rules about alcohol, drugs, and vaping being off-limits, our expectation is that you are not watching pornography. Pornography is not supposed to be accessible to people under the age of 18."

**Then you can ask:** "Is that a limit that you can accept and respect?"

## **Stay focused on the positive.**

Given some of the research findings on teenagers and pornography, you may be anxious about your teen's pornography use. However, teens who have discussed pornography with a trusted adult say that the conversations have been productive and made them feel better about sex and themselves. And as much as 52% of teens surveyed say they realize that pornography does not accurately show the way that most people have sex in real life.

It matters to teens when their parents and caregivers make an effort to talk with them about difficult topics. As long as the conversation is respectful, not threatening, and feels generally supportive, talking with your teen about pornography can make a difference.

Learn more in the 2023 Common Sense report, "Teens and Pornography."



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