

What to Do If Your Young Child Sees Pornography

Common Sense Media January 10, 2023

Tips to promote healthy communication and development with elementary school-age kids.

Topics: [Cellphones and Devices](#) [Online Safety](#) [Sex, Gender, and Body Image](#)



If your young child has access to tablets, phones, or computers, there's a chance they will see pornography. For many parents and caregivers, this is a major concern.

The tips and strategies here can help you prepare for the chance that your child will see pornography. Most importantly, you can learn when—and how—to have age-appropriate conversations with your child about it.

Are you a parent of a preteen or teen? See these tips for how to have open conversations with older kids about pornography.

Know the facts.

Approximately 15% of teens surveyed by Common Sense said they first saw pornography before age 11—either by accident or on purpose. And more than half of those teens said they had seen it by age 13.

There isn't research on what younger children experience when they come across pornography. However, research involving adolescents suggests that seeing it can make some youth anxious, cause body image problems, and influence attitudes about sex.

While the facts are concerning, try not to panic. The chances that your child will experience lasting harm from one, or even two, exposures to pornography are likely low—particularly if you're able to talk with them about it in a supportive way.

Prepare for it.

Before giving children access to an internet-connected device like a tablet or phone, it's a good idea to talk with them about pornography in an age-appropriate way.

- **You can say:** "Certain things on the internet are for adults only, and this includes some types of pictures and videos of naked people—what's called pornography."

Make your rules about pornography clear before—and after—they see it.

- **You can say:** "Watching videos that show people without clothes on is not good for kids. Some of those are too scary for you. If you see a video or photo of naked people, I want you to shut your eyes and call me or an adult you trust. I will help you turn it off. I do not want you to see it, even by accident. It is not your fault that you saw that video."

Children with access to cellphones or other devices with cameras also need to know your rules around taking photos and videos.

- **You can say:** "It's not OK for you to take photos or videos of your private parts or anyone else's private parts. That isn't only my rule, that is a law. Nobody should

ever ask you if they can take a photo or video of your private parts, and if they do, I want you to tell me."

Stay calm and positive.

It's normal to feel surprised or shocked if you discover your young child has seen pornography. Even when children look for it on purpose, keep in mind that it's normal for children to be curious about sex and bodies.

If your child sees pornography, react in a calm way, and use a positive tone of voice and gentle words. Your feelings of shock, frustration, or worry can come across as anger, even if that's not your intention.

When it comes to sex, keeping the lines of communication open between you and your child is important. You will want your child to trust you and come to you with questions and for advice when they are preteens and teenagers.

Ask questions.

The first thing you should do if your young child sees pornography is reassure them. Then try to get more information about what they saw.

- **You can say:** "I saw (or heard) you were looking at a video of naked people. I'm curious about that. Can you tell me how you found that video?"

Once you know how your child saw the image or video and what they saw, it's important to check on how they're feeling and give them a chance to ask questions.

- **You can say:** "I am sorry you saw that because it's not good for children to see that kind of video. I am wondering how it made you feel. Can you tell me what you were thinking or feeling when you saw it?"
- **You can also say:** "What questions do you have for me about what you saw?"

Based on your conversation, you'll have a better idea of how seeing the pornography affected your child. If you're concerned your child may be experiencing trauma because of something they saw, a professional counselor may be able to help.

Model and encourage critical thinking skills.

"Critical thinking skills," or the ability to question and reject the messages we receive, can help children stay healthy in multiple ways. Pornography isn't the only type of sexualized content that can harm children. Ads, TV shows, and movies can be a problem as well.

Parents and caregivers can model critical thinking by asking questions while watching TV or movies together. Point out when messages are exaggerated, false, or problematic. Remind children that they shouldn't believe everything they see.

Improve online safety.

Parental controls and internet filters can help you limit access to adult content on devices at home. However, filters shouldn't take the place of age-appropriate conversations and clear rules about pornography. It's still possible something will get past the filters, or children will see pornography elsewhere.

Recognize warning signs of sexual abuse.

In rare cases, children are shown pornography on purpose by an adult family member or acquaintance. If you are concerned that your child may have experienced sexual abuse, you can call the National Sexual Assault Hotline (RAINN) at- 800-656-HOPE (800-656-4673).

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



Emily is a Professor at Boston University. She is the author of the book Pornography and Public Health (Oxford University Press, 2021). Her research focuses on understanding and preventing dating violence, sexual violence, and on helping neurodiverse teenagers and