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Online pornography and age-verification:

What parents need to know

Talking to your children about pornography can be difficult. But with online pornography just one click away for most children, it's a topic that needs to be addressed.

It is all too easy to think 'not my child' – but the reality is that a lot of children stumble across pornography, and our research has shown that some are as young as seven or eight the first time they see it. That's why it's so important to have those difficult conversations early on, to help young people understand what they might encounter online.

This helpful guide for parents outlines what you need to know for when the time comes to speak to your child about online pornography and how to broach those tricky conversations.

What does the BBFC know about pornography?

We are a recognised expert in online pornography, having regulated adult content released on physical media formats since 1985. We also classify some online adult content on a best practice, voluntary basis for a small number of services. In 2020 we published research into young people's experiences of seeing online pornography.

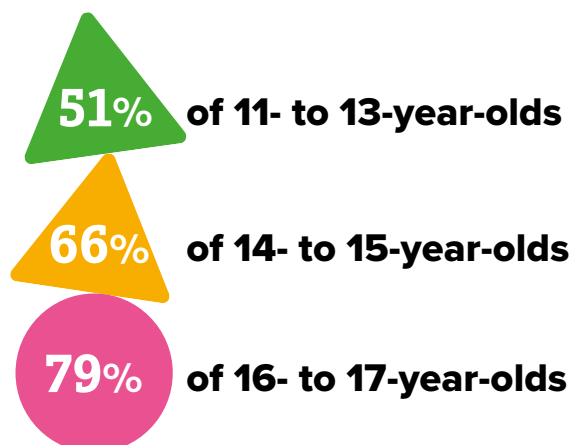
Why do parents need to know about online pornography?

Our research found that pornography has become normalised amongst young people. Most of the boys we interviewed reported watching pornography daily for a period of their lives, often between the ages of 14 and 16. Similarly, some of the girls interviewed reported watching pornography around four times a week at the same age.

At what age do children first see online pornography?

Pornography remains a single click away for most children and teenagers. **The majority of the young people we spoke to as part of our research had seen pornography by the age of 13.** In some cases as young as seven or eight years old.

The proportion of children who say they have seen pornography:



Our research identified a disconnect between parents' perceptions and the reality of children's experiences.

While you might prefer to think that your child hasn't watched pornography, the reality is that many children will have seen it – either by seeking it out or by stumbling upon it accidentally.

This disconnect was particularly pronounced in respect of girls, with many parents saying they were sure their daughters would not intentionally seek out pornography.

However, our research showed that the majority of girls reported they had actively searched for pornography at some stage.

Over 60% of the 11- to 13-year-olds who had seen pornography said their viewing of pornography was mostly "unintentional".

Children described stumbling across pornography through unwitting Google searches, receiving links from friends, adverts or pop-ups, or being shown videos on a friend's phone.

Where do children see online pornography?

A lot of the young people we spoke to said they would usually search for pornography on dedicated pornographic websites, such as Pornhub, xHamster, xVideos, or RedTube. It was also very common for respondents to have seen pornography through social media, with platforms mentioned including Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter.

What sort of things are they seeing?

Pornography, and access to it, is very different today than when many parents were children themselves. Parents may remember seeing 'adult' magazines or 'glamour' images when they were growing up. But today, hardcore pornography is freely accessible to children online - including on social media sites. Our research showed that many children had stumbled across 'aggressive' or 'violent' pornography, which they found upsetting or disturbing, including content they felt normalised rape.

Often, young people are exposed to this content accidentally, through videos appearing on home pages of pornography sites, and some reported getting lost in 'rabbit holes' which lead them to seeing increasingly graphic content. **While we will find illegal or harmful pornography unsuitable for classification, these content standards do not currently apply to online content.**

How can I protect my child from online pornography?

Parental controls are a useful tool for putting you in control of what your child sees on their phone.

We also work with mobile network operators – including EE, O2, Three, and Vodafone – to keep children safe online across millions of websites. We use our [Mobile Classification Framework](#) to set standards for websites on 3G and 4G networks, so children under 18 don't see content that's only suitable for adults, including pornography.

Filters are applied by default on all mobile phones when you buy them. If adults would like to disable this, they can do so by contacting their Network Mobile Operator.

The Government is also working on bringing in online safety legislation this year, which will introduce measures to protect children from harmful content online, such as pornography, through a range of steps including age-verification.

What is age-verification?

Age-verification is a technical measure which can help protect children from stumbling across online pornography. It would require adults wanting to access pornography to prove that they are 18 or over. It's not about trying to stop adults viewing legal pornography, but about ensuring that if a child searches for or stumbles across a pornographic website, they won't see any unsuitable content.

But age-verification is not a silver bullet, and won't necessarily stop determined older teens from accessing pornography. That's why it's important to combine these measures with education, and to start having conversations with your children as early as possible.

83%
of UK parents
are in favour of
the introduction of
age-verification for online
pornography.

Background to the research

This research by Revealing Reality was commissioned by the BBFC to explore young people's interactions with and attitudes towards pornography. Revealing Reality adopted a mixed-methods approach to include a wide range of views. This comprised a combination of qualitative and quantitative work with children and adults from May to August 2019.

- **Children's qualitative research** – 36 one-on-one depth interviews with 16- to 18-year-olds across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- **Adults qualitative research** – 4 parent focus groups each with 6 participants – mothers and fathers.
- **Online survey** completed by a parent and a child with a combined total of 2,284 respondents (1,142 parents, and 1,142 children 11-17). The survey was representative of children aged 11-17 in the UK.

What impact does early exposure to pornography have on children?

There is strong evidence that early exposure to pornography can have a damaging and long-term impact on children's healthy development and relationships.

Some young people in our research felt pornography had created unrealistic and undesirable expectations of sex. Some who were sexually active felt it had affected their behaviour during sex, particularly in the copying of 'rough' or 'forceful' sex. Some also felt that pornography had affected their or their partner's understanding of consent, while others spoke about pornography negatively affecting perceptions of body image.

We also take into consideration references to pornography when classifying films and TV shows.

References to pornography are unlikely to be classified below 12, and are most commonly rated 15.

During our latest guidelines research, people told us that they expect frequent strong references to pornography to be classified 18.

12

15

18

How can I talk to my child about online pornography?

It is important to be proactive rather than waiting for your child to come to you. Take an interest in their online life, discuss the sorts of content they might see, and reassure them they can always talk to you if there is something that's worrying them. If your child tells you that they have seen something upsetting online, it's important to make sure they understand that they haven't done anything wrong. Our research told us that children described feeling 'grossed out' and 'confused', particularly those who had seen pornography when they were under the age of 10.

You can find some excellent guides about how to talk to your children about pornography from: