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Young men and pornography: Meeting the challenge through Sex and Relationships Education.

This short article will explore how schools can use Sex and Relationships Education to address the impact of pornography on the sexual attitudes, expectations and behaviours of young men. Its focus is on mainstream, heterosexual pornography that is usually accessed through the internet, mobile phones or DVD.

The use of pornography among young men at some time in their adolescence is common and seen by many as being a rite of passage; a bonding activity that establishes them within their peer group and, importantly, positions them as heterosexual (Carroll et al, 2008; Haggstrom-Nordin et al, 2006). How much pornography directly

affects young men's behaviour is still unclear, though there is increasing evidence to suggest that it does emanating from research, particularly in Scandinavia (Haggstrom-Nordin et al, 2005; Tyden & Rogala, 2004). There is stronger evidence that pornography influences the attitudes and expectations of young people, contributing to negative views of themselves, their partners and their sexual relationships (Peter & Valkenberg, 2007; Redgrave & Limmer, 2006). Pornography is underpinned by some consistent discourses that resonate with young men because they are an extension and an exaggeration of some of the gendered social norms in relation to sex (Limmer, in progress). The six key themes,

explicitly or implicitly found in almost all pornography, are:

1. Sex is a purely physical activity taking place within an emotional vacuum.
2. Heterosexuality is compulsory, for men at least.
3. Male pleasure is paramount - the encounter is complete on male ejaculation and women's pleasure is conceptualised as evidence of male artistry and expertise.
4. Men should take the lead, be the experts and not refuse a sexual opportunity.
5. Women are always willing to have sex - even though sometimes they 'pretend' that they are reluctant.
6. Sex is consequence-free - issues of infection and conception are absent.

The impact of these themes can be significant, particularly for young men who do not have access to alternative frames of reference provided by family, wider social networks and institutions. It is the young men who do not have positive sexual role models, who are alienated from parents and family and who rely on their peer group to define appropriate attitudes that are particularly vulnerable to the impact of pornography (Limmer, in progress). So why do young men use pornography, what do they get from it? First and foremost pornography is about pleasure and masturbation; it is watched specifically because it is sexually stimulating and aids masturbation. Secondly, some young men describe how pornography provides them with the explicit information and images about what the female body looks like and how to actually have sex, that is missing from much of the current sex education provision. They profess to learn how to give pleasure and crucially how to appear knowledgeable and experienced when they actually have sex - an important aspect of sexualised masculinity. Thirdly, pornography provides a way of demonstrating heterosexuality in lieu of the opportunity to have sex with a young woman (Hald & Malamuth, 2008). Young men's masculinity is, in part, predicated on demonstrating that one is not

gay and the approved way of demonstrating this is to have sex with young women (Holland et al, 1994). For those young men who are not having sex the use of heterosexual pornography provides 'evidence' of their straightness. These three concerns, pleasure, knowledge and fitting in with one's peers are powerful preoccupations for young men and consequently addressing the use and impact of pornography is complex and needs to recognise the central part that pornography plays on their sense of their sexual selves.

The School's role

So, how can we address pornography which plays an important part in young men's lives, but which is, at the same time, destructive to themselves and to young women? The first response is that, given the volume of pornography available to young men, delivered through a range of media, there is little likelihood of cutting off the supply. A more productive and useful approach is to reduce the demand through challenging the use of pornography and seeking to meet the needs that pornography currently fulfils, in other, less destructive ways. One of the key sites for this work is the school and below are some suggestions as to how schools can more effectively address issues relating to young men and pornography.

~ Rather than avoid the issue of pornography or address it simply through confiscation of materials, schools should seek to directly address it as part of their Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) programme. Studies suggest that over 90% of young men use pornography at some time, so it is safe to assume that all schools and classes can be suitable environments to address the issues.

~ Young men have a legitimate criticism of much SRE when they report that there are very few explicit images used to help them understand the female body and sex. Using non-exploitative but explicit images within SRE, accompanied by explanation and discussion can address this gap.

~ SRE has tended to focus on the negative

consequences of sex in terms of conception and infection. One of the attractive elements of pornography is that it reframes sex in terms of pleasure. Introducing the notion of sex as pleasure; within the context of responsibility, respect and equality provides a more meaningful framework for SRE for young people.

~ The need for young men to emulate the masculine, sexual norms portrayed in pornography is an indication of vulnerability and uncertainty rather than strength and confidence. Addressing issues of self esteem and confidence is a key priority in this context.

~ Pornography contributes to unrealistic expectations in terms of sexual performance, prowess and the lived experience of sex - addressing and correcting these is important in enabling young people to develop emotionally and physically healthy relationships.

~ The world of pornography can be inhabited by unusually beautiful and well-endowed men and women - images that young people may aspire to and feel inadequate in not achieving. Addressing body-image and the pressures to conform to an ideal are important in helping young people feel positive about themselves and their relationships.

~ SRE can be used to reinforce the norms in relation to sex. Despite what pornography might suggest, most young people are not sexually active, and those that are, do not behave in the ways depicted. Helping young people establish healthier sexual norms is an important part of their emotional and physical development.

~ Condoms are rarely, if ever used in pornography - a message that SRE should seek to challenge and reverse.

~ At the heart of pornography is sexual exploitation and unequal gender power relationships. Promoting equity and respect needs to remain central to all SRE that is delivered.

This article does not suggest that challenging the impact and influence of

pornography is easy or straight-forward; but it is important. The decision to make SRE statutory provides us with a great opportunity to take stock of our priorities and to reframe how we engage with young people in relation to sex. Challenging the influence of pornography needs to be part of that reframing and has the potential to lead us in exciting and innovative directions.

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