

WHAT DO  
YOU NEED  
TO  
#MAKEiTGOOD?

# Insight Topic 14: **PORNOGRAPHY**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

NHS Tayside and partners want to adopt a positive approach to young people's sexual health. An insight gathering project has engaged young people in discussion of what they need to make relationships good. The purpose of the insight process is to bring detail to consideration of future services, particularly the possible use of social marketing or broader communication messages targeting young people.

This paper is one of a number of topic chapters published at [www.makeitgoodtayside.org](http://www.makeitgoodtayside.org) Each topic chapter presents:

- Insight from young people.
- Insight from other research, resources or services.
- A summary and discussion points.

For more about the insight gathering process please refer to '**About the Insight Gathering project**' also published at [www.makeitgoodtayside.org](http://www.makeitgoodtayside.org)

## **1. INSIGHT FROM YOUNG PEOPLE**

In the initial focus groups, the topic of **PORNOGRAPHY** was raised and discussed by 9 of the 16 groups. In terms of online engagement, responses to the **PORNOGRAPHY** online survey came from 43 young people as follows:

Online engagement by Local Authority:

	Number of online submissions
Angus	8
Dundee	27
Perth and Kinross	6
Other area	2
Total by method	43

Online engagement by gender:

	Male	Female	Other gender identity
Number of participants	19	22	2

Online engagement by age:

	Under 16	16	17	18	19	20	21+
Number of participants	11	17	8	1	2	1	3

In addition to discussion in focus groups, young people completing the **PORNOGRAPHY** survey provided a response to the request: *Tell us about your experience of pornography when it comes to sex or relationships.* Insight from young people points to several themes.

### **Contrasting views of pornography**

Insight from young people evidences different perspectives on pornography. Some young people see pornography relatively positively (liking it), they may have fairly neutral attitudes toward it, or see it negatively (finding it harmful). There is no doubt that it is ubiquitous: "It's difficult to get away from, you even get things on Facebook". (Focus Group 12/Dundee)

Those with a positive view find it exciting and enjoyable.

I love porn. (16/Dundee/Male)

I use porn to get off. (21+/Dundee/Male)

It is why I get up in the morning. (>16/Dundee/Male)

Porn is one of the seven wonders of the world. I believe that on the First Day when God said "Let there be light." he also said "Let there be porn."  
(16/Dundee/Male)

Fun exciting and hard. (16/Dundee/Female)

Those with a more neutral perspective see pornography as a normal part of life or relatively harmless. While accepting of it, some young people report feeling embarrassed or ashamed of watching it. One young person raised questions about pornography being acceptable if it is produced 'ethically'.

Normal. Unrealistic. Harmless. (>16/Dundee/Female)

porn is banter. (16/Dundee/Female)

There is nothing wrong with porn as long as it doesn't affect your relationship negatively. (21+/Angus/Female)

It sometimes makes me feel ashamed but sometimes I am interested  
HOWEVER I don't feel anything about it. (>16/Dundee/Male)

Maybe it's fine if it's made by a company. Maybe then it's more ethical, well, as ethical as any company can be. (Focus Group 15/Angus)

Other contributors view pornography as harmful, either to participants or to the viewer and their relationships.

Porn isn't about relationships it's just about sex. (Focus Group 16/Angus)

Degrading, unrealistic, explosive. (16/Dundee/Female)

Own decision, distort ideas on relationships. (19/Dundee/Female)

I live away from my boyfriend and only see him at weekends. It upsets me he watches porn as it makes me feel worthless. (17/PK/Female)

Watching porn is one of the worst things to do in a relationship. When your partner finds out they will feel hurt and as if you don't want them sexually enough, or they aren't enough for you on their own. You shouldn't be needing to watch porn if you're in a happy healthy relationship.  
(16/Dundee/Female)

Young people have also expressed some concerns about the nature of pornography they might see, and about easy access to it.

Some of it is a bit strange. (16/Angus/Male)

It shouldn't be available to everyone. (17/Dundee/Female)

### **Pornography and gender**

While not seeking to overstate the gender differences between male and female contributors to this insight gathering process, on balance most female respondents have responded negatively to questions about the impact or influence of pornography on sex and relationships, and most young men more positively. At least in terms of public discussion about watching pornography, young men are viewed as more likely to be consumers.

Something boys watch. (16/Dundee/Female)

Girls watch it but don't admit it. (Focus Group 12/Dundee)

Boys think it's cool. (Focus Group 12/Dundee)

People don't care – they think I'm weird for not watching it. (Focus Group 12/Dundee)

It depends. Some girls don't like it but then the man isn't doing anything.  
Women watch it too – look at 50 shades! (Focus Group 13/Dundee)

### **Impact of pornography on expectations and behaviour**

Young people identify that pornography has impacted on how they or others view sex and relationships; with expectations about their bodies and what they do when having sex. Young people recognise that what they view may not be realistic but feel the pressure to perform similarly.

People think it's like a relationship should be like. (Focus Group 12/Dundee)

Enjoyable to watch at the time but when you think it over afterwards, you realise a lot of it is faked, particularly how the male partner can go on for so long and how loud the female orgasm is. (17/Dundee/Male)

I feel like porn made my boyfriend have unrealistic expectations of what our sex would be like, resulting in a lot of pressure on me. (16/PK/Female)

Porn has such a bad impact on people's relationships especially young people as they get the wrong idea of what sex is all about! (20/PK/Male)

There's pressure to do it for a long time like in porn. (Focus Group 15/Angus)

There is definitely an expectation to climax, even if you can't or aren't in the right mood, I think guys just expect a girl to come as soon as they touch you. They don't talk about orgasm and stuff in school so unless you tell them or they ask you, which is just really awkward, how are guys meant to know about it? It's not like in the pornos. (Focus Group 4/PK)

Pressure. I mean it's never going to be like that is it. It's not even real. They use like pills and stuff. Guys who think it's going to be like that are just going to be confused! (Focus Group 6/Dundee)

Porn influences what people think, people might think they want something they see and then they can't say no. (Focus Group 12/Dundee)

*Q: has porn influenced anything?*

YP1: Body hair

YP 2: The size your dick is supposed to be.

YP 3: How long you do it.

YP 4: A lot of people expect anal and don't get it. Like it's forbidden fruit.

(Focus Group 14/PK)

### **Pornography as something that 'isn't real'**

A common response to pornography is to say that 'it isn't real' in the sense that it is not a true representation of the sex that people have. One of the prompts for discussion in the focus groups was a poster which stated this view. Online respondents also used this language and perspective:

very unreal sex (16/Dundee/Female)

not real sex (>16/Dundee/Female)

Watching sexual activities. Gives teenagers a false idea of sex.  
(17/Dundee/Female)

For this young man however the notion of 'real' was not understood; comments about condom use are also interesting.

Like your poster there, what does it mean 'Porn isn't real'? I was watching it before I came out tonight. Seemed pretty real to me. And that's another place you don't see guys faffing about with johnnys. (Focus Group 7/PK)

### **Learning from pornography**

Insight from young people confirms that pornography is used to learn about sex.

Boys watch it to get an idea about sex. (16/Dundee/Female)

For the young men in the exchange reported below, pornography fills the gap because there simply is no other source of learning about the details of having sex.

YP 1: Porn is like where you learn everything for sex. Like all the positions, how to make a bird cum, how you should treat her, what to expect. It's like there is no other information about it, so it just is the only place. Aye, we got the chat in school about bananas and johnnys but that's not sex, it's just like

nothing to do with the reality of it. Like when you are in the moment and you need to know what you have to do.

YP 2: Aye, I expect girls to react the same way as in porn, 'cos like I expect them to groan and scream and shit. It's just the way you know they are having a good time...

YP1: I don't know man, I think porn can make you or your partner feel pretty insecure, like what if she doesn't cum or your cock isn't three-foot long.

YP 2: What? Are you having a bad time because it's not like in a porno?

YP 3: I don't think it's exactly the same, but he's got a point about there not really being anywhere to learn stuff. It's not the sort of thing you chat with your family about and your mates will always tell you they are having healthy good sex, like absolutely destroying the bird, it's not like they are gonna come up to you and say 'hey, my sex is really bad, how can I make it better?' (Focus Group 7/PK)

### **Learning about pornography**

Young people's insight points to the need to learn about pornography, but that to date school has not provided such an opportunity.

I think you need to learn about porn, and safe sex, probably before most parents might be happy with it. (Focus Group 15/Angus)

*Q: Did you learn anything about it at school?* Got nothing at school – not even the condom demonstration. (Focus Group 14/PK)

If people get the right education they understand its fantasy – it's not what people really do. We've never discussed it at school. Well we talked once about adult sex workers. (Focus Group 15/Angus)

## **2. INSIGHT FROM RESEARCH, RESOURCES OR SERVICES**

The purpose of identifying insight from other sources is to help locate young people's perceptions and lived experience in a broader context, and where possible to provide further evidence to support the stress which young people have given to an issue, in this section regarding *pornography*.

In terms of the broad context, **pornography (as used by adults) has often been viewed in quite different ways**: as reflective of male patriarchy and oppression of women where women are seen as commodities and exploited; or as distasteful or morally wrong but a private matter for adults; or as free speech/pro-sex.

**Pornography is not currently defined in statute law, but the sale and publication of obscene material is prohibited** by section 51 of the Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982 while the display of indecent material is controlled by the Indecent Displays (Control) Act 1981. Pornography which is sold legally might be rated R18. The sale, publication and possession of indecent images of children under the age of 18 is prohibited by the 1982 Act (as amended by the Protection of Children and Prevention of Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2005. The Criminal Justice and

Licensing (Scotland) Act 2010 contains provisions which criminalise possession of extreme pornography which came into force on 28 March 2011.

There is evidence from a number of reviews about school-based sex and relationship education that **young people want to learn more about pornography**. In evaluations<sup>i</sup> (by TASC Scotland) of young people's views for NHS GGC (2014) 58% of young people wanted more opportunities to learn about the topic and in similar work for NHS Lothian in (2016) 53% of young people expressed an interest in more learning.

In the report '**Basically Porn is Everywhere**'<sup>ii</sup> (2013) the Children's Commissioner in England identified that children aged as young as 10 are viewing pornography, this can be accidental; the internet is the main location for viewing material. Gender differences are identified in the report, with more boys than girls watching pornography and reporting more positive views of it. The report states that young people who view pornography are more likely to take part in riskier sexual behaviours including more likely to have had anal sex, used alcohol and drugs in the context of sex or had sex with multiple partners. The Commissioner identifies that **more work is needed to be able to understand the ways in which viewing pornography may be impacting on children and young people**.

The OFCOM report 'Sexually Explicit Material and Video on Demand Services'<sup>iii</sup> also states that the research evidence is not available to state clearly that viewing pornography in their teenage years causes harm although it might be considered that 'moral harm' might be a consequence i.e. "tolerance of promiscuity, stereotyping/objectification of women, a cynical attitude towards traditional relationships, and earlier sexual experience". However, it is noted that material that does not receive a formal certification of R18 is considered potentially harmful to all viewers, which is why it is not permitted. The report concludes that "the evidence supports a precautionary approach to policy making in this area".

There are **resources which support young people in their teenage years to learn on the topic of pornography**. The resource Planet Porn<sup>iv</sup> has been produced by Justin Hancock an educator in the realm of sex and relationships. As well as talking about pornography the resource enables conversations around self-esteem, body image, boundaries, pleasure, consent, communication, safer sex, sexual safety, the law, emotions, relationships, gender and sexual diversity and oppression. In his introduction to the resource Justin gives a reminder that young people are exposed to pornography in different ways or for different reasons.

"Not all use of porn is for the same reason either. Some young people are exposed to porn without their consent (pop-ups, email links etc.), others are curious about what porn is and just have a quick look, others look because some of it is funny or shocking, some to rebel, some to learn and some to be sexually aroused by".

He also reminds us that most young people have a level of media literacy which means that:

"This all suggests that rather than being exposed to harmful images, young people are actively filtering and developing their own understanding of text which is concomitant with an increased interest in sex and their own emergent identities. Young people are perhaps setting their own rules for what they are ready for and if they see something they don't like they switch off and/or they talk it through with someone – just as they might with any media which they may find upsetting".

Professor Alan McKee<sup>v</sup> has also assessed the contribution that porn makes in educating young people about healthy sexual development. He reports that **pornography does not teach relationship skills, negotiation or consent and that it makes "sex look easy"**. However, he also states, considering adolescents, that:

"Research shows that healthy sexual development includes natural curiosity about sexuality. Retrospective studies show that accidental exposure to real life scenes of sexuality does not harm children. Our survey shows that age of first exposure to pornography does not correlate with negative attitudes towards women. Studies with non-explicit representations of sexuality show that young people who seek out sexualised representations tend to be those with a preexisting interest in sexuality. These studies also suggest that current generations of children are no more sexualised than previous generations; that they are not innocent about sexuality; and that a key negative effect of this knowledge is the requirement for them to pretend to be ignorant in order to satisfy adults' expectations of them.".

The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre<sup>vi</sup> (CEOP) is concerned with online safety and provides information for children, young people, parents and professionals.

The NSPCC<sup>vii</sup> provide information on how to talk to a teenager about pornography.

### **3. PORNOGRAPHY: SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION POINTS**

When it comes to the insight offered by young people and other sources important themes and issues have been highlighted. These are summarised below and discussion points are highlighted. Again, some attention is given to the use of insight from this project in terms of the use of social marketing to promote positive sexual health for young people.

In all of the points which follow it is important to remember that **the target of this insight gathering process is 16 to 20 year olds** and so in terms of these final summary/discussion points there is a focus on this age group, and not on young people in their early teenage years for whom we might have different concerns or approaches.

## **The politics of pornography and its suitability as a topic for social marketing**

Perspectives on pornography are influenced by the individual's personal, political and moral view. Public bodies also adopt a view on such matters. NHS services have a clear perspective on prostitution for example, that it is violence against women. Pornography might also be viewed as part of this spectrum of gender-based violence. This context makes work on the issue of pornography complex, when the view might be that there is a need to challenge negative representations of women and sex, while also working to support and educate young people in terms of how they understand or negotiate their way around something as pervasive as pornography. Young people have clearly stated they want to learn about sex, they see pornography as a source of information. This all points to a need for improved education as well as having clinical services which can talk with the individual about pornography; in both education and services it is possible to take a view, but also foster open discussion rather than be perceived of as judgemental or lecturing. Whether pornography is a specific topic which can be addressed via social marketing (whose focus should be on *behaviour change* rather than just attitudinal shifts) would need further consideration.

## **Pornography and gender**

Insight from young people in this process supports the findings from research that, in broad terms, young men and young women have different views and experiences in terms of watching/using pornography. It seems that young men are more likely to go to pornography for sexual pleasure but also as a source of learning about sex. If pornography is to be a focus of future work, thinking about social marketing, then this points to the need for *segmentation* so that interventions would need to be tailored to these different gendered perspectives.

## **Communicating about sex**

The insight topic chapter on COMMUNICATION discusses the need to help young people acquire the skills and language to negotiate sexual encounters and relationships; this might involve communicating about boundaries, wants, desires, condoms and contraception. The problem with pornography is that it is not about communication, as one researcher commented earlier it makes "sex look easy" and as one young man commented insightfully: "And that's another place you don't see guys faffing about with johnnys". (Focus Group 7/PK) Whether in education, information, services or via social marketing/communications young people would benefit from a focus on online/media literacy (to support them explore how they see or interpret pornography) and also in terms of being able to develop self-awareness and confidence to be able to talk about what they want (and do not want).

## REFERENCES

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<http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/internet/explicit-material-vod.pdf>
- <sup>iv</sup> Planet Porn <http://bishtraining.com/planet-porn/>
- <sup>v</sup> 'Does pornography harm young people?' Australian Journal of Communication, 37(1), pp. 17-36 (2010) Alan McKee <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/41858/3/41858.pdf>
- <sup>vi</sup> The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP)  
For parents: <https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents/>  
For children of all ages: <http://www.ceop.police.uk/safety-centre/>
- <sup>vii</sup> NSPCC <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/online-porn>