

RESPONDING TO KIDS ABOUT PORN - FOR PARENTS

when a child has seen harmful and/or pornographic content

1. LISTEN – WITHOUT JUDGEMENT OR FEAR

Believing the child and listening calmly is very important. It may have been very difficult for them to bring this to you, and they may be experiencing trauma and be unable to think and act clearly. If you escalate they may shut down. Remaining calm and open during these discussions helps us to de-escalate the situation for the child and provides the child with the security and safety they need to be able to work their way through their current distress and help them to regulate.

It is important to let them take their time as they may not have the words to describe what they have seen and will need assistance to find these words. They may be feeling scared, worried, guilty, angry or confused. They also may also not want to upset you, get their friends or others in trouble, or may even be concerned about losing their phone or laptop privileges. Your aim is to create a safe place for them to talk without being worried about the consequences or they may not speak. It may take them a number of days to tell the full story, or want to process it, so make sure you create space to listen to them over that time.

Approaching the situation calmly without judgement, fear or anger demonstrates your child that talking with you is safe. If you display distressing emotions your child may feel that they cannot come to you about concerns or stresses they may encounter in the future. Staying calm may not be as easy as we would like it to be. Find some space to take some deep breathes, and take a moment to settle your own distress, panic, anger or outrage, so that you are able to then respond to your child in a calm supportive manner.

If your child denies outright that they have seen this content - and other people may have told you that they have – it may mean they are not ready to talk or are in a state of denial or anger. It is okay that they do not talk immediately but reassure them that you are not angry with them but would like to talk with them about the content when they are ready as that you want to help them be able to understand and navigate their time online safely in the future. Make sure you continue to make space for them to talk if they are ready, or encourage them to speak to other people they trust if they are not able to talk with you about it.

2. FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENED (where, when, what, how, who)

Thank the child for coming to you, believe what the child tells you and let them know that together you will work through this in a supportive way.

Using some open-ended questions you can ask your child what it is they saw. You can ask them where they found this content or who sent it to them, if anybody else saw the content or if somebody explicitly showed it to them. Ask where it happened - did they view pornography at school or at home or somewhere else? If it was at school how did they access it (school network, game, video, Snapchat, other domain or app, etc.)? Find out enough information that you know what you need to do next – talk, report, notify or engage support services.

As parents or caregivers, we might be tempted to lecture a little but please refrain from doing so it is always best to plan our approach by ensuring we have accurate information first and are supporting our children with the opportunity to learn, this is a teachable moment. Responding in the best possible manner is important for our child as we don't want them to walk away with shame or guilt but instead we want them to learn from this experience about how they might hope to keep themselves safe online in the future.

- If a child was shown pornography by an adult this is a matter of child safety, and the process is to follow mandatory reporting guidelines.
- If a child has been shown pornography by their friends or older students at a school or another organisation tell the principal or the person in charge. They will want to know what it was and who was involved so that they can have some discussions and be able to handle the situation collaboratively with the students, parents and community that are involved.
- If a child was shown pornography in someone else's home have the conversation with the adult caregivers in that house. Let them know you are concerned that your child saw inappropriate content in their home. Ask them if you can have a chat about how they access online content when your children visit their house and you can offer to send them some information.

3. REASSURE & MAKE A PLAN

Reassure the child they have done nothing wrong in this incident. It is important to emphasise that it is not their fault – pornography is intrusive, harmful and is made to be addictive. Reassure them that that they did the right thing by telling you as you can support them or tell the best people who can take action to help them. Reassure them that pornography is not real and is not a normal part of a healthy relationship.

This can be an opportunity to understand and teach children how to manage pornography in the future. It is not in the child's best interest for caregivers to be judgmental or to criticise the child or other children that may have been involved. Punishing or overly criticising may be the catalyst for the child to withdraw, stop listening or stop talking with you and may put them into a state of fear, guilt, responsibility and shame. When they are experiencing these feelings on top of the already confused bewildered uncertainty that they are experiencing over the content, this complicates the situation for the child and can make it overwhelming for the child to be able to see a way through.

The child has done the right thing when they have come to you – even if they made some unsafe choices in accessing the pornography. This means you have an opportunity to help them to make better choices in the future. This would not be possible if they had kept it hidden for fear or shame or guilt. By supporting them and starting conversations from this point about pornography you are going to be able to assist in the long-term health and wellbeing both of your child and for your relationship with your child.

Ensure the child knows what you will do next and let them be involved in planning the solution. This may include telling the school, parents of others who have seen this, or the authorities - but please be mindful that this is a sensitive topic so only tell who needs to know to protect the child's privacy. You and the child can make a plan together which helps them regain some control and be proactive in keeping themselves safe. Together you may make a plan to learn about e-safety, delete or limit apps, installing safety software and making rules around when they are online and who they will talk to.

4. EDUCATION AND PREVENTION OF REOCCURENCE

Education for children is vital, however, to educate children we must first educate ourselves so that we understand the online world they are navigating and have strategies on how to support our children in this. It is very different from the offline worlds we grew up in. To do this we can engage in self-learning – either online by ourselves, through reading books, through watching speakers, enrolling in workshops, in parenting groups or we can ask our children's schools to organise on site workshops or speakers.

Places to access online resources and information about pornography, its effects on children and how to have discussion with children about inappropriate online content:

- [Culture reframed](#)
- [Youthwellbeingproject](#)
- [ESafety commission](#)
- [The clay centre](#)

The objective in educating our children is to help them develop the skills and language they need to respond to harms in online environments through discussions that include:

- Public and private pictures and what to do if you should come across them online
- Let them know that pornography is not real, they are actors, and the intent is to shock and create addiction.
- Children know that they are not developmentally ready to understand or critically analyse what they are seeing. Porn is adult only content.
- It is also essential that children understand that pornography is not a reflection of happy healthy relationships. Equally important is to discuss what does make a healthy relationship.

If a child comes across or is being exposed to pornography, we can utilise the technique "Retrain your brain". Help the child to use the following steps.

1. Create a mental picture of a family outing or event where you had heaps of fun and felt safe and loved. Really remember how you felt at the time. Take really long mental picture.
2. If the images of the inappropriate content the child saw pop's into their mind again, they can remind themselves that these pictures were someone else's private pictures and not for them.
3. Tell that image to go away.
4. Ask the child to bring back the picture of their family outing and remember how good they felt that day.
5. If the child struggles with this, they can go to a trusted adult, someone on their safety network and ask for assistance.
6. Children might need help doing this at first but with practice they will soon be able to do it on their own.

5. MAKE IT A WHOLE FAMILY (and SCHOOL) APPROACH

Knowing that most children will be exposed to porn, for the first time between the ages of 7 and 11 years old, we need to have the first, or early conversations with them at a younger age even if it is difficult or new for us. This is why it is important to have some clear and safe communication, which is age appropriate, with our children to help them understand and stay safe from the harms of online pornography, hyper-sexualisation and online grooming. Porn is the most prevalent sex educator of our time – we need to have an alternative conversation regarding relationships and sex that are safe and healthy. As well as giving children healthy, supportive, and correct information, we also need to work together to create boundaries your children need, understand and accept.

If you can start conversations with your school, they are also in a very important position to support your child's education around healthy relationships, the harm of pornography and e-safety. Teachers can often deliver or incorporate safety and body safety lessons in the classroom that can reinforce your support at home, and peer groups at school are often good supports for each other in practicing safe online interaction, and supporting each other to speak up, and reinforcing boundaries.

For information regarding professional education, age appropriate in class education and parent information contact PB West we have a range of resources and proudly work and partner with the youthwellbeing project and utilise their IQ programs. PB West are leaders in Protective Behaviours and Personal Safety education and wellbeing for families, children, communities and professionals.