

Talking about pornography

Autistic children hitting puberty and adolescence can be scary, for both children and their caregivers. Talking to any teenager about sex is awkward, and it can be even more difficult when the teenager is autistic and sometimes struggles to understand social concepts. This resource outlines a few things to keep in mind when talking to your autistic teenager about pornography.

Make sure you are ready for the discussion

Discussing pornography with your teenager is going to be awkward for both of you. Make sure you're both calm before starting the discussion. For some teenagers, starting the discussion while you're driving, cooking, or doing another task that means you're not looking at them can help them feel less judged and awkward.

Let your teenager know that they don't have to talk about anything they don't want to, and they can stop the conversation if they're uncomfortable. It's important to stick to this – if your teenager wants to shut the conversation down immediately, that's ok. Giving them control over the conversation is a great way to make them feel safe talking about uncomfortable topics with you, and can help increase their comfort level until you can have a discussion without them shutting it down.

Prepare to be told things you don't want to hear. Your teenager may tell you that they've already seen some pornography, that they watch it regularly, or that they have a favourite kind of pornography. They may tell you about a specific video or picture they've seen. It's ok to be surprised, but try not to judge your teenager or react in any way that they might interpret as shaming them for watching or liking pornography.

Keep conversations short and casual

Talking about pornography with your child is awkward and difficult, for both of you! Trying to fit absolutely everything you want to say into a single conversation is likely to make the experience so uncomfortable that your child only really remembers how awkward it was – keeping the conversation to one or two essential points can help your child to remember what you said, as well as stopping them from becoming so uncomfortable that they shut the discussion down.

Treat your child like the young adult they're becoming

It's normal for teenagers to be interested in sex, and it's normal for them to seek out pornography. Trying to protect a teenager from being exposed to any sexual content is likely to push them to seek out whatever they can find in secret.

Research has shown that over half of all teenage girls and almost all teenage boys have seen online pornography before they turn eighteen. The aim of talking to your child about pornography is to acknowledge that they will almost certainly encounter it (whether because they have deliberately sought it out or because they are exploring more adult online spaces), and to give them tools for understanding the difference between pornography and sex, and for working out what to do if they see something that makes them uncomfortable or upset.

It's common for parents to worry that talking to their child about pornography will encourage the child to seek it out. This is not accurate – almost all teenagers will seek out some form of pornography at some point in their lives, whether they have been told about it by a parent or not. Teenagers who know a bit about what pornography is and how it works, and who have a safe, trusted adult that they can talk to without fear of judgement, are much more likely to engage with pornography safely.

Giving your teenager more freedom around internet access is an important part of letting them learn to navigate adulthood. Consider removing parental controls or safe search settings on your teenager's devices, and try to avoid checking up on their browser history or internet activity. It may seem counter-intuitive, but often the less involved you are in your teenager's online life, the more likely they are to come to you if they encounter something they're unsure of, or something that makes them uncomfortable.

Make sure your teenager understands public and private spaces

For some autistic teenagers, where you are and aren't allowed to look at pornography, masturbate, etc. is a whole new set of rules that they will need to learn. Making a list of public spaces (no talking about sex, no masturbating, no looking at sexual content); private spaces (it's ok to masturbate and/or look at sexual content); and in-between spaces (it's ok to talk about sex or ask questions, but not ok to masturbate – an example of this might be the doctor's office, or around trusted adults) can be helpful.

It's particularly important if your teenager has younger siblings to make sure they're not exposing younger children to sexual content. Using parental controls on any computers or devices that are kept in common areas of the house can help to prevent this while a teenager is still learning what spaces are public and what spaces are private. It's also important to make sure the browser history is cleared on any computer that younger children have access to, to prevent curious younger siblings poking around and encountering inappropriate material.

Explain the differences between pornography and real-life sex

Teenagers are likely to encounter pornography long before they are actually having sex, and can end up forming inaccurate ideas and expectations about what sex will be like. One of the benefits of discussing pornography with your teenager is being able to give them the tools to set realistic expectations for their future experiences, rather than relying on pornography.

Identifying the differences between pornography and real life can also provide a structure for discussions that can help autistic teenagers know what to expect. This could look like providing an example and asking your teenager how similar they think it is to real life (e.g. "Do you think most women look like female porn performers?"); each making your own lists of all the differences you can think of between pornography and real life and then comparing them; or any other way that works for you of making finding differences into a game.

Some differences to discuss could include:

- There is rarely any communication in pornography. Performers generally don't ask for consent, check that their partner is comfortable, talk about their partner's preferences, etc. – all important parts of making sure a real sexual encounter isn't harming anyone.
- Protection is rarely if ever used in pornography.
- A lot of heterosexual pornography is very focussed on male pleasure at the expense of female pleasure; it can be helpful for teenage boys in particular to understand that pornography is not a good place to learn how to be a good sexual partner.
- Pornography can include sex acts and behaviour that people in real life, particularly inexperienced young people, may not want to do. You don't need to talk about specific sex acts with your teenager, but what you can do is reinforce the ideas that you can always say no to something you don't want to do, and that you need to make absolutely sure your partner is into it before trying something new.

- Performers often adhere to a very rigid set of appearance standards (in particular, women tend to be thin with large breasts and no pubic hair; while men tend to have very large penises and are often unhealthily muscular), which can make teenagers feel insecure about their own bodies. It can help to talk about how hours of work, special diets, and even surgery goes into making pornography performers look like that; that it's not necessarily healthy; and that finding other body types or features attractive is normal.

For more help with talking to your teenager about pornography, head to <https://www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/resources/items/how-to-talk-with-young-people-about-pornography/>