

When is sexual content online more a right than a risk? And how can parents figure this out?

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Sonia Livingstone shares the core findings and recommendations from her new report on young people's sexual rights and risks online. She argues that we can no longer plead embarrassment or worries about pornography as the reasons why we as a society fail to educate, support and provide young people with the sexual information they have a right to. Sonia is Professor of Social Psychology at LSE's Department of Media and Communications and has more than 25 years of experience in media research with a particular focus on children and young people. She is the lead investigator of the Parenting for a Digital

Future research project.

The mass media are full of panics about how children encounter sexual content online. From these reports, one might suppose all sexual content is pornographic, that all pornography is exploitative or harmful, and that children should get their sexual information – if it is really necessary – from some other source.

Rather less attention is paid to the legitimate reasons why children and young people might seek out sexual information, or to the practical question of where on earth they are supposed to get it from. Addressing these questions would mean thinking about when and why such information is desired, how to draw the line between legitimate and problematic uses of such content, and who or what is the appropriate source of such information. It's not only regulators and child welfare advocates who worry about this – many parents do too, knowing that they themselves are often reluctant to provide their children with timely and age-appropriate guidance on sexual matters out of sheer embarrassment.

As debates over statutory provision of sex education from primary school onwards remains controversial, children and young people are turning to the internet for answers. And why should they not? Information, including sexual information, is a right, enshrined in universally approved UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. ^

I have just published a literature review commissioned by eNACSO, the European NGO Alliance for Child Safety Online, entitled "Sexual rights and sexual risks among youth online: A review of existing knowledge regarding children and young people's developing sexuality in relation to new media environments."

To discover research on the risks and opportunities that 10 to 17-year-olds face when seeking or encountering sexual information or experiences online, **Jessica Mason** and I searched key databases, consulted with international experts and read a mountain of research reports. Our top seven findings are as follows:

1. Age is an important factor in going online to access sexual content or experiences. Older teenagers are more likely to access sexual content, engage with others, and take other risks online. The 9-12 age range seems to mark an important stage in beginning online behaviour that parents or teachers may judge risky.
2. Many of the problems associated with children and young people's uses of information communication technologies (ICTs) for sexual purposes are linked not to accessing information *per se* but rather to unequal gender dynamics and gendered pressures on sexual behaviour. For example, girls **face greater pressure** to send 'sexts' and much harsher judgements when those images are shared beyond the intended recipient.
3. Equally, children's low levels of knowledge about the nature and importance of sexual consent mean that they may lack skills to evaluate they find online. Indeed, the source and credibility of information matters to youth, but it is unclear which online sources they are using, including to what extent they see pornography as a credible source of information about sex.
4. A notable proportion of children and young people are exposed to or access pornography online and offline, although exact estimates vary. Adolescents who view pornography, especially those who are more frequent viewers, experience an array of negative health and wellbeing outcomes, but the direction of the relationship between these factors is not clear.
5. Much of the evidence about harm from online sexual content is linked to already-at-risk children, who tend to have family or interpersonal difficulties such as poor relations with parents, low self-esteem, or poor body image.
6. Meanwhile, online sources of information about sexual health are important to all young people, and especially to low-income, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) and homeless youth who particularly lack alternative sources of helpful, open-minded and reliable information.
7. Most worryingly, the review found that children and young people are turning to online pornography as a source of information about sex and sexual expectations in the absence of other sources of information being available to them.

Overall, we found a considerable and unresolved tension between those who argue that young people have rights to sexual expression and those who argue that **children need to be protected** from potentially harmful online behaviours. This tension persists partly because not enough research exists in this domain, and too many studies have flawed methodologies to allow strong policy recommendations to be made. Nonetheless, we also offered some recommendations for parents, educators, government and others:

- **Recognising digital rights.** As children and young people turn to, and increasingly rely on, the internet as a means of actualising their rights to information, identity and expression, we need to **respect children's needs and opportunities online** as well as their protection from harm. This requires explicit attention to safety matters when developing new online opportunities and, conversely, explicit attention to children's positive rights (information, expression, participation) when developing **new safety practices or resources** (so as not to **over-block or unduly restrict**).

- **Recognising voices.** Adolescents' voices and opinions need to be considered in these debates. Their preferences for sources and contexts of information and guidance should be identified, and they should be invited to comment on research and to participate in boards and panels designing education programmes and policy interventions. In short, it is important to consider where young people wish to get their sexual information from, and how? Can society include, respect and address their wishes?

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- **Better education.** Comprehensive sex and relationship education needs to be introduced early on in the school curriculum – ideally from before young children begin to get interested in sexuality, and continuing through adolescence. Curricula should cover emotions, consent, sexual identity, dynamics of healthy (and unhealthy) relationships, sources of trustworthy information, critical media analysis tools and critical analysis of pornography, in addition to sexual and reproductive health issues. Further, rather than (or as well as) designing **dedicated ICT-related or digital literacy sessions**, the importance of the internet in exercising sexual rights and ensuring sexual protection would be better embedded in teaching and resources for sex and relationships education.

- **Supporting parents.** Schools and governments should offer more support and materials to parents to enable them to provide advice and guidance to children and young people on issues related to sex, relationships and sexualisation in commerce, the media and online. Parents especially need resources for talking to younger children in an age-appropriate manner. All these resources must be carefully tailored to children's diverse needs, including those who are at risk or from a sexual, ethnic or other minority, avoiding inappropriate assumptions about 'typical' or 'normal' development.

Embarrassment in talking to children and young people about sex is not a sufficient reason to leave them in the dark. Worries about pornography are not a sufficient reason to avoid providing constructive and non-patronising information and advice online. And controversies over how to draw the line between what is appropriate and inappropriate (for whom? in whose eyes?) is not a sufficient reason for schools to leave this task to parents alone.

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