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 view 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 straightforward; 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.

References


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