

The role of schools in addressing the impact of pornography and sex in the media

Young people are increasingly exposed to sexually explicit material – through the media and through their own exploration of the internet. Results from [The 2011 EU KIDS online survey](#) of 25,000 children suggest the extent to which children encounter pornography online and offline. 23 per cent of the 9-16 year olds surveyed said they had seen sexual images of this kind, although this percentage is often reported as being much higher. Concerns have been raised that this exposure is having a significant influence on adolescent sexuality and health.

Young people are not passive consumers - but they do need support to develop their critical understanding of the things they might be exposed to, or are seeking out. In an absence of high quality sex and relationships education, young people who want to know more about sex may turn to pornography.

Incidences of sexting (transmitting sexual images and messages via mobile phones and other devices) – whether created consensually, coercively or non-consensually – are becoming more frequent. The young people involved have no idea that, even if they are under 18, ‘sexting’ could be classed as making, using or distributing child pornography (see Appendix One for the law relating to pornography). Such “sexts” are also often used as a tool to bully or harass the person featured.

Practitioners working with children and young people also increasingly report incidences of inappropriate sexual behaviour, sexual harassment and sexual bullying which may be a potential consequence of abundant sexual media.

Teachers recognise the need to address some of these issues with their students but need support to get it right. This guidance from the PSHE Association aims to help teachers to support young people’s understanding of the difference between positive and negative relationships and how pornography may distort their view of what is normal – both in terms of body image and sexual relationships.

In order to address some of these issues schools need to consider the following:

National legislation and guidance

The Department for Education (DfE) review of PSHE is expected to report early in 2013. It is hoped that updated Sex and Relationships guidance will follow the review. The PSHE Association will report the results of the review as soon as they are available and will support schools in responding to its recommendations. In the meantime the sex and relationship education guidance published by the government in 2000 remains in place, along with all the legislation that underpins it.

All schools must have an up to date policy that describes the content and organisation of sex education provided outside national curriculum science.

It is the school governors’ responsibility to ensure that the policy is developed and made available to parents for inspection.

- Primary schools should either have a policy statement that describes the sex education provided or give a statement of the decision not to provide sex education other than that included in national curriculum science.

- Secondary schools are required to provide sex education which includes (as a minimum) information about sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV/AIDS.

The sex and relationship education (SRE) guidance (DfEE 2000) is supported in legislation by the Learning and Skills Act (2000) which requires that:

- young people learn about the nature of marriage and its importance for family life and the bringing up of children
- young people are protected from teaching and materials which are inappropriate, having regard to the age and the religious and cultural background of the pupils concerned
- governing bodies have regard to the SRE Guidance.

There is extensive legislation that applies to pornography, sexting, sexual bullying and sexual harassment. School staff and students need to understand this legal framework. Considering the implications of such legislation (perhaps using scenarios or case studies) could provide one way of exploring with students issues such as sexting and sexual harassment. The laws specifically governing these areas are outlined in Appendix 1.

The government has also made a commitment to tackling teenage relationship abuse. The 'This is Abuse' website (<http://thisisabuse.direct.gov.uk>) contains material to support young people in recognising abuse and dealing with it.

School management and policies

It is essential for all school staff to follow the school's policies on sex and relationships education and child protection. Schools should already have strategies in place to deal with all forms of bullying and inappropriate behaviour. Issues such as sexting, sexual bullying and inappropriate sexual behaviour should be dealt with in these contexts and according to school policy.

When developing lessons to explore issues surrounding sexualisation and pornography, teachers are contractually bound to work within the school's policies. They must have the support of the senior management team and governors who in turn need to understand and endorse the planned curriculum.

A robust programme of SRE is part of effective PSHE education

Even if a school does not feel able to cover pornography or sexualisation and sexual bullying as a specific topic, it should ensure that it is providing sex and relationships education that meets the needs of the young people in its community. This should include an exploration of sexual ethics including themes such as consent, respect, negotiation, equality, rights, empowerment, trust, honesty, boundaries and safe sex.

All young people have a right to receive a well-planned and effectively delivered programme of SRE that forms part of high quality PSHE education. To help schools to assess their current provision the PSHE Association has published [audit tools on the membership area our website](#).

Trained and confident teachers

If teachers are to be effective in helping students to explore the more controversial aspects of the curriculum they need to be sufficiently experienced, competent and confident in covering the basics of sex and relationships education. They must be well trained and supported by senior managers.

Ill-prepared and ill-equipped teachers delivering this subject will do more harm than good. The PSHE Association's [online CPD programme](#) – available free to members - will help with the basics, whilst any one of [the Association's comprehensive range of CPD workshops](#) will give teachers a good grounding in the principles of best practice in teaching PSHE education, including SRE.

Bespoke SRE and PSHE education training is available from the PSHE Association [on request](#) and specific training in dealing with pornography and young people offered by various providers, including [The FPA](#). It is important to ensure providers are reliable and of a good standard, [our guidelines for choosing suitable CPD](#) should help you find the right one.

Teaching approaches

Teaching approaches used for other sensitive and controversial issues should be used. See the [PSHE Association guidance on dealing with sensitive or controversial issues](#) and [Unit two of the Association's online CPD programme – Teaching and learning in PSHE education](#).

It is important to develop strong ground rules with your class to maintain a safe learning environment, for example not sharing personal stories, showing respect for others' points of view and having the right to 'pass' if you do not want to comment. Discussions can be de-personalised by using distancing techniques such as made up scenarios, storylines in TV programmes/ fictional TV characters.

Whilst the ground rules may be developed specifically for PSHE education lessons it is also important to adhere to the overall behaviour policy of the school. Never allow students to make fun of others in the class and insist that they take the subject seriously. If the issue is addressed seriously, students will respond seriously.

If published resources are used it is essential to use them in the context of the school's policies, and students' needs.

Suggested teaching and learning approaches might include the following:

Sexual imagery:

- Exploring the use of sexual imagery in adverts for such items as chocolate, cars etc. and whether or not sexual imagery is appropriate for these products as well as discussing the pervasiveness of sex in the media. Ask students to keep tally charts to record the extent to which they feel they are exposed to "sexy imagery" over a 24 hour period and discuss in the next lesson. See ['Sex in the Media' lesson plan, presentation and worksheet on the PSHE Association website](#).
- Considering the differences that might exist if you were making a movie to appeal to a male or a female audience – how might men and women be portrayed differently?
- Looking at body image by viewing such materials as the [Dove Evolution Video](#) which shows before, during and after shots of a model getting ready for a photo-shoot. This highlights how makeup and image manipulation can give rise to unreal expectations of beauty.

Attitudes towards pornography

Considering questions such as:

- Is pornography healthy? Unhealthy? Why? In what way could its use affect a relationship?
- How might one partner in a relationship using pornography make the other partner feel?

- What do you think about the accessibility of pornography these days? Is it okay or harmful?
- Does pornography realistically depict sex? If not, why not?
- How might pornography influence people who watch it?
- Is pornography a good way to find out about sex?
- Do males and females have different attitudes to pornography? Why?
- Do adults have different attitudes to pornography than teenagers? Why?
- What advice would you give someone claiming they were addicted to pornography?
- What advice would you give someone considering sending a sexy photo of themselves to their partner?

Sex and the law

Young people need to understand the laws relating to sex, sexting and pornography. Appendix one on the law can help with this.

Sexting

Discuss celebrity situations – how can anyone know for certain that their partner will never release any pictures or video of them without consent? Material on [the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre website](#) can help with this. Always emphasise the law as it pertains to under 18s. [This clip about sexting](#) could also be a useful starting point for discussion.

Consent

Consent is a very important issue to address throughout any lesson on sex and relationships education. Consent and boundaries are established off screen thus pornography usually implies that people are always sexually available which can be confusing for both young males and females. For pornography to happen, there has to be an assumption of yes – but in the real world, you have to assume *no* unless told otherwise. For more support on teaching and learning about Consent (which should be a cornerstone of ALL sex and relationships education) [please see this guidance on teaching young people about consent](#).

Sexual bullying

It is important to explore gender diversity, gender stereotypes, types of harassment and define sexual bullying and work out strategies for addressing it in your school. The [Womankind Expect Respect Toolkit](#) and the [Brook Sexual Bullying Project](#) both contain lots of useful resources and information to help you with this. The Government website 'This is Abuse' (<http://thisisabuse.direct.gov.uk/>) includes film clips and exercises to help young people explore teenage partner abuse.

Working with parents

Involving parents and carers in the development and review of sex and relationships education is essential. Parents are naturally interested in what their children are taught. They want to understand how their children are affected by – and how they are supported in understanding - such difficult issues as pornography. Most parents are hugely supportive of schools' efforts to guide young people through the challenges of today's society once they have had the opportunity to discuss them with school staff. An SRE stand at parents' evenings provides the opportunity to share materials and signpost sources of parental support such as [Speakeasy](#) and [Family Lives](#).

Talking to students

By involving young people in discussion about where they get information and ideas about sex and relationships and by exploring what they would want to see and expect in their own relationships the lessons can be tailored to their needs. You can ask questions such as:

- What do you want and need to know about sex and relationships?
- What worries you about sex and relationships?
- What do you think the effects of pornography on young people might be?
- How could people in schools and other agencies support you with some of these issues?

Being an active member of the PSHE Association

Share your views and ideas on all aspects of PSHE education - including these more difficult and controversial aspects of the curriculum - and receive those of other practitioners by being an active member of the PSHE Association. The Association can provide help and advice on all aspects of PSHE education. It is a member of the [Sex Education Forum](#) whose website provides access to materials and guidance on SRE.

Appendix one: The law

Pornography and the law

Teachers need to be clear on the law and child protection issues. In summary:

- In the UK pornography is legal to look at so long as it does not feature under 18s; sex with animals; scenes of rape or sexual assault; torture or violent scenes which are life threatening or likely to cause serious harm.
- People have to be 18 or over to buy porn magazines or videos and many websites try and prevent under 18s from accessing them either by a disclaimer on front page or by charging a credit card for access.
- Pornography can be shown on television after 9pm (the watershed) so long as it does not show erect penises or close ups of genitals.
- It can be illegal to watch porn with someone under the age of 18 (this law is designed to protect young people).
- People under the age of 18 who film or take sexual pictures of each other can be charged with making child pornography. Anyone who shares such images could potentially be charged with distributing child pornography. This could result in being placed on the Sex Offenders' Register for *life*. Individuals could also be found guilty of this offence if someone emails them or texts them a copy of such a picture or video – **even if they did not ask for it**. Young people - if they receive such a picture or video - should *delete it immediately* and *absolutely should not* pass the picture or video on to anyone else. If a teacher suspects that images are being shared they must consult with the child protection lead member of staff for advice. Behaviour and child protection policies must always be followed.

The laws relating to sex, sexualised media and sexual offences.

The Equality Act 2010 requires public bodies to take steps not just to eliminate unlawful discrimination and harassment, including sexual harassment, but to actively advance equality.

The Sex Discrimination Act 1975 which makes it illegal for one person to discriminate against another on the grounds of sex, or to subject another to harassment, including sexual harassment.

The Sexual Offences Act (2003) – It is an offence for anyone to intentionally touch another person sexually without their consent. In the UK (apart from Northern Ireland) the age of consent is 16.

The Protection from Harassment Act 1997 prohibits harassment and similar conduct, including verbal harassment, and applies to incidents that have occurred on two or more occasions. Harassment of another person includes alarming them or causing them distress.

The Malicious Communications Act 1988 makes it an offence to send a letter, electronic communication or article of any description with the intent to cause distress or anxiety.

The Obscene Publications Act 1959 makes it an offence to publish an obscene article, including reading matter, sound recording and films or other record of pictures. Publishing includes circulating, giving, lending, storing, projecting or transmitting an article.

The Protection of Children Act 1978: Creating, possessing, copying, storing or distributing photographs or video films of young people under the age of 16, which are of an indecent or sexual nature, or permitting such photographs or films to be taken, is illegal. This also includes computer graphics made to look like photographs.