

HOW TO TALK TO KIDS ABOUT ONLINE PORN



7 age-appropriate ways to talk about this tricky topic

Sexually explicit material, including pornography, is widespread online and it can be difficult to control what children encounter. On average, children come across pornography between 11-12 years old. It is important to talk with children early and openly about what they might see online. Use these seven tips to get the conversation started.

1. Be prepared and stay calm

Kids may bring up online pornography at unexpected moments—or you may discover they’ve encountered it before you’ve had a chance to talk. It’s natural to feel caught off guard or even worried, but approaching the conversation with a calm and nonjudgmental attitude will help your child feel safe. If you feel unprepared, it’s okay to pause and come back to the discussion when you’re ready. Take time to think through what you’d like to say beforehand.

2. Acknowledge that curiosity is normal

Many kids are understandably curious about sex and may look to porn to learn more. If your child has explored porn on their own, begin the conversation by validating their curiosity to reduce any shame they may feel. You might say, “It’s normal to be curious. There’s nothing wrong with having questions about sex and sexuality.” To help answer their questions, explore medically-accurate and developmentally-appropriate resources with your child.

3. Make space for conversation and questions

Scaffold conversations about sex and porn over time depending on your child’s age. The goal is to build a bridge and become the askable parent so your child feels comfortable coming to you with questions about sexuality rather than turning to the internet which can be inaccurate and inappropriate for their age. Be honest and straightforward with your answers.

Try the conversation starters below to open the conversation with your child. Focus on how your child might be feeling, rather than talking about the porn itself. It is also important to keep the door open for future conversations.

Conversation Starters for Younger Kids:

- “Some things on the internet can be confusing or not meant for kids. Have you ever seen something that made you feel uncomfortable or icky?”
- “What are some things you can do if you ever see something online that makes you feel uncomfortable, scared, or upsets you?”

Conversation Starters for Older Kids:

- "I want to talk to you about something that might be uncomfortable, and I promise not to talk about it for more than two minutes. Do you feel like porn and sexual content are as common online as I'm hearing about in the news and media?"
- "Have you ever felt uncomfortable with something you saw online? How did you handle it?"
- "We all see confusing, uncomfortable, or inappropriate things online sometimes. How do you tell if the information you find online seems appropriate or safe?"

4. Explain that pornography is not realistic or representative

Let your child know that pornography is not representative of most people's sexual reality or healthy sexual practices. Porn is not designed for educational purposes but for the entertainment of some adults.

5. Provide tools to say no

Other people may try to share porn or explicit content with your child. Guide them through this potentially uncomfortable situation by practicing refusal skills. They need tools to give a direct answer and then distract, such as, "I'm not into that right now. Let's go play basketball." Remind your child that they can always come to you if they are upset by or uncomfortable with something someone has shown them and they won't get in trouble.

6. Respectfully monitor kids' online activity

It's important to be aware of who your kids are talking to and what they are doing online. You can do so transparently and in age-appropriate ways by familiarizing yourself with the apps and social platforms they use, taking advantage of the parental tools and family centers offered by apps, and reviewing social media privacy settings together. Embedding these expectations in a family media agreement can help set clear guidelines and foster ongoing conversations about online safety and digital habits.

7. Be kind to yourself

Parenting in a digital world is a challenging, ongoing learning process. Recognize that many of us did not receive comprehensive sexuality education and we are pioneers in having these conversations with our children. Show yourself compassion and model resilience for your kids. For further reading, explore:

- Tech/Life Balance Parenting Series
- 10 Tech Tips for Families
- HealthConnected for Sexual Health
- Yes, Your Kid by Debbie Herbenick
- Talk to Me First by Deborah Roffman
- Sex, Teens, and Everything in Between by Shafia Zaloom

Thank you to Shafia Zaloom, health educator, author, and Child Well-Being Advisory Council Member for her contributions to this resource.