

In our sex- and tech-saturated culture, there is no longer any question that your kids will encounter pornographic material at a young age. Luckily, forewarned is forearmed.

BY TANYA BOTHA

Not if but *when*

Marie had just reached the car after telling her 14-year-old son she was about to pop out to the shops when she realised she'd forgotten her phone in the house. 'I jogged back to the kitchen, past my son's room.' She pauses, staring into the past.

'Well. There he was. He was watching something on the computer and he had earphones on. He hadn't even closed the door!'

That 'something' was a young lady intimately interacting with an object that resembled an English cucumber. Only it wasn't a cucumber – it was plastic. And bright purple.

'He didn't notice I was there, staring at him, at what he was watching... until he did. That may have been the longest few seconds of my life.' Marie promptly grabbed the door handle and slammed it shut.

This example of adolescent exploration may be embarrassing, but it's still relatively easy to process, possibly thanks to countless coming-of-age comedies depicting similar situations in a funny way. It's practically mainstream. And it *is* funny – our awkwardness about sex can be comical. Boys (and girls) are swimming in a soup of sex

hormones and, well, teenagers are understandably curious about it – in whatever form 'it' takes, including pornography. It's a defining facet of their age group.

Marie had a heart-to-heart with her son two days later, which she describes as 'brilliant', and tightened the internet access and security on all her own and her children's devices. 'It's pretty normal for a boy his age, I think,' says Marie, 'and it provided an opportunity for us to have a deeper discussion around pornography, respect for women and sex in general.'

But what happens when the narrative strays far, far away from our understanding of what's 'normal'? What if your children are encountering pornography way sooner than you could have imagined?

In July this year, an American mom reported that her seven-year-old daughter's avatar had been 'gang

raped' in an online game she had been playing: Roblox, an entertainment platform aimed at children. The Lego-like graphics are child-friendly, and according to the website, the platform 'allows people to imagine, create, and play together across millions of user-created virtual worlds'. The platform offers parental controls for children under 13, but that didn't prevent predators from accessing

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the game and engaging in obscene acts – albeit virtually – with a young child.

Around the same time, headlines revealed YouTube had been flooded with hardcore pornographic videos made using the Roblox platform, depicting explicit sex acts between the cutesy characters.

‘We live in a media-saturated world,’ says creative parenting expert and author Nikki Bush. ‘Our children are connected, which means that porn and inappropriate content are just a click away.’

And it’s not only online where children can encounter

students both sharing and generating porn using smartphones that have cameras and access to the internet. There have been prolific reports in the media over the past few years of images and videos depicting sexually explicit acts or nudity involving students.

In September 2018, a video emerged of a student from a ‘top’ Gauteng school giving another student a lap dance, with classmates cheering on. The student in question was reportedly pregnant when the video was discovered.

Another notable incident was a video that surfaced in 2016

enquire what the child has viewed and what their understanding is of what they’d seen. This way, you can determine the child’s interpretation and understanding of the content. It’s also crucial to determine where they heard or saw the material. Next, install filters on your PC and phones so the kids can’t gain access to mature sites.’

It may also be necessary to speak to another parent (if your child was exposed to material at a friend’s house) or the school – but be very careful here: this could make your child the centre of controversy, which could traumatise them and discourage them from sharing their experiences with you in future.

Start early

Sex education needs to start really early in order to provide context for any pornography they may encounter later on. ‘Having conversations with your child about their own sexual development and providing them with context and a value system against which to make choices about what they are and aren’t prepared to do with their bodies and their minds is an essential part of contextualising pornography,’ says Nikki. ‘They first need to understand the differences between consensual sex in a loving relationship, non-consensual sex (which would be rape) and sex in the setting of porn.’

It’s important to explain to kids that pornography is fantasy, not reality – that the participants are actors playing a role, and that it’s not generally how real people in a loving relationship have sex.

What’s more, there’s a critical window in which you need to have these conversations: you need to talk to them while they’re still young enough to value your opinion. By the time they reach

puberty, they’re far more likely to value their peers’ views over yours.

And don’t sit your child down for ‘The Talk’ – telling them about sexual reproduction in one fraught sitting. This is likely to be a painfully awkward, joyless experience for both you and your child – not an association you want them to have when it comes to sex.

Leandie suggests using everyday examples: if you see dogs mating, use the opportunity to say that’s how puppies are made, so they start getting an idea. ‘Age three and four is about talking about how boys and girls are different, and you can start using the correct clinical names for genitals. When you see a couple kissing on TV, ask what they have seen and what they understand about it, so you can gauge their thought processes.’

Or simply wait until your child asks a question, which they most likely will, and use that as a chance to educate them. ‘If kids aren’t asking questions naturally, you need to plant conversation pieces and use teachable moments to start discussions around sexuality,’ adds Nikki. ‘For example, if kids (hopefully not yours) are caught doing something inappropriate and it goes viral, you can use that as dinner-table conversation. Start off with, “Did you hear about X? How do you think this is going to affect so-and-so’s reputation? Is it something you’d think of doing? If you were approached, what might you do?”’

It’s extremely important to remove the stigma and embarrassment around sex – it is an essential part of life, after all.

Scenario planning

In younger children, scenario planning typically takes the form of talking to your children about

‘stranger danger’ – giving them a set of responses or actions to take if a stranger offers them a lift, for example. The same strategy can be used to prepare your children for the various ways in which pornography might enter their reality.

‘Everyday conversations can introduce the concept of scenario planning,’ says Nikki, ‘preparing the children for “what if” moments. “What if you received a request for a naked selfie – what would you do? What if you’re sent porn on your phone? Are you going to share it or delete it?” Scenario planning gives your child a blueprint to work off to make the best possible choice they can when situations arise. If they have an anchor conversation to go back to, to help them to make a decision, that is extremely helpful and empowering.’

Where naked selfies are concerned, there’s also the possibility of coercion, blackmail and extortion, which carry with them reputational risk that might stalk them for the rest of their lives. Making your child aware of some (preferably, all!) of the scenarios they might be confronted with regarding sex and pornography will go a long way towards giving them a context in which they can understand such experiences and respond constructively.

Promote sex positivity

Sex education at school tends to focus on biology, while at-home sex education may be very fear-based – ‘don’t let anyone touch you without your permission’ can make it seem as if sexual touching in any context is bad, and this can stay with children well into adulthood. So it’s also important to make sure your children understand that sex is meant to be a pleasurable, loving experience between two adults who really like and trust each other.

Point out that anything that is pleasurable in a healthy way should leave you feeling fulfilled, and that includes sex, or anything to do with sex. Conversely, anything pleasurable that leaves you feeling empty or that you crave more of afterwards, is not a healthy kind of pleasure, but more like addiction. Viewing pornography often falls into this second category, while loving sex falls into the former. This can also be a helpful model in any discussion about addiction.

‘Talk about the beauty of sex and how pornography can have the effect of degrading what sex is actually meant to be – a beautiful way of sharing love with another person by connecting physically and emotionally with them,’ says Nikki. ♣

It’s important for parents to be aware that in South Africa, a child reaches criminal capacity at 14 years of age – which means that if a child of that age or older takes a naked photo of another child, they could be charged with a crime, even if the subject was willing.

inappropriate material. Games like Grand Theft Auto – which, even though it has an age restriction of 18, some parents allow their kids to play – contains explicit sexual content; in some versions, the game allows players to have sex with and kill prostitutes.

‘Sex is just a three-letter word and porn, four,’ says Nikki. ‘Even children age seven to nine are capable of typing the terms into the search window of a device. What comes up will be graphic and not age appropriate.’

The new normal

The average age for first exposure to pornography is 11, and the average age for first-time sex is 14, says Nikki. ‘It is no longer a case of if they’ll be exposed, but when.’

Apart from games and online pornography, schools are becoming hotbeds of pornography, with

depicting a 15-year-old girl having sex with four boys in a school classroom in Durban. Fifteen boys were arrested and five appeared in court.

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But don’t freak out

‘Your reaction will set up the direction for future conversations about sex and porn,’ says clinical sexologist Leandie Buys. Parents should be extremely careful not to shame their child, she adds.

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PHOTOGRAPHS: GALLO IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES; SUPPLIED

Essential resources:

- **Net Nanny or Covenant Eyes** are two examples of filters that can be installed on your computer or phones, suggests Leandie Buys. leandiebuys.co.za
- **Read *Easy Answers to Awkward Questions*** by Nikki Bush, who has several other excellent parenting books and resources on her website Nikkibush.com.
- ***Selfies, Sexts and Smartphones: A teenager’s Online Survival Guide*** by Emma Sadleir and Lizzie Harrison. Thedigitallawco.com/publications

