

A Twelve-Year Old is Watching Porn

With young people, we need to discuss and contextualize porn

It's a familiar story. 12-year-old Dexter's parents separated soon after his dad went to prison for beating someone up. Since then, his mother has had various boyfriends and Dexter has started getting into trouble, hanging out with older boys. Recently, he's been excluded from school because of his angry outbursts.

Will, his therapist, is telling me in our supervision meeting about Dexter, but the work sounds relatively straightforward. "He wants to join the army or the police," says Will.

Of course he does, I think to myself. Like lots of young people, he imagines the excitement and the containment that might come with a uniform, with rules, with structure in his life.

We discuss the attraction of older boys as role models. Will says he thinks it's all about identity, about Dexter trying his best to become manly without a man in his life, or rather, with a man whose own attempts at manliness have landed him in prison. We discuss the grandiosity of Dexter's outbursts as ways of compensating for his size because Dexter is small for his age, like a lot of boys who get into Big Trouble.

"It's great that he's got you," I say to Will, "because therapy can be a place where he doesn't have to act big but can think with you about what it's like to feel small, powerless, insignificant.... You can be a man who doesn't shame him for only being twelve years old." A thought occurs to me. "I imagine he watches a lot of porn...."

"If you say so!" Will says. "We haven't really discussed it."

"Perhaps you should," I suggest. "I'd be surprised if most 12-year-old boys aren't watching online porn at least occasionally and some of them will be watching porn a lot. Remember, Dexter's a boy trying to work out how to be a man, what's expected of men. He's bound to be interested in how men behave, in what men do, in how men treat other people."

"But I can't just ask him if he watches porn," says Will. "That would sound weird. He might get the wrong idea!"

It's a fair point. How *could* he ask about something like that without sounding weird and, more importantly, *why* would he ask a 12-year-old boy about porn?

Of course there's nothing new in people of all ages looking at pornography but what *is* new is the availability and range of online porn, if not in Dexter's house, then on phones or round at his friends' houses or via the older boys he hangs out with. He's only twelve. Puberty is just beginning to kick in. The sex education curriculum at his school will be concentrating on how babies are made and online safety. It won't be deconstructing and trying to help boys like Dexter understand

A Twelve-Year Old is Watching Porn

With young people, we need to discuss and contextualize porn

what they're watching when they watch porn; it won't be putting their fantasies of masculinity into context or explaining the practical and emotional realities of physical sex. Desperate not to be ignorant, he and his friends may well be watching porn for masturbation but they'll also be watching it as a kind of sex education. 'Hanging out with older boys' means absorbing older boys' versions of masculinity, listening to their boasts about sexual experience and prowess: boasts based on pornographic narratives.

Rightly or wrongly, pornography has become a lens through which young people see themselves. "How do I compare with the men and the women online? Do I behave in the same way? Do I excite other people and, if not, why not? Will I ever be good at sex? And if I'm no good, how can I hide that from other people?" There's an urgent need for pornography to be discussed and contextualized.

"Imagine a boy like Dexter who's not yet physically developed watching that stuff," I say to Will. "Imagine him thinking that this is what the world expects of men. Imagine him watching the way the men and women act in heterosexual porn: the way their bodies look, the way they treat each other: the men in control and the women submissive, apparently happy to tolerate anything. Imagine Dexter thinking about his mother with her boyfriends.... Am I being prudish?"

"I don't know," he says. "I can't say I watch much pornography."

"Well watch some!" I implore him. "You can think of it as research into what Dexter and his friends are watching! I think we need to be proactive and ask about young people's porn consumption because you can bet they won't mention the subject, even though it'll have become an important factor in their attempts to work out how they're supposed to be in the world. Some 12-year-olds won't be ready to discuss anything like this and that's fair enough: no one wants to sexualize children or take away their innocence. But for some that innocence has long since been taken away. What we're trying to do is to limit the damage by helping young people make better sense of what they're watching. If you ask him, Dexter can always lie and say no, absolutely no way - he never watches porn. But if you ask in a matter-of-fact way, like it's no big deal, like it's nothing to be ashamed of, then in my experience most young people will admit to watching at least a *bit* of porn and that's your opportunity!"

"For what?"

"For talking about how unrealistic porn might be, for explaining the differences between pornographic sex and everyday sex, the differences between pornographic bodies and everyday bodies.... It's an opportunity to think together about what people might *really* need from each other, for putting the relationship back into the sex, if you like. Assuming that Dexter's never had sex, he's got no experience to compare with the porn he's watching. I think you have to become an unofficial sex education teacher, Will, explaining to him in appropriate detail the differences

A Twelve-Year Old is Watching Porn

With young people, we need to discuss and contextualize porn

between porn sex and everyday sex. You have to tell him about the importance of understanding other people's feelings and you have to explain about consent, because in porn there's no concept of consent, no negotiation: everyone just appears to be up for anything. And if you're a 12-year-old boy watching, that's what you'll end up thinking must be normal unless someone tells you different. In porn, women don't have periods and men don't ejaculate prematurely. In porn, condoms are apparently unnecessary because STIs don't exist and women never get pregnant. Oral sex is obligatory and anal sex is straightforward. In porn, no one's ever distracted, the phone never rings and children haven't been invented. No one farts, smells or needs a pee!"

Will looks taken aback.

"But more importantly, no one ever feels anxious, has mixed feelings or wants to stop. And no one ever mentions love. And that's another task – helping Dexter think about the feelings that might be involved in sex, the feelings men have that are not necessarily brave and confident but that are manly in more tentative, sensitive, generous ways, miles away from a narrow little stereotype that reduces manliness to fighting and drinking and predatory sex!"

Will's laughing. "I can see you feel strongly about this!"

I assure him that I do feel strongly because I think that many young people feel obliged to have to have sexual relationships that imitate pornography. And when those relationships can't be like porn, they get confused. Some couples split up because they're so disappointed in each other. Others split up because of one partner's continued use of porn. "It affects everyone, Will, including boys as young as Dexter. In fact, *especially* boys as young as Dexter!"