

The 'Keep It Real Online' campaign wants parents to talk to kids about porn—but where to start?

July 17 2020, by Tracy Clelland



Credit: Shutterstock

The hugely successful "[Keep It Real Online](#)" video aimed at getting parents to talk to their children about pornography has gone viral and been praised around the world. But my 16-year-old son asked an interesting question when he looked at the campaign website: "Why does it say talk 'to' your child? Shouldn't it be 'with'?"

This is why I always ask his opinion about how he makes sense of the world. As a sexuality educator for over 30 years, a university lecturer and mother of two teenage sons, it has been my privilege to listen to people's stories of sexuality and the impact on their lives.

Some have been uplifting and some are simply heartbreaking. Either way, [young people](#) and adults generally want to reflect on the complicated, messy and often irrational nature of sex and relationships. They also want to talk about joy, pleasure, intimacy and love.

Young people want better sex and relationship education

So any discussion of pornography inevitably leads to a broader conversation—much like the one we imagine is about to take place in that viral video.

In case you haven't watched it, two naked porn actors arrive at an ordinary home to talk to a boy who has been watching them online. The mother who answers the door is understandably surprised and a little lost for words. But in the end she tells her son they need to talk about the difference between the online and real worlds.

The video provides an excellent starting point for parents and children to have conversations about our understanding of sex, relationships and gender.

As the [research](#) continues to show, young people want better sexuality education from the adults in their lives. But what does better sexuality education look, sound and feel like to young people?

Before parents can talk with their children, they first need to reflect on how ideas about pornography are in turn shaped by broader

socio-[cultural values](#) and attitudes towards young people, sex, relationships and the digital world.

Too often, parents' anxieties about the loss of [childhood innocence](#) make them feel they need to be the expert who talks to their child about the dangers of pornography.

You might define this as a fear-based approach, and it can lead to young people having feelings of [shame and guilt](#) for being curious about sex. Very often this can be the end of the conversation.

Listening rather than explaining

It's not easy, but parents should try not to let their own worries about pornography override their capacity to talk with, rather than to, their children about all aspects of sexuality. By doing so they will also help young people [explore and develop](#) their own critical thinking and media literacy.

My current research explores how 56 New Zealand parents understand and experience sexuality education with their children. Embarrassment and feeling unprepared continue to make it difficult for parents and young people to talk about sex, let alone porn.

If they do talk about pornography, we're finding it is challenging to shift from being the parent who knows and explains to the one who asks open questions, listens and invites their child to share their world view.

But the fact is, as [extensive research](#) from the New Zealand Classification Office has shown, many young people have already seen pornography. The [top two reasons](#) they give are curiosity and that they found it by accident.

As adults and parents we need to remember that young people are sexual beings who are curious about sex. They often report that parental messaging doesn't match their own feelings and experiences.

Letting young people lead the conversation

For those reasons, a conversation about pornography as a social, cultural, personal and highly complex issue can be a way into a deeper discussion.

From there we can explore what it means to [navigate](#) the bumpy roads of sex and relationships. Sexuality education by parents sometimes tries to smooth out those bumps with information and advice rather than shared discussion. Yet it's through the emotional wrestle with social and cultural expectations that our sexual selves develop.

We need to allow young people to [narrate their own lived experiences](#). At the same time, we should foster their ability to [critique](#) the wider moral landscapes in which they live.

Embrace sexuality as messy, complex, irrational, emotional and part of being human. Don't look for the "right" answers from young people. Allow them to explore the emotional complexity and joy of sexuality. In this way, online access to pornography becomes just another intersection on their [sexuality](#) journey.

That is the beauty of the "Keep It Real Online" video—it's humor allows us to ask young people open-ended questions. What should adults really be saying to young people? What do they think about [pornography](#)? What do they think constitutes a healthy relationship? Who is advantaged and disadvantaged by the porn industry?

Most of all, pause, breathe, don't judge. Young people are far more

insightful than adults sometimes give them credit. They are constantly watching, learning and working out how society expects them to behave.

Sometimes parents [need](#) to be open—but keep their mouths shut!

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: The 'Keep It Real Online' campaign wants parents to talk to kids about porn—but where to start? (2020, July 17) retrieved 3 February 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-07-real-online-campaign-parents-kids.html>

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