



Young People's Guide to Online Content



Better Boundaries
Online

A calm, practical guide to help you navigate the digital world with confidence, awareness, and self-respect. Online spaces can shape how we think about ourselves, relationships, and sex - sometimes in positive ways, but often with hidden pressures or harmful messages.

This guide breaks down the facts about what you might see online - from social media trends to pornography - and gives you the tools to spot what's real, what's risky, and how to protect your mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing.

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Let's Talk About **Sexual Energy**

Okay, let's get real for a second: **sexual energy**.

It's that spark inside you that makes you feel alive, happy, and connected to other people. It's a totally natural part of being human, linked to love, closeness, and even the power to create life - yep, it's that powerful! It's literally how you came into the world, and one day it might help you create life too.

But here's the tricky part: the way sex is shown on TV, in music videos, on social media, or in lyrics often isn't the full picture. Think of it like looking in a funhouse mirror - things look exaggerated, distorted, or just plain wrong. If you're not careful, those images can shape the way you think about sex and relationships in unhealthy ways.

HERE'S A COMPARISON...

- Eating fast food feels amazing in the moment, but too much can damage your health.
- Drugs might seem fun at first, but they can ruin lives.
- Porn can be the same. It's designed to grab your attention and trigger that sexual spark, but most of it doesn't show real love, respect, or consent. Watching a lot of it can mess with how you see relationships in real life.



That's why we want to help you navigate this online world with some straight-up facts and tips. Sexual energy is one of your most powerful strengths, but it needs to be used wisely. When it gets mixed with shame or unhealthy ideas from porn, it can leave you feeling confused or even powerless. And you deserve better than that.

You deserve relationships and experiences that are:

FUN

RESPECTFUL

HONEST

CONSENSUAL

Where both people feel good - not hurt, pressured, or upset afterward.

Sexual energy is a big deal - it can literally create life! That's why learning about it is just as important as learning maths or science. The difference? You can retake a maths test, but if you get sex and relationships wrong, the consequences can be huge: hurting yourself, hurting someone else, or even becoming a parent before you're ready.

So, the takeaway? Be smart with your sexual energy. Use it with care, respect, and wisdom - and it'll set you up for healthy, happy connections that last.





What Happens When You Go Through a **Negative** or **Toxic** Sexual Experience?

PHYSICAL EFFECTS

- Injuries or pain in the body
- Risk of STIs (like chlamydia or HIV)
- Unwanted pregnancy
- Trouble sleeping or feeling constantly “on edge”
- Turning to alcohol or drugs to cope, which can cause more health problems

MENTAL EFFECTS

- Flashbacks, nightmares, or panic attacks
- Feeling down, hopeless, or even suicidal
- Worry and anxiety that makes life harder
- Trouble focusing in school or zoning out (dissociation)
- Eating too much or too little as a way to cope
- Using substances to numb the pain
- Negative beliefs about yourself (“I’m broken,” “My needs don’t matter”)

EMOTIONAL EFFECTS

- Guilt, shame, or feeling “dirty” (even though it’s NOT your fault)
- Fear of being hurt again
- Anger that’s hard to control
- Feeling numb or disconnected from people
- Difficulty trusting others in relationships
- Low self-worth or self-esteem

How Trauma Can Show Up in Your Life: The Traffic Light Zones

Sometimes when something bad or non-consensual happens, your mind and body react in different ways. These reactions don't mean you're "broken" - they're your body's way of trying to protect you. But it helps to know what the signs look like so you can get support early.

NORMAL STRESS RESPONSE

These are common reactions right after a bad experience. They don't mean you're weak - they're your body's natural way of coping.

- Trouble sleeping or having vivid dreams
- Feeling tense, jumpy, or easily startled
- Feeling sad or tearful
- Getting irritable or moody
- Wanting more time alone than usual

Most people experience some of these. With support (friends, family, counsellor, self-care), they often ease over time.

WARNING SIGNS

These signs mean the stress is sticking around and starting to affect your daily life. This is a good time to reach out for help.

- Avoiding friends, school, or activities you used to enjoy
- Feeling numb or disconnected from your emotions
- Using food (not eating, overeating) or substances (alcohol, vaping, drugs) to cope
- Trouble focusing at school or at work
- Feeling like "something is wrong with me" or blaming yourself

If you're in the Yellow Zone, it's not your fault - it just means your mind and body need some extra care and support to heal.

SERIOUS IMPACT

These are strong warning signs that you need support right away.

- Self-harm (hurting yourself on purpose)
- Thoughts of suicide or feeling like you don't want to live anymore
- Believing you're worthless or "damaged"
- Intense anger, panic attacks, or severe flashbacks
- Using alcohol or drugs heavily to numb pain

If you're in the Red Zone, you're not alone. This is your brain's alarm system saying, "I need help now." Talking to a trusted adult, a counsellor, or calling a helpline can make a huge difference.



If you've had a negative or harmful sexual experience, I want you to hear this clearly: it is not your fault. When it happened to me, I felt like my light and beauty had been put out. I believed my needs didn't matter, and I carried shame that was never mine to carry. For a long time, I couldn't sleep properly or trust people. That's why I'm sharing this - so you know you are not to blame, and healing is always possible. Your light can shine again.

Larissa Astara Gray

REPUTATION

NEGATIVE BELIEFS

NOT FITTING IN

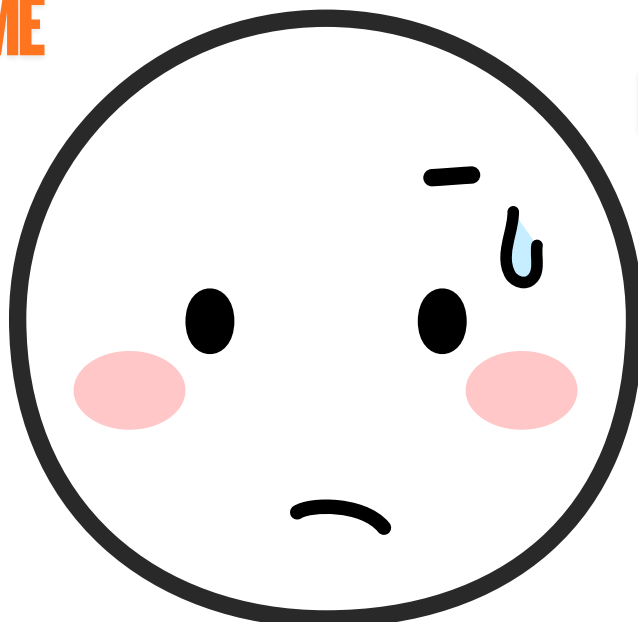
SHAME

SELF HATRED

NO SELF RESPECT

DEFILEMENT

SELF BLAME



ATTRACTING MORE ABUSE

HARD FACED

SLUT SHAMED

EMOTIONAL PAIN

VOICE TAKEN AWAY / SHUT DOWN



When it's healthy, respectful, and consensual, sexual energy doesn't drain you - it builds you up. It helps you shine, grow, and feel good about yourself.

What Happens When You Have a **Positive, Healthy, Consensual** Sexual Experience?

Physical Effects

- Better sleep 🤤 (oxytocin + relaxation = deeper rest)
- Stress relief 😌 (good hormones help your body chill)
- Pain relief 🩹 (endorphins can ease cramps or headaches)
- Heart health ❤️ (gets your blood pumping, like light exercise)
- More energy ⚡ (healthy intimacy can leave you feeling alive and refreshed)
- Hormone balance 🔄 (dopamine & serotonin boosts help your body feel steady)

Mental Effects

- Less stress + anxiety 🌈 (your brain calms down)
- Better mood 😊 (happy chemicals = feeling good)
- More focus + clarity 🎯 (better sleep + less stress = sharper mind)
- Confidence boost ✨ (feeling wanted and respected lifts self-esteem)
- Stronger resilience 💪 (healthy love makes it easier to handle challenges)
- Lower risk of depression ❤️ (connection protects your mental health)

Emotional Effects

- Stronger bonds 🤝 (trust and closeness grow)
- Feeling safe + secure 🛡️ (healthy intimacy builds trust, not fear)
- Joy + fulfilment 🌟 (mutual affection = happiness)
- Deeper trust 💬 (you feel more open with each other)
- Feeling valued 💎 (being respected shows you matter)
- Real connection 🌍 (belonging and support make you thrive)

Negative Body Image

Unrealistic Standards

Let's get real: porn often messes with how we see our own bodies. It pushes fake, "perfect" standards that aren't real life - and they can leave you feeling insecure for no reason.

But here's the truth: people love all body shapes and sizes. What really matters is your vibe - your kindness, confidence, and how you make others feel.

THE SIZE MYTH

Porn makes it look like "bigger is better" and that huge penises are the norm. That's just not true. People are into all different types of bodies. What really shines is confidence, humour, and respect - not size. Believing the myth can cause anxiety or even lead guys to consider dangerous "enhancements."



UNREALISTIC STANDARDS

Porn often shows shaved, "perfect-looking" vaginas that look unnatural. This can make girls feel like their bodies are "wrong" if they don't match. Real talk: there's no one way a body should look. Confidence is what's attractive - not meeting some fake standard.



BODY HAIR SHAMING

Porn stars are often hairless everywhere, which makes natural body hair seem "bad." But tons of people love natural features. One student even said she felt embarrassed about her body hair after comparing herself to porn. In reality, hair is normal - and what makes you glow is your self-love, not being flawless.



THE PERFECT BODY PRESSURE

Porn often shows ripped, muscular men and super-slim women. This fuels eating disorders, body dissatisfaction, and low self-esteem. A UK study found that 29% of teens felt bad about their bodies after watching porn. But here's the secret: attraction isn't about a cookie-cutter look - it's about how you carry yourself.



LOOKS VS FEELINGS

Porn objectifies people and strips away what really matters: personality, kindness, humour, and connection. Real attraction is about how someone makes you feel, not how they look in a filtered video.



Stats & Facts

Pornography frequently depicts sex as performative, aggressive, and flawless, creating false expectations that can harm real-life intimacy and relationships.

Porn raises beauty and sexiness standards to unrealistic levels, distorting what consumers find attractive.



30% of people over 16 report that real sex hasn't lived up to porn-fueled expectations, with 37% unsure.



Pornography use is consistently linked to endorsing unrealistic expectations about sex and partners



EXPECTATIONS

Viewing porn can lead to decreased sexual satisfaction due to discrepancies between fantasy and reality.

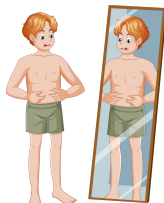


44 % agreed with the statement that if I girl says no you can turn her around

44 % saw porn depicting rape or the recipient being asleep while receiving sex



75% said porn affects body image



59% saw pornography by accident

Verified statistics from the Children's Commissioner's August 2025 report, "Sex is Kind of Broken Now: Children and Pornography"

Let's Talk About **Porn** and **Real-Life Intimacy**

This isn't about judging anyone - it's about keeping it real. Porn can seriously mess with how we think about sex and relationships. It's like a movie: all performance, no emotion, and zero awkwardness - which means it's nothing like real life.

Porn often shows sex as something aggressive or "perfect," where people are treated like objects instead of humans with feelings. That's messed up, because real connection is about care, consent, and mutual respect - not domination or pressure.

The impact is real: studies show that girls often expect sex to hurt, while boys expect it to feel good. That "pain vs. pleasure" gap comes from what society (and porn) teaches us — and it can shape how we see intimacy for years.

SO HERE'S HOW TO FLIP THE SCRIPT:

💬 Talk about consent. It's not awkward - it's powerful. Everyone deserves to set boundaries.

▶ Pressure = red flag. If someone pushes you into something, that's not okay.

❤️ Sex should never hurt. Not physically, not emotionally. If someone's drunk, high, or asleep, it's not consent - full stop.

✨ Healthy intimacy = mutual respect, trust, and care. That's what makes it good.

Talking About Sex (and Why It Matters So Much)

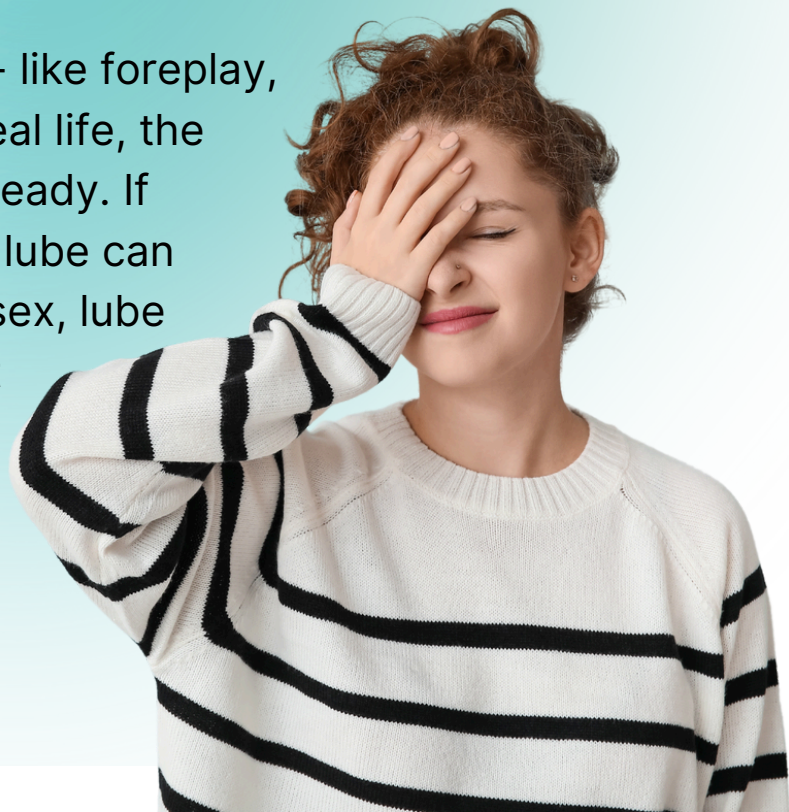
Let's be honest - talking about sex can feel **awkward**. There's so much stigma around it that people sometimes turn to alcohol or soft drugs to "loosen up." But here's the truth: **open, honest chats about sex should be normal**. You don't need to drink or get high just to have a simple, real conversation.

And manipulation or pressure? That's a hard **NO**. Why would you want to be with someone who isn't fully into it? That's not connection - that's control.

Alcohol can mess things up in other ways, too. It numbs your body, so you might not notice pain or discomfort during sex. You could end up doing things that hurt or leave you sore after. For guys, alcohol can delay finishing, which might sound great, but it can lead to pushing too hard without realising.

The bottom line: a fun night should never leave anyone hurting. **Check in with your partner** - make sure everything feels good throughout.

Porn skips over all the real stuff - like foreplay, consent, and communication. In real life, the body needs time and care to get ready. If things are dry or not feeling right, lube can help - it's totally normal. For anal sex, lube is non-negotiable and things must go slowly, gently, and with constant check-ins. If it's not your thing, that's completely fine too.



We've grown up in a world where it's "normal" to joke about sex but weird to talk about it properly. That's backwards!

When we start having honest, respectful conversations, everyone's more empowered and there's no confusion about consent.

**Healthy communication = no grey areas, no games, no lies.
It's about respecting yourself and valuing your body.**

If you ever feel like you can't say no or aren't being checked in with - that's not a safe space. Sometimes people go along with things because of trauma responses like "freeze" (shutting down) or "fawn" (people-pleasing). Knowing your own patterns helps you take your power back.

**CHANGING THE
CONVERSATION**



Be the **Conductor** of Your Experience

Think of sex like music - it's best when both people are in tune. To make that happen, ask questions and check in often:

Are you comfortable?

Do you really want to do this?

Does that feel good?

Is there anything you'd like to change?

Being the "conductor" means owning your body, your choices, and your voice - and encouraging your partner to do the same. That's what makes intimacy real, empowering, and safe.

I've created a **Consent Menu** you can use to practice these conversations. It's all about knowing what you like, setting clear boundaries, and keeping every experience full of care and mutual respect.

⚠ Violence in Porn: Why It's **Not** "Normal"

What you might see online

- Physical aggression: slapping, choking, gagging, hair-pulling, forced acts. Often shown as if it's normal or "sexy."
- Verbal aggression: insults, name-calling, threats, coercive talk.
- Coercion / non-consent: ignoring "no," forcing "rape fantasy" scenarios.
- Degradation: spitting, humiliation, treating people like objects.
- Pain-as-pleasure: extreme "BDSM-style" scenes without safety, consent, or aftercare.

Why this is a problem

- Repeated exposure can normalize harm, especially towards girls and women.
- It can shape real-life behavior and expectations (more pressure, less care).
- People become desensitized, believing pain or humiliation is "just part of sex."
- Teens who see violent porn are more likely to accept or use aggression in dating.

Bottom line: Real intimacy is about mutual respect, care, and consent - not power over someone else.

🚫 Strangulation/Choking: **Not** Safe, **Not** Cute

What actually happens when pressure is put on the neck - even for seconds:

- Oxygen drops: You can black out or get brain injury in a very short time.
- Brain panic: Your amygdala fires "you're in danger," creating trauma memories.
- Memory effects: The hippocampus can glitch - memories may be fragmented.
- Vagus nerve stress: Can cause fainting, dizziness, nausea, dissociation.
- Hidden harm: Soreness, voice changes, headaches... and in severe cases, death.

Also: You can't speak clearly or withdraw consent when your airway is restricted. That puts everything in a grey, unsafe zone.

Real talk: Sex isn't about power. It should feel safe, wanted, and good for everyone involved. If it doesn't, stop.

❤ If You're Shaken or Unsure

- You did nothing wrong by seeing something online.
- If something happened that scared or hurt you, you deserve support.
- UK help: Childline 0800 1111 (confidential).

SEX SHOULD NEVER BE PAINFUL



Sex should feel good, not hurt. If something feels painful, uncomfortable, or just off, that's your body saying stop. Pain is never a "normal" part of sex - it's a sign that something isn't right, like not being relaxed, not ready, or not having enough lubrication.

🧠 Why Pain Happens

Sometimes people rush because that's what porn shows - jumping straight to penetration without warming up or checking in. But real bodies don't work like that. Whether it's vaginal or anal sex, your body needs time, trust, and relaxation to feel ready. When you take things slow, your body naturally produces lubrication (for vaginal sex) or relaxes the muscles (for anal sex).

💧 Lube Is Your Friend

Lube keeps things comfortable and helps prevent soreness or tiny tears.

- If things feel dry, use a water-based lubricant - totally normal and healthy.
- Anal sex always needs lube, because the body doesn't produce natural lubrication there.
- Avoid using random products (like oils or lotions); they can irritate skin.
- Always test lube first to make sure it feels good and doesn't sting.

🔥 Foreplay Matters

Foreplay isn't "extra" - it's what helps your body and mind get ready. Kissing, touching, talking, and slowing down all help build connection and natural comfort. The more relaxed and safe you feel, the better everything will be.

GREEN FLAGS

ASKS FIRST

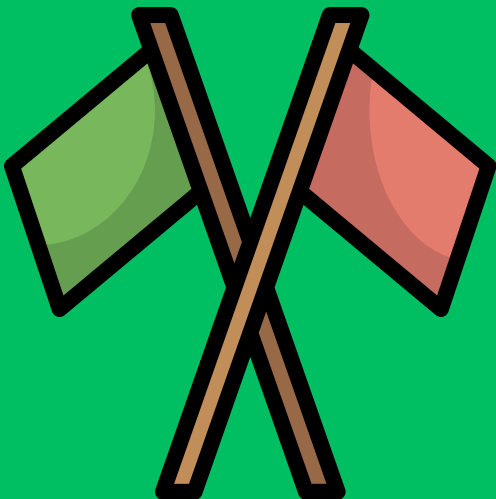
LISTENS

SLOWS DOWN

CHECKS IN

STOPS WHEN

ASKED



RED FLAGS

IGNORES "NO"

WON'T STOP

MOCKS

BOUNDARIES

GRABS YOUR

NECK

USES PORN

AS PRESSURE

- "EVERYONE

DOES THIS"

Addiction and the Hidden Toll

Addiction isn't just about drugs or alcohol - it's anything you rely on too much to cope, escape, or feel "good." Some addictions lift you up, others pull you down.

Healthy Addictions

Things like exercise, art, reading, music, volunteering, or learning can be positive addictions because they:

- Help you relax and feel good mentally
- Build focus and self-discipline
- Boost your confidence and growth
- Improve your physical health
- Give you a sense of purpose and connection



Negative Addictions

Addictions like drugs, alcohol, phones, social media - and yes, porn - can take control of your mind and body.

They can:

- Damage your health (organ damage, sleep problems, low energy)
- Mess with your mood (anxiety, depression, low self-esteem)
- Hurt relationships (less empathy, more isolation)
- Affect your brain (dopamine overload = you need more to feel the same "high")



Dopamine: The "Wanna-Get-It" Chemical

Dopamine isn't the reward - it's the chase. It's that "I need it now" feeling before you even get the thing.

Porn triggers huge dopamine spikes because it's tied to sexual desire - one of the strongest human drives.

Over time, your brain gets used to the hits, so you need more extreme content to feel the same buzz. That's how addiction starts: slowly, quietly, and often without you realising it.

The Silent Addiction

Porn is what I call a **silent addiction** - nobody talks about it, and most people think it's harmless. But if you're:

- Watching it often,
- Struggling to connect with real people,
- Or feeling numb or guilty afterwards -
- ...that's your brain waving a red flag.

Porn addiction can mess with real intimacy, self-esteem, and even cause erectile dysfunction (ED). It's becoming more common in young men - sometimes leading to dependence on erectile drugs, which can make things worse in the long run.

The good news? **Your brain can reset.** Complete abstinence (no porn, no substitutes) helps your natural sexual energy return. It might take time - there's a "flatline" phase where you don't feel much at first - but it passes. What comes back is real, healthy sexual energy.



SELF CHECK-IN

AM I ADDICTED?

Take a moment to check in with yourself. There are no right or wrong answers - just honesty.

Ask yourself:

Do I use this (porn, social media, alcohol, gaming, etc.) to avoid feelings like boredom, stress, or sadness?

Have I tried to cut down but can't stick to it for long?

Do I hide or lie about how much time I spend doing it?

Is it starting to affect my sleep, schoolwork, friendships, or mood?

Do I feel guilty, numb, or empty afterwards - but still go back to it?

What Your Answers Mean

- If you said yes to one or two - you might just need more balance. Try taking short breaks and see how you feel.
- If you said yes to three or more - that's your brain's way of saying, "Hey, I need a reset." Reach out to someone you trust or check the Resources page for support.

Sextortion

What It Is and How to Protect Yourself Online

Sextortion is when someone tries to trick, pressure, or scare you into sending sexual images and then threatens to share them unless you do what they want.

♥ How Sextortion Usually Works

Someone might:

- Pretend to be your age or someone you'd find attractive
- Build trust through flirty chat, compliments, or fake photos
- Ask you to move to private messages (Snapchat, Instagram, WhatsApp)
- Encourage you to send a picture or video
- Screenshot or record everything
- Then threaten to post it unless you send more or pay money

These people are criminals, not friends. Their goal is control, not connection.

If Someone Ever Threatens You

DO

- **Block them**
- **Screenshot messages and usernames**
- **Report them on the platform**
- **Tell a trusted adult**
- **Contact the police (they deal with this every day)**

DON'T

- **Send anything else**
- **Pay money**
- **Try to negotiate**
- **Let fear make you act quickly**

IT WON'T HAPPEN TO ME.

A lot of young people feel this way and that's totally normal. But sextortion doesn't happen because someone is "naive" or "stupid."

It happens because criminals are clever, patient, and really good at pretending to be your age, your type, and your vibe. They use fake profiles, AI-edited photos, and screenshots to make everything look real. They know exactly how to make someone feel seen, special, or wanted and that's how they trap people.

It's not about weakness.

It's about being targeted.

If it can happen to thousands of smart, confident young people every year, it can happen to anyone.

And **deepfakes** make it even easier. Apps only need one photo of you - even one from social media - to create a fake sexual image or video that looks real. This can happen to anyone, even the most careful.

IF YOU EVER THINK ABOUT DEEPFAKING SOMEONE ELSE... STOP!

Creating or sharing sexual deepfakes is illegal in the UK.

Even as a "joke," it can lead to:

- Police taking your phone
- Suspension from school
- A criminal record
- Losing people's trust

But the worst part isn't the punishment - it's the **damage** you cause.

Deepfakes can leave someone feeling violated, unsafe and ashamed, and in some cases the impact is so severe that young people change schools or even harm themselves.

DON'T BE THAT PERSON



The Ethics **No One** Talks About



Let's start with the word "pornography."

It comes from ancient Greek Pornographos which means "writing about prostitutes." Back then, it meant written stories

- not the violent, real-life videos online today.

We've gone from words on a page to real people in pain, filmed for profit.

So ask yourself - how did that happen?

THE TRUTH: IT'S NOT ALWAYS ACTING

Here's the part no one tells you:

☞ Up to 50% of online porn may involve real victims - people trafficked, forced, or threatened.

You could be watching:

- Someone being hurt or assaulted
- A person drugged or too scared to say no
- A teen who's been lied about or trapped
- Someone whose child or passport is being used against them



You can't tell from a video what's real and what's abuse. That's how dark the industry has become.

💔 The Hidden Impact on You

Even if you don't realise what you're seeing, your brain and body do.

Here's what happens:

- You might feel drained or numb after watching.
- You can't make eye contact easily.
- You feel disconnected, "off," or ashamed.
- Your nervous system reacts like you just saw real trauma - because you did.
- You start to question yourself: "What's wrong with me?" "Why do I feel bad?"



That's not weakness - that's your conscience and empathy waking up.

🧭 The Questions That Matter

Before you click, ask yourself:

Would I be okay if this was my brother, sister, or friend?

Would I want this done to me?

What if the person on screen was being hurt for real?

What kind of person do I want to be — someone who watches harm, or someone who stands against it?



⚡ The Energy Exchange

Everything we take in - music, videos, people - affects our energy.

Violence, degradation, and pain don't disappear when the screen turns off; they stay in your nervous system.

Ever noticed feeling:

- Emotionally numb or anxious?
- Disconnected from real people?
- Unable to be truly intimate or open?

That's your body saying, "This isn't right for me."



♥ Reclaiming Your Power

When you realise what's behind the screen, everything changes.
You're not bad - you were misled.

Here's how you take your power back:

Acknowledge: "I didn't know."

Forgive: Yourself for being curious - you were human, not evil.

Choose differently: Connection over consumption.

Protect: Your energy, your heart, your values.



🌱 What Real Intimacy Feels Like

When you stop watching porn, you start to feel the real thing:

- Real connection and consent
- Feeling energised, not drained
- Eye contact that feels comfortable
- Pleasure that comes from care, not control
- Respect that actually turns you on



That's what true intimacy is - safe, mutual, human.

✨ The Better Choice

Instead of porn, explore your sexuality through:

- Imagination
- Emotional connection
- Understanding your body
- Creative outlets
- Exercise or mindfulness
- Real relationships built on trust



Your sexuality is yours - not an industry's.

**EVERY CLICK IS A CHOICE — TO FUEL HARM OR PROTECT
OTHERS. SAYING "NO" TO PORN IS SAYING "YES" TO REAL
CONNECTION AND THE PERSON YOU WANT TO BE.**



Resource Guide

Helplines

IF YOU ARE STRUGGLING WITH PORN ADDICTION

UK ADDICTION TREATMENT CENTRES - 0203 131 5938
WWW.UKAT.CO.UK/ADDICTION/BEHAVIOURAL/PORN/

RAPE CRISIS SUPPORT

RAPE CRISIS ENGLAND & WALES - 0808 500 222
WWW.RAPECRISIS.ORG.UK

RAPE CRISIS SCOTLAND - 08088 041 03 02
WWW.RAPECRISISSCOTLAND.ORG.UK

THE SURVIVORS TRUST - 0808 801 0818
WWW.THESURVIVORSTRUST.ORG

ONLINE AND POSTAL STI TESTING (HOME KITS)

BROOK SEXUAL HEALTH
WWW.BROOK.ORG.UK

OTHER SUPPORT RESOURCES

WOMENS AID
WWW.WOMENSAID.ORG.UK

NSPCC - 0808 800 5000
WWW.NSPCC.ORG.UK

CHILDLINE - 0800 1111
WWW.CHILDLINE.ORG.UK

BOOKS

**PORN BOMB: WHAT EVERY YOUNG PERSON
NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT PORNOGRAPHY**
BY MAXIMILLIAN & SAMANTHA MARCHAM



What every
Young Person
needs to
know about
Pornography

MAXIMILLIAN MARCHAM
& SAMANTHA MARCHAM

Illustrations by Steve Colaghan

ABOUT ME

I'm Larissa, founder of Better Boundaries Online and a passionate advocate for pornography education and awareness. My drive to educate comes from my own story - a story that, heartbreakingly, is far from unique. According to Rape Crisis, 6.5 million women in the UK over the age of 16 have experienced rape, and that's only the reported cases. The true figure, including non-consensual experiences, is likely far higher, and the emotional and mental trauma can linger for decades.

At 13, I was desperate to fit in, to belong. During a truth circle with friends, every girl claimed they'd lost their virginity. I felt like an outsider, consumed by the pressure to conform. I now know that feeling like you don't belong is universal - it's normal, and it's okay. But back then, that pressure led me to a decision I wasn't ready for. I was seeing a 17-year-old boy and told him I was ready to "take the next step." I wasn't. At a party, he cornered me in a downstairs bathroom. I said, "Not here, not now," but he dismissed me, calling me a "prick tease" and accusing me of leading him on. He pinned me against the wall, and I froze. He raped me, then walked back to the party, swinging the condom to cheers from his mates. I was left crumpled on the bathroom floor, a different person. Later, I found out the girls in the truth circle had lied.

A cloud of shame engulfed me. As Dr. Brené Brown describes, shame is the fear of not being good enough for connection. I felt unworthy, filled with self-hatred and toxic beliefs: I'm only wanted for sex; my needs don't matter; I'm unfit for human connection. I blamed myself - why didn't I scream? Why didn't I run? I didn't yet understand the trauma response of freezing, how your body shuts down to survive. To cope, I slipped into another trauma response: fawning. I befriended my abuser to avoid the shame and ostracism I'd seen another girl endure after accusing him of rape. I buried my pain, letting it eat away at me.

That shame shaped my life. I entered toxic relationships, believing they were all I deserved. My voice was silenced, my reputation tainted. I built walls, projecting a tough exterior to hide my pain. I had no self-respect, engaging in risky behaviours - casual sex, the morning-after pill, STI clinic visits, even a termination that was a thousand times more soul-destroying than the rape itself. I felt defiled, my light and beauty stolen. By 22, I was a heroin addict, numbing years of trauma. Yet, deep down, I knew I wasn't a bad person. I cleaned up after three years, but the scars of trauma and negative beliefs kept me trapped in cycles of abusive relationships - violence, control, and chaos became my norm.



LARISSA

Astara Gray

After 37 years of healing through counselling and trauma-release therapies, I've reclaimed my voice and power. Now, I'm on a mission to empower young people to navigate sexuality with confidence, preventing the pain I endured. A 1937 Harvard study found that good relationships are the key to happiness, yet young people today face unprecedented challenges. By age 13, up to 50% have been exposed to pornography, 88% of which depicts violence and abuse. Shockingly, an estimated 50% involves human trafficking - real abuse, not just prostitution. Mainstream media often glorifies toxic behaviour, as seen in documentaries like those about Bonnie Blue, ignoring the long-term emotional and mental trauma for both victims and perpetrators.

While the government has introduced restrictions on explicit content, tech-savvy young people can bypass these using VPNs or, worse, the dark web - a dangerous place we don't want our children exploring. The solution isn't just restriction; it's empowerment through education. I advocate for mutual respect, consent, honesty, balance, non-judgment, clear boundaries, and compassion in sexual experiences and relationships.

Through Better Boundaries Online, I'm giving young people the tools to build healthy, empowered relationships, free from shame and trauma. **No one should endure what I did.** Together, we can create a future where every young person's voice is heard, their boundaries respected, and their light shines bright.