

Pornography, violent video games, derogatory comments on social media, and sexualised music videos and lyrics can all spread negative messages about sex, and about girls and boys. These messages can harm young people, making it harder for them to develop and enjoy good relationships with one another.

These messages include:

- Sexiness is about how someone looks, rather than their character or the personal connection
 - It's cool or normal for boys to be sexually pushy, or manipulative (eg pretending they have feelings for a girl)
 - Girls shouldn't be too sexual (for example, girls getting called names if they're suspected of having sex)
 - Sexual activity is mainly about satisfying male sexual desire
 - Being gay, bisexual or transgender is not normal, or OK
- Young people who are influenced

by these ideas might not state them outright, but they spread through things like jokes, and people being given kudos if they act in line with them – or put down if they don't.

Research suggests that when peer groups take on these views, harassment and abuse are more likely, and it makes it harder for both girls and boys to enjoy equal relationships with each other.

What should I look out for?

Some signs your teenager or their friends are giving these ideas air-time:

- Sharing jokes or comments online about sex that's not consensual or mutually enjoyable
- Online chats discussing people as sex objects, with no apparent respect for their thoughts or feelings (including comments like 'I'd do her')
- Frequently rating and comparing people on their sex appeal or sexual behaviour
- Glamourising things like pornography, and sex that's the result of persuasion or coercion.

Is your child influenced by harmful sexual messages online?

Clinical psychologist **Elly Hanson** offers some useful tips and advice for parents

Illustration: Bratslav Milenkovic



What you can do

1 Challenge the attitude or behaviour without shaming them. You could mention how easy it is to be influenced by things we see online.

2 Don't worry if your child is defensive. Even when people argue back, they often still mentally shift their thinking, and parents'

views do have an impact on teenagers, even if they might not admit it.

3 Brush-offs can floor us ('Lighten up'; 'I'm not hurting anyone, relax!'). Maybe have a response or two lined up to challenge any, drawing attention to how people on the end of such behaviour feel and pointing out that resisting negative ideas is a strength.

4 Explore with them how they might 'call out', or step out of, sexist or negative peer-talk.

5 Research shows that boys are more likely to share sexist jokes if

they feel insecure about their own masculinity. Think about how you might build their identity and confidence around more positive things (like sport, friendship, creativity, etc).

6 Talk to your child about pornography and how it can get in the way of people having good relationships by offering unrealistic ideas about sex and relationships.

7 You could also talk to your child's school or college. Find out what they do to promote a safe culture, and ask your child how teachers respond to sexist behaviour. How is sex and relationships education taught?

8 If the school doesn't seem to have a thoughtful and effective approach, encourage them to rise to their responsibilities – and invite other parents to talk to them too, to emphasise the point.

For more information and advice, see Thinkuknow from CEOP, the National Crime Agency's Child Exploitation and Online Protection command www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents