A guide to teaching about online sexually explicit media: The basics

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Introduction

This guide was written to support educators, especially American educators, as they decide whether or not to teach about sexually explicit media (SEM)[i] in their classrooms. It will also provide guidance as to how to teach this topic.

First, we provide research to offer an overview of youth access to SEM, and how that access is related to youth wellbeing. So much written about youth exposure to SEM is portrayed in a biased, fear-based manner; our aim is to present the research objectively so that you can draw your own conclusions. Second, we provide some recommendations for how to implement a lesson that addresses SEM. Finally, we provide some resources, including some lesson materials, to help you get started.

It is not the aim of this guide to label SEM as "good" or "bad," but rather provide you with research and tools so that you can begin informed discussions with young people about what they may be exposed to in the media. This guide can also be used to help explain to parents, school administrators, or other stakeholders why it might be important to address this topic in your community. While we believe it is important to listen to the needs and preferences of your community, we believe that teaching youth to critically analyze SEM supports engagement in respectful, and healthy relationships.

Almost all young people are online: Some are being exposed to sexually explicit media

As of 2015, 92% of teens are online daily, and 24% of teens report being online "almost constantly." In contrast, only 12% report once-a-day Internet use.

Three-fourths of young people ages 13-17 have or have access to a smartphone. This percentage is important to consider because smartphone use is the primary driver of internet use. Almost all teens with access to smartphones (91%) report going online from mobile devices daily.[14]

Just as internet use has increased significantly over the past decade, so too has the availability of online SEM. As a result, a significant number of youth have either deliberately accessed or been unintentionally exposed to this content. Youth can be exposed to sexually explicit images and media through pop-ups, unsolicited links, email attachments, chat rooms, instant messages, and/or while searching for other information.

Studies have shown that children are first exposed to online SEM as young as 10 and 11. Research out of the University of New Hampshire's Crimes Against Children Research Center found that Approximately one in four (23%) American youth between the ages of 10 and 17 have been exposed to unwanted SEM online, with younger children being more likely to report unwanted exposure.[12]

Age and gender matter[ii]

Gender

Studies of youth ages 13 to 19, have found that boys and young men are more likely to access SEM and do so more often than girls and young women.[13, 21] A study of young people ages 13 to 18 conducted in the United States found that 40% of males reported deliberately accessing SEM online compared to only 13% of females.[2] Additionally, boys report a steeper increase in frequency of use of SEM compared to female adolescents;[21] in other words, boys are not only more likely than girls to view SEM online, but also increase usage at a faster rate as they get older.

Boys and young men are also more likely to report positive attitudes toward SEM, whereas girls and young women report higher rates of discomfort and unwanted exposure.[10] In a Swedish study of 15- to 25-year olds, 61% of females compared to 29% of males viewed SEM negatively, and 46% of females and only 23% of males described the material as degrading.[26]

Age

Both wanted and unwanted exposure to SEM increase with age. According to a national survey, 17% of 10-11 year-olds reported unwanted exposure to SEM online compared to 30-38% of 16 and 17 year-olds. Meanwhile, only 1-5% of 10-11 year-olds reported wanted exposure as compared to 30% of 16-17 year-old boys (only 8% of similarly-aged girls reported seeking online SEM).[28]

An online survey of parents and youth ages 9 to 16 administered in 25 European countries did not differentiate between wanted and unwanted exposure, but also found that older youth were more likely to have seen sexual images online. Findings from this survey indicated that 5% of 9- to 10-year olds had been exposed to SEM online compared to 8% of 11- to 12-year olds, 16% of 13- to 14-year olds, and 25% of 15- to 16-year olds. Images seen by older youth are more likely to be more graphic or sexually explicit.[15]

Young people view sexually explicit material for a variety of reasons

The reasons young people access SEM online are as varied as youth themselves. However, research has identified some key motivations:[10,18]

More common reasons:
- Curiosity
- Sexual arousal and masturbation
- Enjoyment
- Information/education on topics such as sexual desire and sexual activities

Less common reasons:
- Humor
- To develop sexual skills and sexual confidence
- To break the rules
- To understand sexual identities

Overall, sexual curiosity is normal and natural and trying to find accurate information about various aspects of sexuality, sexual health, and relationships is healthy and developmentally appropriate for youth.[23,30]

Sexual media available online is often graphic and does not depict healthy sexuality

Even though seeking out information about sex and sexuality is normative for youth, not all sources are recommended for educating youth about sexual health and healthy relationships. The type of SEM that young people are exposed to online varies, as there is a wide and diverse selection of SEM available online and much of it is available for free. Depictions of sexual acts are portrayed through still photographs, live webcams, and recorded videos. Those involved in the making of online SEM may be amateurs or professionals, voluntary or involuntary, and engage in a variety of sexual acts including masturbation; oral, anal, and vaginal sex, and; threesomes and group sex. Male ejaculation on a female, often her face, was found in 45% of free online content analyzed in one study.[9] Adolescents report viewing pornography featuring rape, incest, bestiality, and bondage, bukkake, group sex, choking, and public humiliation. Reactions towards these extreme behaviors tended to be indifference or acceptance, with some female participants noting disgust and surprise.[22]

The sex depicted online often does not reflect sexually healthy behaviors and practices. Performers are rarely shown practicing safer sex methods such as using condoms and other barrier methods when engaging in sexual behaviors. One study found that only 11% of sex scenes in sexually explicit

films showed condoms being used, and only one scene in over 300 movies included discussion about pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.[3] Much of what is included in SEM does not portray consent, and adolescents have expressed concern over the depictions of sexual pressure and strict gender roles they have seen, and the potential impact of these depictions on real-life sexual experiences.[25]

The bodies of many sex performers are not realistic images of everyday people. Male performers are often very slender and muscular with larger than average penises. Women are typically slender, with large breasts, and little to no pubic hair. Persons with disabilities are rarely represented. Also, the sexual performances depicted in sexually explicit stories are not typical; sexual acts last significantly beyond the norm which may influence sexual insecurities among young people.[19] It is common for SEM to degrade women, especially women of color and trans women, through its representation of sexual acts. Some more extreme sexually explicit content portrays women as victims of violence and rape, although these instances are rare in more accessible forms of online sexually explicit media.[9]

Research finds that there are associations between exposure to sexually explicit materials and sexual attitudes, behaviors, and relationships[iii]

To date, research has not shown that viewing SEM directly causes changes in sexual attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors in young people (see Appendix for a brief description of our methodology used to compile this summary). The research does suggest that viewing SEM may influence some sexual attitudes and behaviors in some youth. However, it is unclear if certain sexual attitudes and behaviors in young people cause them to view SEM, if the viewing of this material causes young people to have certain sexual attitudes and behaviors, or whether another characteristic (e.g., impulsivity, sexual curiosity) causes young people to have certain sexual attitudes and behaviors and also seek out SEM. Similarly, viewing SEM has not been directly linked to sexual aggression for the majority of males. There is some evidence that viewing sexually violent material is associated with sexual violence.[31] While direct links are still uncertain, the relationship between violent sexual media exposure and sexual aggression and harassment may be due to underlying predisposing perpetration factors.

Despite the fact that we don't know if viewing SEM *causes* any unhealthy attitudes or behaviors, the following characteristics are *associated with* the use and consumption SEM:

Attitudes and beliefs
- Unrealistic attitudes about sex and relationships, e.g., the inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality[19]
- Preoccupation with sex[19]
- Sexually permissive attitudes[19]
- Positive attitudes about casual and recreational sex[19]
- Belief that sexual behavior is more prevalent and accepted among peers[19]
- Belief in traditional gender roles; including views of women as sex objects[13]

Sexual behavior
- Studies are contradictory. Whereas some find an association between viewing SEM online and increased sexual behaviors,[19] other studies find no associations.[16] Overall, it appears that SEM does not directly cause initiation of sexual activity.[13]
- A rise in sexual experience was associated with a decline in SEM viewing.[13]
- There is an association between viewing SEM and reduced sexual satisfaction.[13]

Self-concept and body image
- Insecurities about body image in females[19]
- Insecurities about sexual performance in males[19]
- Body monitoring and concern over own appearance in males[13]

Sexual aggression
- Early viewing of SEM has been associated with sexual harassment perpetration in males.[4]
- Males who consume SEM, both violent and nonviolent, were found to have greater rape acceptance and victim-blaming attitudes when acts depicted in the SEM result in the victim's arousal and not disgust. This was also found to be associated with a greater acceptance of interpersonal violence after viewing pornography or sexually violent films.[1]
- Hyper-masculinity among male and hyper-femininity among female adolescents predicts exposure to violent-themed SEM.[21]
- Violent SEM has been shown to predict sexual violence in those young men who intentionally seek out violent sexual content; SEM is not linked to sexual aggression for the majority of males.[31]

Mental/emotional health
- Behavior misconduct at school[19]
- Social maladjustment, lower levels of social integration[19]
- Symptoms of depression[30]
- One longitudinal study found that depression and excessive sexual interest are risk factors for compulsive SEM use.[7]
- There is not enough evidence to state whether viewing SEM leads to sexual addiction and/or compulsivity.[10]

We can allow sexually explicit media online to be the sexuality educator of youth today or we can be the sexuality educators

Whether the characteristics mentioned above contribute to a young person's desire to seek out SEM or exposure to this material contributes to certain types of sexual attitudes and behaviors is yet to be determined. Nevertheless, education about SEM has become necessary. Sexually explicit content is prevalent online; 12% of all websites are sexually explicit and 70% of men ages 18-24 visit a sexually explicit site at least monthly.[24] One of six teens state that "pornography" is one of the top three places they learn about sex and relationships, yet more than seven in ten believe that it can have "damaging impact" on their relationships.[20]

Mobile phones are one of, if not the primary means of accessing SEM.[10] This use of mobile devices has decreased parents' abilities to monitor their children's online activities.[17] Avoiding conversations about the SEM available online will not make the industry disappear; young people will continue to access sexually explicit content with or without adult guidance. Sexuality education that addresses explicit media allows the misinformation received by watching this material to be analyzed and corrected; potential anxieties over viewing inaccurate sexual depictions can also be addressed.[6] Providing youth with tools to critically analyze the material they may encounter will better prepare them to engage in respectful, healthy, and happy relationships, sexual and otherwise.

Currently, most sexuality education offered in the United States is limited in content and scope, and stresses abstinence as the best, if not the only, viable option for youth – despite the fact that 57% of young people become sexually active in high school.[5] As a result, youth are left to "learn about sexuality while dealing with polarized cultural expectations: restricted information at home and school and uncensored information in the media."[23] Research from the U.K. indicates that young people are unhappy with their sexuality education and are increasingly turning to online SEM as a

resource for education and for understanding sexual norms.[10] Experts believe the same is happening in the US. It is essential that educators provide comprehensive sexuality education rooted in the current and lived experiences of today's youth; exposure to SEM online is part of that reality.

Recommendations

Before Implementation

Get administration buy-in: Before teaching young people about SEM, it is important to get your administration's support to address this topic. Talking to your administration, and including the information provided in this guide that demonstrates the need to discuss this topic in schools is an essential first step. Without higher level support, it will be easier for you to be held responsible for potential backlash over teaching this material when unsure parents or other community members question its relevance or appropriateness. Meeting with administration and getting their buy-in will show that the decision to address SEM in the classroom was not an individual decision, but an organizational/school/district-based one.

Consult with other relevant stakeholders: Discuss the idea of addressing SEM with school counselors, relevant community organizations (e.g., domestic violence programs, youth drop-in centers), and the youth themselves. See if these groups believe that this issue is relevant and appropriate to discuss in a formal setting. Try to determine which groups will approach SEM usage non-judgmentally and which groups pathologize all SEM viewing and may shame those who disclose use. Understanding community response to SEM will help you determine whether or not addressing it in the classroom will be met with support or resistance.

Know your state's sexuality education laws and health standards: The current national sexuality education standards, last updated in 2012, do not address SEM specifically. However, teaching about SEM is relevant to many current US standards such as those related to media and cultural influences on healthy sexuality; the role of technology in relationships; how perceptions of norms influence healthy and unhealthy behaviors; decision-making skills, and, the influence of personal values and beliefs on individual health practices and behaviors.[8] Being able to state how the lesson addresses specific educational standards will strengthen the case for teaching this topic.

Understand your school's relevant rules and policies: Check with school administration to see if there are any school policies that restrict discussing certain topics before implementing any classroom lessons or activities. Also, addressing SEM may result in young people disclosing incidents where they have been exposed to SEM and may express concern. If a young person confides that they are watching SEM with an adult, mandatory reporting may become necessary. Consult with the proper authorities to determine when, as an educator, you need to comply with any mandatory reporting requirements.

Gain additional expertise: Teachers are often assigned to teach sexuality education without receiving much support. Asking your administration if you can receive additional training on this topic before you teach. Even receiving a basic core skills sexuality education training could increase your confidence and efficacy. Beyond the Talk (beyondthetalk.net) is one organization that provides teacher trainings and additional resources.

Plan ahead: *When* an educator introduces these materials will be dependent on the age of the youth, perceived need, and community contexts (see Resource A for some Oregon-based examples of developmentally appropriate sexuality education topics divided by grade level). We recommend that a sexuality education program plan includes determining at what grade level an educator will introduce SEM. Ideally, these conversations will be included as part of a comprehensive sexuality education program plan which also includes discussions about the general sexualization of the media, as opposed to there being a lesson purely on pornography, especially among younger people. Lessons about SEM can be included when discussing topics such as healthy relationships,

media literacy, influences, and consent. There are a few lessons available for middle school and high school students that address SEM as part of a holistic, comprehensive sexuality education program (see Resources for sample lessons and other helpful documents).

Explore your own values: To safely and effectively address the topic of SEM with youth, it is important for educators first to think about their own knowledge and attitudes about pornography and SEM. Educators should consider how their own opinions and attitudes may influence their teaching and determine if they feel qualified and comfortable to lead a discussion and answer questions about this topic. It may be that experienced sexual health educators are better suited. It is important for educators to address issues about SEM in a neutral, unbiased manner in order to support young people in exploring their own values and developing their decision-making skills that align with these values.

When discussing sensitive topics, educators should maintain a respectful environment where young people do not feel judged and feel safe to discuss all aspects of sexuality. Remember, statistics show that it is likely many students in a classroom have already seen sexual images online; it is important to not shame these students by declaring that the material they viewed was "bad" or "sinful." Instead, we recommend that educators acknowledge that it is not the norm for most young people to have seen SEM, but that it is also not uncommon for young people to have been exposed to such material online or via other media – often not on purpose.[30] It is also important to let young people know that in the US it is illegal for people under age 18 to view pornography.

During Implementation

Create a safe environment: Before beginning any discussions about sexuality, never mind sexually explicit media, it is important to make sure that you have made your space safe for all youth. Discuss selfcare strategies for young people who may feel uncomfortable during discussions; remind students of school counselor hours, and/or let students know about local community resources that offer outside support. Establish ground rules so that different viewpoints are listened to, yet do not force a student to speak up in class if they do not want to. Keep side conversations or off-track comments to a minimum. Provide a question box so that students can ask questions they otherwise may not ask (you may even require all students to write something down to put in the question box so everyone is participating and therefore increases anonymity). A question box also provides educators an opportunity to seek answers to questions that they do not know and/or to determine ways to objectively address more sensitive, difficult topics that may arise.

Make the lesson engaging, rather than lecturing: Ideally, a lesson on SEM would include a series of interactive activities aimed at (1) the development of a working definition of pornography, (2) a discussion on the law, (3) a section on media literacy (e.g., pornography as a business trying to sell people something; how those having sex are entertainers and not depicting "real" sex), and (4) a discussion about how sexually explicit media often do not provide models of healthy and safe sexual expression. Getting young people to analyze the messages that SEM deliver, and how those messages differ from the ones you have been teaching (i.e., consent, boundaries) will allow them to develop the critical thinking skills needed to analyze this material on their own.

1. Clearly define pornography and/or sexually explicit media: Research has shown that young people have a hard time defining pornography or what it means to be "sexually explicit".[10] This may be because media from mainstream movies to music videos to television advertisements is often highly sexualized. One way to begin a conversation about SEM is to involve students in crafting definitions. A sex and relationship education curriculum from Australia, called Fantasy vs. Reality, defines pornography as follows: "Printed or visual material containing the explicit description or display of sexual organs or activity intended to stimulate sexual excitement."[6] This is one of many definitions. Educators may choose a definition that works best for them, their classroom, and their community.

2. Discuss pornography and the law: It is important for youth to understand the law and pornography. It is illegal for young people in the US under age 18 to view pornography online, but it still happens. Additionally, it is important for youth under 18 to understand, that if they view or possess pornographic images of anyone under 18 and/or create and share sexually explicit images of themselves or others via sexting, Instagram, SnapChat, etc., that such acts are illegal, and that they could be prosecuted as sex offenders for such behavior depending on the state they live in.

3. Discuss how sexually explicit media are forms of entertainment, not education (media literacy): Engaging students in activities that provide them opportunities to critically analyze the information that they see in the media is another effective way to begin addressing pornography. Activities that encourage students to think about the business (i.e., it encourages people to buy more) and entertainment (i.e., the people they see are performers/entertainers who are having sex for a camera, not for each other), aspects of the industry can cultivate critical thinking skills about why pornography exists and how viewing SEM is not a good way to learn about healthy relationships. For example, ask students if they think safer sex practices such as using condoms and dental dams are portrayed in SEM and why or why not. Exercises that open discussions about the ways in which gender, race, sexual orientation, and sex are portrayed in SEM, and encourage reflection on how these portrayals differ from respectful, healthy relationships may also be beneficial.

4. Emphasize the characteristics of a healthy relationship: It is not enough to tell students that SEM often serve as unhealthy models for a relationship; students also need to learn what a healthy relationship looks like. It's possible that a review of something already taught in your sexuality education curriculum will suffice. However, if your sexuality education curriculum does not address healthy relationships, this concept can be introduced in a number of ways. For example, students can participate in activities that help them differentiate healthy and unhealthy relationships. One idea is to have students categorize statements about relationships such as "Women always want sex, even if it doesn't seem this way initially" to "Unprotected sex is a health risk" as being "healthy" or "unhealthy" relationship characteristics. Another is to have students read scenarios about relationships and rate them as healthy or unhealthy. A good lesson can be found in the no cost Rights, Respect, Responsibility curriculum by Advocates for Youth; this particular lesson is for Grade 8, but could generate good discussion at other levels (See Resource C). A final suggestion is to have students engage in activities to build skills and the confidence to make healthy decisions. One idea is to have students provide the endings to sexual relationship scenarios, then discuss the risks and benefits of each ending and choose a few endings that embody the concepts of a healthy relationship.

You can also provide an opportunity for young people to reflect on their own attitudes about viewing SEM and healthy relationships. Here is a series of questions to help educators engage youth in conversations about their personal attitudes and values surrounding SEM:[11]

- Is viewing sexually explicit media healthy? Why or why not?

- How could sexually explicit media affect a relationship?

- How might using sexually explicit media by one partner make the other partner feel?

- What do you think about the accessibility of sexually explicit media?

- Is sexually explicit media okay or is it harmful? Why?

- Does sexually explicit media realistically depict sex? Why or why not?

- How might sexually explicit media affect the person watching it?

- Is viewing sexually explicit media a good way to find out about sex? Why or why not?

Conclusion

We hope you found the information in this guide helpful. Ultimately, we want you to use this guide as you see best, as you are the one who knows your school and community better than any outsider. The information and resources provided here can be useful when collaborating with parents, colleagues, counselors, administrators, and community members to determine the best way to talk to young people about SEM online. A good guide for concerned parents whose children are viewing SEM is available in the Resources section (Resource B); this may also help you if a student discloses viewing such content.

Additional Resources

A. Age/Developmentally Appropriate Comprehensive Sexuality Education Guidelines Available at http://www.ode.state.or.us/wma/teachlearn/conferencematerials/sped/2012/aged evapprotopicguide.pdf. Accessed July 31, 2018.

B. So your kid is looking at porn. Now what? Written by Larry Magid for ConnectSafely. Available at http://www.connectsafely.org/so-your-kid-is-looking-at-porn-now-what/. Accessed July 31, 2018

C. Healthy or Unhealthy Relationships? A Lesson Plan from Rights, Respect, Responsibility: A K-12 Curriculum (designed for 8th grade). Available at http://advocatesforyouth.org/3rscurric/documents/8-Lesson-3-3Rs-HealthyOrUnhealthyRelationships.pdf. Accessed July 31, 2018.

D. Porn: Fact or Fiction. A video created by Amaze.org for ages 10-14. Available at https://amaze.org/?topic=personal-safety#popup1137. Accessed July 31, 2018.

E. Fantasy or Reality? How Sexually Explicit Media Affects How We See Relationships IRL. A Lesson Plan from Rights, Respect, Responsibility: A K-12 Curriculum (designed for 12th grade). Available at https://www.advocatesforyouth.org/3rscurric/documents/12-Lesson-5-3Rs-FantasyorReality.pdf. Accessed July 31, 2018.

F. Relationships and Sexuality in the Media, A Lesson Plan from Media Smarts (designed for high school students). Available at http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/mediasmarts/files/lesson-plans/lesson_relationships_sexuality_media.pdf. Accessed July 31, 2018.

G. A poster challenging the way pornography depicts sex: https://www.fpa.org.uk/sites/default/files/fpa-sexual-health-week-2017-fantasy-vs-reality-poster.pdf

H. Training and coaching opportunities are available at Beyond the Talk: www.beyondthetalk.net.

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For more information, including training opportunities, please contact Dr. Gowen at info@beyondthetalk.net.

Appendix: Methodology

We reviewed over 100 abstracts from January 2015-May 2018 to include in this updated literature review, prioritizing longitudinal studies over those that used other methodologies. Three comprehensive reviews citing longitudinal studies were also included. Findings from longitudinal studies were highlighted because many cross-sectional designs produce conflicting information and are difficult to determine direction of causality or association. Longitudinal studies tend to be more rigorous and allow us to make assumptions about an exposure, such as sexually explicit media, and its outcome being associated due to the presence and/or dose of the exposure and its temporal relationship to the observed outcome. Nevertheless, given the scant information on this topic, many additional sources using non-longitudinal approaches were included in this review. Many other studies were not included due to their primary study population being outside the United States; however, some international studies were included when there was no available research that drew from participants from the United States.

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[i] We have chosen to use the term "sexually explicit media" as opposed to "pornography" to refer to sexual images that can only legally be viewed by persons 18 years or older. This is because "pornography" has many connotations and attitudes associated with it. We believe SEM is a more literal, and hopefully neutral, term. The one exception to this nomenclature is when we discuss legal issues. Since laws and policies address pornography, we use that term in those contexts.

[ii] There are no national surveys that address racial and ethnic comparisons so we do not report on these demographics. Similarly, we could not find research on online sexually explicit media and young people of different sexual orientations and gender identities (see McCormack, 2017 for the one exception), and therefore these populations are also not discussed separately. We believe more research is needed to better understand how different youth interact with, and respond to, sexually explicit media.

[iii] This information has been taken from the findings of a growing body of global evidence. Studies from the U.K., Sweden, Holland, Australia, Taiwan, Canada, and the U.S. are primarily responsible for the information provided in this section.