

UNDERSTANDING YOUNG PEOPLE, PORNOGRAPHY & SEXTING



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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National Youth Council of Ireland

The National Youth Council of Ireland is the representative body for voluntary youth organisations in Ireland. We use our collective experience to act on issues that impact on young people.

www.youth.ie

National Youth Health Programme

The National Youth Health Programme (NYHP) is a partnership between the National Youth Council of Ireland, the Health Service Executive (HSE) and the Department of Children, Disability, Equality, Integration and Youth.

www.youth.ie/health

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Foreword

Over the past number of years, through the delivery of training by the National Youth Health Programme and conversations with youth workers across the youth work sector, it has become increasingly clear that the pornography industry is having a significant and negative impact on young people's relationships.

In today's society, young people are accessing mobile phones and digital devices at an early age, and, as a result, are either unintentionally exposed to or voluntarily accessing problematic and extreme content, such as pornography.

Within this content, relationships are often portrayed without discussions around consent, the use of contraception, or healthy dynamics. Instead, it frequently depicts violence, particularly towards women. Unfortunately, where comprehensive Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) is lacking, some young people turn to pornography for guidance and mistakenly perceive these unrealistic portrayals as real-life examples of relationships.

In addition to the influence of pornography, many young people lack the confidence and ability to assert their opinions, desires, and boundaries within relationships. This can create unhealthy, problematic, or even dangerous dynamics, which may have lasting consequences on both their friendships and romantic relationships.

With that, the aim of this resource is to equip youth workers and those working in the youth work sector with the confidence and reliable information needed to engage young people in conversations about pornography, healthy relationships, and the legalities surrounding the sharing of sexually explicit images. This resource is designed to complement a suite of sexual health training facilitated by the National Youth Health Programme, which supports the healthy sexual development and wellbeing of young people.

Rachael Treanor

Rachael Treanor
National Youth Health Programme Manager

*** The pornography industry is having a significant and negative impact on young people's relationships.**



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Introduction

The National Youth Health Programme (NYHP) is a partnership between the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI), the Health Service Executive (HSE) and the Department of Children, Disability, Equality, and Integration (DCEDIY). The NYHP works towards making a defining contribution to developing effective youth health promotion practices that support young people to make healthy and positive choices.

Background to the development of this information resource

The National Youth Health Programme provides training and resources to youth workers and other professionals on a myriad of issues relating to young people's health and wellbeing, including their sexual health, see youthhealth.ie for a comprehensive outline of all supports available.

In recent years those working in the Youth Work Sector have repeatedly raised concerns about young people's exposure to pornography and its impact on their sexual and relationship development. Youth Workers have specifically highlighted their concerns about explicit image sharing amongst Young People.

In addition, Youth Workers commonly cite lack of information, guidance and resources to aid them in addressing the issue. In response to this need, the National Youth Health Programme, within NYCI, developed the one-day, training programme, '*Understanding Young People & Pornography*' in 2016, and have now produced this information resource as an accompaniment.

Aim of the resource

This resource aims to provide workers and volunteers in the Youth Work sector, with additional information and signposting to better enable them to address the issue of pornography with Young People in their service.

This resource is part of a wider response to the effect pornography has on the healthy sexual development of Young People. There are many more resources and training aimed at the healthy sexual development of our Young People; further information is available in section 4 and on youthhealth.ie

SECTION 1

Defining Sexual Health and Pornography



Key definitions

This section outlines the relevant key definitions in relation to pornography and sexual health and wellbeing more broadly.

Sexual health

The World Health Organization (WHO) has defined sexual health as a *state of physical, emotional, mental, and social wellbeing in relation to sexuality; that is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction, or infirmity. Sexual Health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having safe and pleasurable sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination, and violence.*' (WHO, 2006). This definition provides a useful backdrop when considering the impact of pornography.¹

Sexual health promotion

Sexual health promotion is the process by which individuals achieve the ability to control and improve their sexual health². The promotion of sexual health should enhance sexual and emotional wellbeing and help people to reduce the risk of sexually transmitted Infections (STIs), HIV, and unwanted pregnancies.³

Pornography

Pornography is '*printed or visual material containing the explicit description or display of sexual organs or activity, intended to stimulate sexual excitement*'.⁴

Sexual stimulation

Sexual stimulation is any stimulus that leads to sexual arousal or orgasm. The term often implies stimulation of the genitals but may also include stimulation of other areas of the body, stimulation of the senses (such as sight or hearing), and mental stimulation (such as that gotten from reading or fantasizing).⁵

Sexting

Sexting is the sending or receiving of sexual words, pictures, or videos via technology, typically a mobile phone.⁶

Child sex abuse image

According to the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017, a Child Sex Abuse Image is defined as any visual representation that:

- I. Shows, or in the case of a document relates to, a person who is or is depicted as being a child and who is engaged in or is depicted as being engaged in real or simulated sexually explicit activity,
- II. Shows, or in the case of a document relates to, a person who is or is depicted as being a child and who is or is depicted as witnessing any such activity by any person or persons or
- III. Shows, for a sexual purpose, the genital or anal region of a child or of a person depicted as being a child.

Offences in relation to production, distribution, possession of child sex abuse images and online grooming.

¹ https://www.who.int/health-topics/sexual-health#tab=tab_2

² Eisenberg ME, Bernat DH, Bearinger LH, Resnick MD. Support for comprehensive sexuality education: perspectives from parents of school-age youth. *J Adolescent Health*. 2008;42(4):352–9. doi: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2007.09.019

³ Pan American Health Organization. Promoting sexual health: Recommendations for Action. Washington DC: 2000

⁴ <https://dictionary.apa.org/pornography->

⁵ [https://www.wikidoc.org/index.php/Sexual_stimulation#:~:text=Sexual%20stimulation%20is%20any%20stimulus,gotten%20from%20reading%20or%20fantasizing\).](https://www.wikidoc.org/index.php/Sexual_stimulation#:~:text=Sexual%20stimulation%20is%20any%20stimulus,gotten%20from%20reading%20or%20fantasizing).)

⁶ <https://www.youth.ie/documents/lets-talk-about-sexting/#:~:text=The%20NYCI%20National%20Youth%20Health,on%20the%20topic%20of%20sexting.>

SECTION 2

Pornography and Legislation in Ireland



2

Key legislation

Ireland has historically maintained strict laws regarding pornography. However, as with many countries, the advent of the internet has complicated enforcement.

Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 1993:

- This law makes it illegal to produce, distribute, or possess pornography that is considered “obscene”. The definition of obscenity under this act is broad and subject to interpretation by the courts.
- The law particularly targets material that could be deemed as harmful to minors or degrading.

Child Trafficking and Pornography Act 1998:

- This act specifically addresses child sex abuse images. It criminalizes the possession, distribution, and production of child sex abuse images, with severe penalties for violations.
- The act also mandates reporting any suspected instances of child sex abuse images.

The Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2021 (Coco’s Law):

In February 2021 the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act was commenced, known as Coco’s Law.

Coco’s Law creates two new offences which criminalise the non-consensual distribution of intimate images:

1. It is an offence to distribute or publish intimate images of a person, without consent and with intent to cause harm. Penalties include an unlimited fine and/or 7 years imprisonment.
2. It is an offence to take, distribute or publish intimate images of a person without consent even if there is no specific intent to cause harm. Penalties include a maximum fine of €5,000 and/or 12 months’ imprisonment.

Importantly! This applies even if the person initially gave consent for the pictures to be taken, but they were later shared with other people without their consent.

This law is in addition to existing legislation which makes it illegal to send, receive or share any sexually explicit images, video or text of someone under 18 years of age.

A child under 17 years of age can only be charged with an offence under this Act with the consent of the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Enforcement and Challenges:

Internet access: The rise of internet access has made it difficult to enforce bans on pornography. While Irish law criminalises the distribution of obscene material, the availability of such content online from international sources complicates enforcement.

Technological solutions: The Irish government has considered and sometimes implemented technological solutions such as internet filtering to block access to illegal content. However, such measures are often controversial and seen as infringing on freedom of expression.

Ireland’s legal framework on pornography is complex with the modern challenges posed by the internet. While child sex abuse imagery is strictly criminalised, the regulation of adult pornography remains a contentious issue.

SECTION 3

Young People and Pornography Use



Why do young people use pornography?

Through our conversations with youth workers and volunteers across the sector, we continuously hear and collect the main issues and concerns of what is impacting young people's wellbeing. It should be noted that this list below is a summation of the main themes that we hear through our engagement with professionals who work with young people, and they are commonly referenced across various literature and research in the area. It is not an exhaustive list but common themes that have emerged include:

- 1. Curiosity and exploration:** Adolescents and young adults are often curious about sex and their own sexuality. Pornography can provide a way to explore and learn about different sexual behaviours, preferences, and identities.
- 2. Sexual education:** In the absence of a comprehensive sexual education for some young people, they turn to pornography as a source of information about sex, anatomy, and relationships. However, it's important to note that pornography often presents a distorted and unrealistic view of these topics.
- 3. Sexual arousal and pleasure:** Pornography is designed to be sexually stimulating, and many young people use it as a means of arousal and self-pleasure.
- 4. Peer influence:** In some cases, young people may feel pressure from their peers to watch pornography as a way to fit in or be seen as sexually experienced.
- 5. Escape and stress relief:** Like other forms of entertainment, pornography can provide a temporary escape from stress, boredom, or other negative emotions.
- 6. Cultural differences and issues -** In cultures or communities where discussions about sex are taboo or where access to accurate sexual health information is limited, pornography may be one of the few resources available for young people to learn about sex.
- 7. Technology and accessibility:** With more and more young people having internet access through smartphones, and from a younger age, pornography is more accessible than ever before, making it easier for young people to find and consume.

Issues and concerns relating to young people using pornography

These issues and concerns were collected from youth workers, volunteers and other professionals that attended the NYHP's 'Understanding Young People & Pornography' training.

1. Impact on sexual attitudes and behaviour:

Exposure to pornography at a young age can shape attitudes and behaviours towards sex and relationships. It may lead to unrealistic expectations about sex, body image, and sexual performance. It can also influence ideas about consent, gender roles, and power dynamics in relationships.

2. Potential addiction:

Excessive consumption of pornography, especially at a young age when the brain is still developing, can lead to addiction-like behaviours. This can interfere with daily functioning, academic performance, and social relationships.

3. Negative psychological effects:

Frequent exposure to pornography may be associated with negative psychological outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, particularly among adolescents, this is backed up by some studies in the area.⁷

4. Impact on intimate relationships:

Pornography use can affect intimate relationships, leading to conflicts, decreased satisfaction, and difficulties in establishing emotional intimacy. It may also contribute to infidelity and unrealistic expectations of partners.

5. Increased coercion/coercive control –

linked to the impact on relationships, there has been an anecdotal increase in young people displaying coercive behaviours and

looking to control all elements of a partner's life. This may be attributable to some of the behaviours displayed in pornography.

6. Legal and ethical concerns:

Accessing pornography before the legal age or viewing illegal content can have legal consequences. Moreover, there are ethical concerns surrounding the production and distribution of pornography, including issues of consent, exploitation, and the portrayal of harmful or violent sexual acts.

7. Sexual health risks:

Pornography depicts unsafe sexual practices and does not accurately represent real-world sexual health advice. This can contribute to risky sexual behaviours, increased likelihood of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and unintended pregnancies.

8. Impact on brain development:

There is growing concern about the impact of pornography on the developing brain, particularly in adolescents. Some research suggests that exposure to explicit sexual content may affect brain reward pathways, decision-making, and impulse control.⁸

9. Privacy and online safety:

Young people may be at risk of inadvertently exposing themselves to inappropriate or harmful content online while searching for or consuming pornography. Additionally, sharing or distributing sexually explicit material without consent can have serious legal and social consequences. (See section 2 on Pornography and legislation in Ireland and section 4 on sexting).

⁷ Use of Pornography by Young Adults in Ireland. <https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/40677/>

⁸ Brown, J.A. and Wisco, J.J. (2019) 'The components of the adolescent brain and its unique sensitivity to sexually explicit material', *Journal of Adolescence*, 72(1), pp. 10–13. doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2019.01.006.

Impact of pornography use on the developing brain

The fact that many young people are getting their sex education from mainstream pornography is deeply problematic for several reasons, including the unrealistic portrayals of relationships and sex. That's why it's so important that young people are provided with context and accurate information to combat this miseducation. One important aspect of pornography young people need to know about is its effect on the brain.⁹

How pornography works on the brain

Pornographic images and videos stimulate the part of the brain that releases dopamine – the neurotransmitter of pleasure and reward. It's one of the things that makes us feel good when we enjoy food, buy a new pair of shoes, or have pleasurable sex. The imagery in pornography can be so hyper-stimulating for the brain that it releases unnaturally high levels of dopamine.¹⁰

Pornography can wear out our reward system

Trying to create these high dopamine rushes again and again can 'wear out' the system. This often leads to pornography users seeking out more 'hard-core' material to achieve the same feelings of pleasure as previously produced.¹¹

The high levels of dopamine released through frequent use of pornography have the potential to leave the brain unresponsive to natural pleasure, including things that gave pleasure in the past. It is believed that frequent pornography use desensitises the brain's reward pathway and can disrupt the natural ability to produce dopamine. Studies show that anything that creates significant changes in the transmission of dopamine can contribute to depression and anxiety, which may be why other research shows that frequent pornography users report greater depressive symptoms, lower quality of life and poorer mental health compared to those who don't watch pornography.¹²

Pornography can change our sexual behaviour

Pornography has the potential to change our sexual interests, behaviours and expectations. Mainstream pornography offers an almost uniform sexual script of female objectification and degradation and male violence towards them.

Research has shown that 'the more pornography a man watches, the more likely he was to use it during sex, request particular pornographic sex acts of his partner, deliberately conjure images of pornography during sex to maintain arousal, and have concerns over his own sexual performance and body image.' Higher pornography consumption is also shown to impact and lessen the enjoyment of intimacy with a partner.¹³

Pornography can affect the ability to delay gratification

Delayed gratification is a useful quality to have in life. It means the ability to wait or work for something that will bring us a higher reward rather than go for whatever pleasure is in front of us right now. The ability to have a long-term mindset when it comes to rewards is what helps us, say, save money for something important rather than buy the cool thing in front of us right now, or work hard on a meaningful project even if it's difficult rather than procrastinating. Pornography may make people choose immediate payoffs over delayed gratification.¹⁴

⁹ <https://www.sexeducationaustralia.com.au/how-pornography-changes-our-brain-and-why-our-teens-need-to-know-about-this/>

¹⁰ <https://www.sexeducationaustralia.com.au/how-pornography-changes-our-brain-and-why-our-teens-need-to-know-about-this/>

¹¹ Park BY, Wilson G, Berger J, Christman M, Reina B, Bishop F, Klam WP, Doan AP. Is Internet Pornography Causing Sexual Dysfunctions? A Review with Clinical Reports. *Behav Sci (Basel)*. 2016 Aug 5;6(3):17. doi: 10.3390/bs6030017. Erratum in: *Behav Sci (Basel)*. 2018 Jun 01;8(6):E55. doi: 10.3390/bs8060055. PMID: 27527226; PMCID: PMC5039517.

¹² <https://www.sexeducationaustralia.com.au/how-pornography-changes-our-brain-and-why-our-teens-need-to-know-about-this/>

¹³ Sun C, Bridges A, Johnson JA, Ezzell MB. Pornography and the Male Sexual Script: An Analysis of Consumption and Sexual Relations. *Arch Sex Behav*. 2016 May;45(4):983–94. doi: 10.1007/s10508-014-0391-2. Epub 2014 Dec 3. Erratum in: *Arch Sex Behav*. 2016 May;45(4):995. doi: 10.1007/s10508-016-0744-0. PMID: 25466233.

¹⁴ <https://www.sexeducationaustralia.com.au/how-pornography-changes-our-brain-and-why-our-teens-need-to-know-about-this/>

SECTION 4

Sexting and Explicit Image Sharing



What is sexting?

Sending, receiving or forwarding of images, videos and texts that are sexually explicit.

What is meant by sexually explicit?

Any image, video or text where the genitals/anus/breasts are the focus.

What are genitals?

The external sexual organs: the testicles, penis (male) and vulva (female) (Let's Talk About Sexting, NYCI).

Why do young people sext?

This information has been adapted from the Webwise resource 'Why do teens sext?'¹⁵

There are many reasons why young people exchange explicit messages. Often messages are exchanged as part of a romantic relationship, as a means of furthering the relationship or as part of the initial flirting stage. Some young people even describe sexting as a form of safe sex as "you can't get pregnant from it and you can't transmit STIs". There are other reasons why young people sext as outlined below:

1. Sexual expression

Young people in romantic relationships sext as a way to further their relationships and as a means of showing their trust in one another. They also use sexting as a form of flirting and as an incentive to start a relationship. Sexting can also be used to express one's sexuality (whereas some people might use fashion to highlight their femininity or masculinity, others might post sexting images online).

2. Communication

Young people sext to communicate with each other. Younger teenagers sometimes send sexually suggestive messages to platonic friends as a form of humour. For young people in established romantic relationships, reciprocity can be the motivation for sending sexts as for every sext sent, one is expected in return. A feature of sexting that appeals to young people is that it is usually a private form of communication, safe from adult intervention.

3. Attention/affirmation

There have been numerous examples within pop culture of people who owe their celebrity status and subsequent fortune to a leaked sex tape. This has led some Young People to believe that they may get spotted and secure a career as a model or television personality if they post provocative pictures online. Other young people use sexts to gain the attention, affirmation and admiration of potential romantic interests.

¹⁵ <https://www.webwise.ie/parents/teens-sexting/>

4. Social and peer pressure

Wider societal pressures contribute to some young people sexting. The 'sexualisation of culture' means that many young people feel there's an expectation to look a certain way and be sexually active. This pressure extends to sending sexts. Peer pressure can further exacerbate the pressure on young people to sext.

5. Impression management

Many young people take 'selfies' or self-produced photos, as doing so allows them to assert control over how they are represented to the wider world. You could almost say that selfies and sexting images are the self-portraits of the modern age. The selective and self-produced nature of sexts can provide young people with something of a protective front for when they're engaged in intimate communication.

6. Accidental/reckless capture of explicit images

Some young people have accidentally produced sexually explicit content. This occurred when young people didn't realise that webcams on computers or handheld devices were in operation and got changed in view of the cameras. In a world where someone seems always to have a camera phone at the ready, it's easy to create and distribute sexting content recklessly and without thinking of the consequences. While the capture of the images may be accidental, the sharing of them is not and will have consequences the person responsible.

7. Coercion/blackmail and revenge

Unfortunately, there have been incidents where young people are coerced into creating and sending sexting content. Once a party has been sent one intimate image, this person can use this image to blackmail the victim into sending more images. There are cases where criminals have preyed on young people and used sexting content to extort large sums of money. In other cases, intimate images have been distributed non-consensually to gain revenge on an ex-partner.

8. Experimental

As young people grow up, it's reasonable that they might want to understand how their bodies are changing. Some young people take pictures of their naked bodies to help them get a better view of their own bodies. They mightn't ever intend to distribute these images but, by legal definition, these personal images could be considered child sex abuse images and could also become, 'the distribution of child sex abuse images' were the images to be shared.

What are some of the risks associated with sexting?

Outlined below are the risks associated with sexting and image sharing for young people. There is no instance where sexting is completely risk/consequence-free. Young people must be made aware of these risks before engaging in the activity.

1. Legality

As has been outlined elsewhere in this resource, any young people under the age of 18 sharing sexually explicit images are in breach of the law - sending, receiving, or possessing explicit images of minors (even if they are self-produced) can be considered child sex abuse images, leading to severe legal consequences.

2. Privacy violations

Unintended recipients: Messages or images intended for one person can easily be shared with others, leading to widespread distribution beyond the intended audience.

Hacking: Digital devices and accounts can be hacked, resulting in private content being stolen and shared without consent

3. Emotional and psychological Impact

Embarrassment and shame: If explicit content is shared beyond the intended recipient, the young person may experience embarrassment, shame, or guilt.

Mental health issues: The stress and anxiety associated with the potential exposure of private content can lead to mental health issues, including depression and anxiety.

4. Reputation damage

Social stigma: Young People may face social stigma or judgment if their explicit content is leaked, affecting their personal and social reputation. This could cause a young person to be marginalised.

Impact on future opportunities: Leaked content can negatively impact future educational, career, and relationship opportunities if potential employers or partners come across the material.

Bullying and harassment: Sexting can lead to cyberbullying, with others using the explicit content to harass, manipulate, or humiliate the young person involved.

5. Relationship issues

Breach of trust: If explicit content is shared without consent, it can lead to a breach of trust in relationships, causing strain or even breakups. This will have knock-on impacts on emotional and mental health.

Pressure and coercion: In some cases, young people may feel pressured or coerced into sexting, which can create unhealthy dynamics in relationships and also expose them to legal consequences.

6. Blackmail and extortion

Sextortion: This occurs when someone threatens to release explicit content unless the victim provides more images, money, or other favours. This can be deeply traumatic and difficult to escape.

7. Loss of control over content

Permanent digital footprint: Once explicit content is shared, it can be difficult or impossible to completely remove it from the internet, leading to a permanent digital footprint. Young people wrongly assume images disappear on some platforms.

8. Technological risks

Metadata exposure: Images and videos often contain metadata (like location data) that can inadvertently reveal sensitive information. This can be a safety concern with young people openly making their location available to strangers online.

Cloud storage: Automatically backing up photos to cloud services can lead to unintentional sharing or exposure.

Sexting and the Law

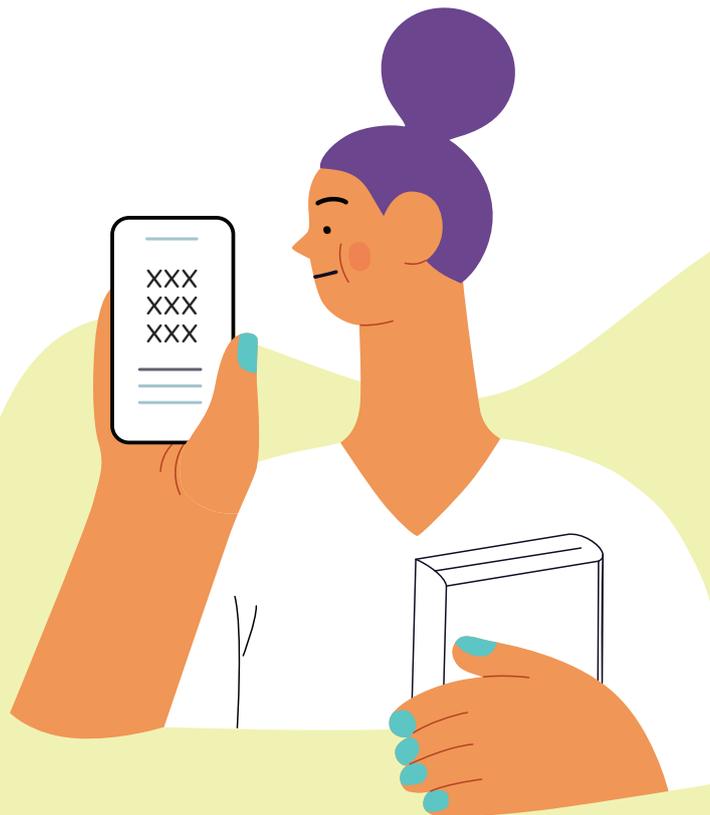
It is illegal to send, receive or share sexually explicit images, videos or text of someone under 18 years of age. (This is not commonly known, or it is regularly misunderstood due to the age of sexual consent being 17 years in the Republic of Ireland). The reason for this is that within Irish law you are still deemed a child until reaching 18 years of age.

It is illegal to...	Why is it illegal?
Send sexually explicit images, videos or texts of yourself to someone if you are under the age of 18	Produced and distributed child sex abuse images and materials
Receive sexually explicit images, videos or texts of someone under 18	In possession of child sex abuse images and materials
Share sexually explicit images, videos or texts of someone under 18 to someone else	Distributed child sex abuse images
Send sexual images to someone under 17 years of age	Sending sexual content to somebody under the age of consent

Coco's law (outlined in section 2) introduced several new offences and penalties concerning the non-consensual sharing or the threatened sharing of intimate images. The NYHP has developed an infographic with all relevant information on Coco's law and can be sourced at <https://www.youth.ie/documents/cocos-law/>

What to do as a youth worker if a young person comes to you having received an unwanted sexually explicit image?

- Remain calm and try not to judge. Your reaction is very important for the young person.
- Treat this as you would with any disclosure from a young person, for example:
 - Thank the young person for trusting you and sharing this with you
 - Actively listen
 - Believe them
 - Do not bombard them with questions
 - Reassure them that you are there to support them
 - Offer to support them with the next steps
- Don't feel like you need to have all of the answers. Let the young person know you will look for more information if necessary.
- Ensure that you are clear about the nature of the young person's issue.
- Report to your line manager and agree with them on all further actions to be taken.
- Follow your child protection policy and procedures and consult with your DLP.
- Check your sexual health policy (if you have one) for additional guidance.
- An Garda Síochána are there to provide additional help and support.



For additional information, including for parents, please visit www.ispcc.ie and check out the support and information section below.

Phone and text support	Online support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An Garda Síochána: 999/112 or visit garda.ie or check local listings for your local Garda Station • Spun Out Text TALK to 50808 • ISPCC Teenline- 1800833634 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cybersafe Kids CyberSafeKids empowers parents, schools and businesses to navigate the online world in a safer and more responsible way. They have a range of information and training resources. • Jigsaw Jigsaw has a wide range of information and resources in the area of youth mental health. • SpunOut SpunOut is an online youth information and support platform, that provides a range of accessible guidance on a wide range of topics • Webwise Webwise an Internet Safety Awareness Centre, they provide information, advice and resources for schools, families and young people on online safety and digital citizenship. • Hotline.ie Hotline.ie works to reduce the prevalence of illegal content online. This is where to report any inappropriate content you are exposed to online. • youthhealth.ie The National Youth Health Programme resources and supports can be accessed here.

SECTION 5

National Youth Health Programme Supports



5

National Youth Health Programme – Sexual health and wellbeing training and resources

The National Youth Programme has a wide-ranging suite of training and resources designed to address the issue of pornography and young people’s sexual health and wellbeing more broadly. These are outlined below.

Training

The National Youth Health Programme offers a range of tailored trainings, designed to assist those working with young people around the promotion and improvement of their sexual health and wellbeing. This work is supported through funding from the Sexual Health Programme in the HSE.

1. Addressing consent and pornography with young people

This interactive two-day training programme is designed to equip youth workers and others supporting young people with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to address the complex topics of pornography and consent with young people. By exploring the interconnections between these issues, participants will gain a deeper understanding of their impact on young people’s relationships, wellbeing, and decision-making. The training combines current research, legal considerations, and practical strategies to promote best practices in supporting young people to navigate these challenges.

Objectives:

- Develop a comprehensive understanding of pornography, including its definition, media influence, and the reasons young people engage with it.
- Explore the impact of pornography on young people’s emotional, psychological, and social development.
- Understand why young people engage in explicit image sharing and how to support them to around the issue.
- Clarify the concept of consent and its importance in fostering healthy relationships.
- Examine the key issues surrounding consent, including legal, social, and cultural considerations.
- Equip participants with practical strategies to guide young people in addressing and understanding pornography and consent in their lives.

This training aims to provide participants with a holistic approach to addressing these sensitive topics, ensuring they feel confident and competent to support young people in making informed, respectful, and responsible choices.

2. B4U Decide:

This is a two-day interactive course aiming to support the development of young people's social and emotional core competencies in relation to their sexual health.

Youth workers will gain the confidence and capacity to support the young people to develop key skills in how they think and feel about themselves and others and how they can deal with challenges and stresses of life. These skills are collectively known as the social and emotional competencies.

Through the B4u Decide, the skills explored include:

Relationship management: the ability to establish and maintain friendships and romantic relationships. This involves learning skills to communicate effectively and confidently, resolving conflict constructively and resisting inappropriate pressures. The training aims to explore activities which will look at friendships and what values are important in friendships.

Decision making: the ability to make constructive choices about behaviours and social interactions based on personal, moral and ethical responsibility. It involves being able to identify problems and use problem solving techniques while considering the wellbeing of oneself and others. The training will also explore a range of ways of working with young people to help them make positive and healthy decisions for themselves. The 2 days will also aim to support you understand the role played by media and peer pressure.

Self-awareness: the ability to recognise and identify emotions but also develop the skills and confidence to identify and explore their own traits and highlight their own strengths to articulate their opinions, likes and dislikes.

Specifically, the training will support young people to gain skills in relation to saying 'no' and resisting pressure.

These skills are in line with the 7 personal and social development outcomes including, communications skills, confidence and agency, relationships, planning and problem solving, emotional intelligence, resilience and determination, creativity and imagination.

Objectives:

- To explore a range of ways of working with young people to help them make positive and healthy decisions for themselves.
- To explore friendships and what values are important in friendships.
- To explore personal traits and to highlight strengths within the individuals.
- To understand the role played by the media and peer pressure on young people and early sex.
- To gain skills to pass on to young people in relation to saying 'No' and resisting pressure.

E-learnings

The National Youth Health Programme has two eLearning programmes designed to provide those working with young people quality and accurate information on best practice approaches to addressing the sexual health and wellbeing of those young people.

1. An introduction to youth sexual health promotion eLearning:

A building block for youth workers to strengthen their capacity in supporting young people to develop their sexual health. Sexual health is a major component of a young person's health and wellbeing as, behaviours, attitudes, norms, relationships, and practices are developed during adolescence. It is therefore vital that, where young people are interacting, they are provided the opportunity to receive good sexual health education and the tools needed to develop good relationships and safeguard their own sexual health. This e-learning is a stepping-stone to that journey.

<https://www.youth.ie/training/an-introduction-to-youth-sexual-health-promotion-elearning/>

Objectives:

- What is meant by sexual health and sexuality
- Children and young people's sexual development
- The policy context of sexual health in Ireland

2. Relationship education and sexuality wellbeing in the youth work sector eLearning:

A building block for youth workers to strengthen their capacity in supporting young people to develop their sexual health. The youth work sector plays a pivotal role in young people's lives to their sexual health development. Here they build their self-esteem and confidence, learn how to manage relationships and develop new skills through a variety of recreational and sexuality educational programmes activities and interventions. This eLearning is a steppingstone to building the capacity of youth organisations and youth workers to develop, implement and evaluate sexuality educational programmes.

<https://www.youth.ie/training/relationship-education-and-sexuality-wellbeing-in-the-youth-work-sector-elearning/>

Objectives:

- Explore sexuality education
- Provide a practical framework to enable organisations to plan, implement and evaluate effective sex education programmes
- Explore the key considerations in implementing sex education programmes
- Explore the competencies of sexuality educators

Resources

The National Youth Health Programme has developed a range of resources to aid youth workers to support the young people they work with around sexual wellbeing and promotion of sexual health.

1. Let's Talk About Consent: A Guide for Young People Exploring the Topic of Consent

This guide for young people provides an introduction to the concept of consent and includes information on:

- Consent and the Irish Law
- Tools to build the confidence and the communication skills of young people in relation to their sexual health

Access here: <https://www.youth.ie/documents/lets-talk-about-consent-a-guide-for-young-people-exploring-the-topic-of-consent/>

2. Let's Talk About Consent: A Guide for Youth Workers exploring the concept of consent with Young People

This guide for youth workers provides an introduction to the concept of consent and includes information on:

- Consent and the Irish Law
- Tools to build the confidence and the communication skills of young people in relation to their sexual health
- Guidance for youth workers to start a conversation with young people on the concept of consent and how their organisation can support young people and their sexual health

Access here: <https://www.youth.ie/documents/lets-talk-about-consent-a-guide-for-youth-workers-exploring-the-topic-of-consent-with-young-people/>

3. Sense and Sexuality 2.0

The aim of the Sense and Sexuality 2.0 support pack is to provide youth organisations with a comprehensive framework within which to address the issue of sexuality and sexual health with young people in a holistic manner.

Access here- <https://www.youth.ie/documents/sense-and-sexuality-2-0-support-pack/>

4. CoCo's Law Infographic

NYCI's Youth Health and Child Protection Programmes have created an infographic to help you understand Coco's Law – The Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020. The infographic outlines:

- How Coco's Law addresses the non-consensual sharing of intimate images
- The offences created by this legislation

Access here: <https://www.youth.ie/documents/cocos-law/>

5. Let's Talk about Sexting

The NYCI National Youth Health Programme with support from An Garda Síochána, has developed this toolkit to assist youth workers and those working with young people to start a conversation with young people on the topic of sexting.

Access here: <https://www.youth.ie/documents/lets-talk-about-sexting/>

6. Youth Health Manual- Promoting Health in the Youth Sector

Over the past few years, there has been significant developments at policy and strategy levels, both internationally and nationally, which provide a strong rationale for promoting health with young people in the youth sector. Health-related policy and strategy development has clearly identified the importance of promoting health with young people and has identified the youth sector as an important setting for health promotion. Additionally, strategic developments in the national youth work arena have identified the pivotal role of youth organisations in addressing and contributing to the physical, social, emotional, spiritual, sexual and mental wellbeing of young people.

Access here: <https://www.youth.ie/documents/promoting-health-in-the-youth-sector/>

7. Competencies of Sexuality Educators

In 2017, the WHO (World Health Organisations) developed a framework to provide support for sexuality educators when implementing sexual health training programmes. The framework also aims to improve the quality of existing programmes within organisations.

With that, NYCI's National Youth Health Programme have adopted the framework and developed this resource to outline the competencies youth workers can develop to be effective sexuality educators. In addition, the guide will support youth workers develop their own and/or improve existing training programmes.

Access here: <https://www.youth.ie/documents/competencies-of-sexuality-educators/>

SECTION 6

Additional Resources and Supports



HSE Sexual Health and Wellbeing Programme

HSE sexual health supports- training, resources and info on www.sexualwellbeing.ie for the general public, parents and professionals.

The HSE's Foundation Programme in sexual health promotion

The aim of the FPSHP is to enhance participants' capacity to incorporate sexual health promotion into their work through developing their comfort levels, confidence, knowledge and skills in relation to sexual health.

This course is unique in an Irish context in terms of its content, length and approach to sexual health promotion. Topics covered in the Foundation Programme in Sexual Health Promotion include an introduction to sexual health promotion, sexual rights and inequalities, a life course approach to sexual health, sexual health promotion within the Irish context, gender, sexual orientation, healthy and unhealthy relationships, intimacy and sexual pleasure, consent and the law, physical sexual health, the role of sexual health promotion policy and raising the issue of sexual health with clients.

The learning outcomes for the FPSHP outline that participants will:

- Have an increased understanding of how their sexual socialisation impacts on their values and attitudes to sex.
- Have increased self-awareness in relation to sexual health issues and understand how this might impact on their work.
- Be aware that people are sexual beings through their life course and have needs with regard to sexual health, whatever their age or level of sexual activity.
- Have increased knowledge around sexual health issues.
- Have an increased understanding of sexual health in an Irish context. To find a course near you visit www.sexualwellbeing.ie

APPENDIX

Information for Young People who Receive Unwanted Sexual Images



Information for young people who have received an unwanted explicit image? (ISPPC, 2019)

- If you have received an unsolicited sexually explicit image: ask the sender to stop, talk to a youth worker/trusted adult and report to An Garda Síochána- do not forward this image on to anyone else.
- If you have been sent anything that makes you feel uncomfortable let the sender know. Ask for help and support from a youth worker/trusted adult.
- Respect others by not pressuring them to engage in sexting with you.
- Even if you trust the person, there is potential that in the future the image/video/text sent could appear online.
- Even though images on some apps are supposed to disappear, these images can be saved.
- Remember video calls can be recorded.
- You can also get support from one of the services outlined at the end of this section.
- You can report any inappropriate content you see online at www.hotline.ie



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