



FPA policy statement on pornography

January 2011

Background

FPA is one of the UK's leading sexual health charities, with over 80 years' experience of providing the UK public with high quality sexual health information, advice and support services. Our mission is to help establish a society in which everyone has positive, informed and non-judgemental attitudes to sex and relationships; where everyone can make informed decisions about sex and reproduction so that they can enjoy sexual health free from prejudice and harm.

FPA runs a series of community-based sex and relationships education projects both for young people and for parents. We also provide a comprehensive information service, including a telephone helpline and a web enquiry service, which respond to 45,000 enquiries a year from professionals and the public on all aspects of sex, sexual health and relationships.

Through our helpline and project work we are aware that people, including some young people, use pornography.

As an organisation we have developed this policy to respond to some of the issues we face.

Meaning of the term pornography

There is not a legal definition of pornography. The Collins English Dictionary defines pornography as "writings, pictures, films etc designed to stimulate sexual excitement and the production of such material". This is the definition we use in this statement.

Legislation then defines pornography which is illegal.

Illegal pornography

The Obscene Publications Acts 1959 and 1964 make it an offence to publish, whether for gain or not, any article whose effect taken as a whole is such, in the view of the court, to tend to 'deprave and corrupt' those likely to see it. The Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008 also made it an offence to possess extreme pornography, which shows adults engaging in extreme sexual activity, such as that which poses a risk to life or would result in serious injury. **FPA strongly opposes the production, distribution and possession of all illegal pornography.**

The production, distribution and possession of indecent images of children and young people under the age of 18 are illegal. This includes photographs, pseudo-photographs (for example, photographs which are manipulated to place a child's head on an adult's body) and tracings or other images produced from a photograph. These images are a visual record of the sexual abuse of a child and **FPA condemns the production, distribution and possession of all child sex abuse images.**

Supporting young people

With new technologies, such as mobile phones and the internet, it is now very easy for young people to access pornography. Some young men appear to be using pornography as a source of information about sex and sexual behaviour in the absence of other effective sources of information and education.

However, pornography often portrays a fantasy version of sexuality and can give an unrealistic and distorted view of sexual behaviour. Through FPA project work, we are aware that this is leading to pressure on some young people who believe they have to behave in a certain way. In particular, there are concerns that gender stereotypes are being generated and perpetuated and, in some cases, young people engage in sexual behaviour because that is what they think is expected of them. Ideas of sexual behaviour can be skewed by exposure to pornography and this can lead to false expectations and subsequent disappointment which can have a negative impact on an individuals' ability to develop positive relationships.

There is very limited research about young people's use of pornography or the impact it has. However, what research is available appears to confirm the issues that have been raised through our work. For example, research in Rochdale found that pornography played a significant role in shaping young people's sexual expectations, leading to pressure on young women to comply with what was expected of them¹. Other research has highlighted concerns about pornography providing a distorted and unrepresentative model of female sexuality. This, combined with a lack of other sources of education and information, has meant this distorted view went unchallenged². FPA believes that more research into the impact of pornography would be very useful.

Ensuring that all young people have access to high quality, comprehensive sex and relationships education in school and in informal settings can help to provide young people with the skills and knowledge they need to make informed choices around sex and relationships. Many young people say that the information they currently receive at school is too little, too late and too biological. Providing an opportunity to discuss issues such as emotions and relationships and concepts such as gender, consent and power could help them to contextualise pornography as unrealistic and to challenge some of the potentially damaging messages and stereotypes it can contain.

Supporting professionals

Through the sex and relationships education sessions we run as part of our community-based project work and through calls to our helpline, we know that many people use pornography and this can have both positive and negative

effects. For example, some people use pornography on their own or with a partner as one way of enjoying and expressing their sexuality. In a survey in 2005, 40 per cent of respondents said they had used pornography on their own³. In addition, it can be a source of information about sex and sexual technique. For others it may be a source of reassurance that their own sexual desires are 'normal', for example a young lesbian, gay or bisexual person may feel reassured by seeing homosexual pornography. However, as has been noted above, pornography can have a negative effect on some people's self-esteem and their relationships.

Questions or issues about pornography may arise in a variety of settings and contexts. Therefore sexual health training, which includes discussion of pornography, needs to be available to professionals including, but not limited to, teachers, youth workers, care workers, social workers and prison staff. This training should provide them with an opportunity to learn more about the law relating to pornography and to explore their own attitudes towards pornography and how this can affect their practice and the service they provide. Professionals need training to ensure they are prepared and feel confident about addressing issues around pornography when they arise.

Such training is important for professionals who work with young people to ensure they are able to address these issues safely and confidently to support young people to make informed choices about their sexual health. It is vital that young people are supported to develop the skills, knowledge and confidence they need to make informed decisions about their own sexual behaviour and relationships, including placing any pornography they might see in an appropriate context.

Training is also important for professionals who work with adult groups, particularly those who work with people with learning disabilities. We are aware of situations where adults with learning disabilities have been denied an opportunity to access pornography because they have needed support to do so, for example, with buying a magazine. In contrast, other concerns have been raised that pornography is sometimes seen as an easy option to enable people with disabilities to express their sexuality because enabling them to develop sexual relationships can be complex.

Older people may also require additional support to access legal pornography and this should be available to them.

These examples highlight the importance of professionals in a variety of sectors and settings being able to access training through which they can explore issues around pornography and discover strategies for dealing with them.

The pornography industry

The pornography industry is a multi-million pound business and consequently there are often concerns that the people involved in the production of pornography are being exploited. Many people involved in the industry say that they enjoy what they do and the money they can make through their

involvement. However, there are also concerns that some people are coerced into being involved and that the men and women who are vulnerable to pressure may be more likely to be involved in the edges of the industry towards illegal pornography. **FPA strongly opposes any action which may coerce individuals into participating in pornography against their will.**

In addition, safeguards and services should be in place to enable the people involved in producing legal pornography to protect their sexual health. This involves having access to good sexual health information, high quality services and the provision and use of condoms.

Summary

Pornography is a complex and emotive subject and is often discussed in negative terms. However it can also be a positive aspect of people's sexual lives. Some people use pornography as a way of enjoying and expressing their sexuality, including with a partner. Pornography can also act as a source of information or reassurance for some people. In addition, it can be a source of information about sex and sexual technique. However, pornography can also have a negative impact on some people's self esteem and their relationships, including their ability to develop the kind of relationships they would like to have.

- FPA believes that comprehensive sex and relationships education should be delivered in schools which provides young people with clear and accurate information about sex and sexual health and allows them to explore concepts such as gender, consent and sexuality to enable them to place pornography in a wider context.
- FPA believes sexual health training which includes discussion about pornography should be available to professionals, including teachers, care workers and youth workers, to support these professionals to address the issue of pornography in the wider context of sexual health.
- FPA believes that legal pornography should not exploit the men and women involved in its production or the people who use it and those involved in its production must have freely chosen to do so.
- FPA believes the men and women involved in producing legal pornography should be able to protect and maintain their sexual health.
- FPA believes people should be able to choose how to express their sexuality provided that the activities they choose are legal and do not result in the harm or exploitation of others. This may include the use of legal pornography. Equally people may choose not to access pornography at all.

¹ Redgrave K and Limmer M, *"It makes you more up for it": school aged young people's perspectives on alcohol and sexual health* (Rochdale: Rochdale Teenage Pregnancy Unit, 2005)

² Hardy S, 'Reading Pornography', *Sex Education*, vol 4, no 1 (2004), 3–18

³ Durex, *2005 Global Sex Survey Results* (Durex, 2005)