

When Did Porn Become Sex Ed?

Conversations between adults and teenagers about what happens after “yes” remain rare.

By PEGGY ORENSTEIN. MAR 19, 2016, NY Times

The other day, I got an email from a 21-year-old college senior about sex — or perhaps more correctly, about how ill equipped she was to talk about sex. The abstinence-only curriculum in her middle and high schools had taught her little more than “don’t,” and she’d told me that although her otherwise liberal parents would have been willing to answer any questions, it was pretty clear the topic made them even more uncomfortable than it made her.



So she had turned to pornography. “There’s a lot of problems with porn,” she wrote. “But it is kind of nice to be able to use it to gain some knowledge of sex.”

I wish I could say her sentiments were unusual, but I heard them repeatedly during the three years I spent interviewing young women in high school and college for a book on girls and sex. In fact, according to a survey of college students in Britain, 60 percent consult pornography, at least in part, as though it were an instruction manual, even as nearly three-quarters say that they know it is as realistic as pro wrestling. (Its depictions of women, meanwhile, are about as accurate as those of the “The Real Housewives” franchise.)

The statistics on sexual assault may have forced a national dialogue on consent, but honest conversations between adults and teenagers about what happens after yes — discussions about ethics, respect, decision making, sensuality, reciprocity, relationship building, the ability to assert desires and set limits — remain rare. And while we are more often telling children that both parties must agree unequivocally to a sexual encounter, we still tend to avoid the biggest taboo of all: women’s capacity for and entitlement to sexual pleasure.

It starts, whether intentionally or not, with parents. When my daughter was a baby, I remember reading somewhere that while labeling infants’ body parts (“here’s your nose,” “here are your toes”), parents often include a boy’s genitals but not a girl’s. Leaving something unnamed, of course, makes it quite literally unspeakable.

Nor does that silence change much as girls get older. President Obama is trying — finally — in his 2017 budget to remove all federal funding for abstinence education (research has shown repeatedly that the nearly \$2 billion spent on it over the past quarter-century may as well have been set on fire). Yet according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, fewer than half of high schools and only a fifth of middle schools teach all 16 components the agency recommends as essential to sex education. Only 23 states mandate sex education at all; 13 require it to be medically accurate.

Even the most comprehensive classes generally stick with a woman's internal parts: uteruses, fallopian tubes, ovaries. Those classic diagrams of a woman's reproductive system, the ones shaped like the head of a steer, blur into a gray Y between the legs, as if the vulva and the labia, let alone the clitoris, don't exist. And whereas males' puberty is often characterized in terms of erections, ejaculation and the emergence of a near-unstoppable sex drive, females' is defined by periods. And the possibility of unwanted pregnancy. When do we explain the miraculous nuances of their anatomy? When do we address exploration, self-knowledge?

No wonder that according to the largest survey on American sexual behavior conducted in decades, published in 2010 in *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, researchers at Indiana University found only about a third of girls between 14 and 17 reported masturbating regularly and fewer than half have even tried once. When I asked about the subject, girls would tell me, "I have a boyfriend to do that," though, in addition to placing their pleasure in someone else's hands, few had ever climaxed with a partner.

Boys, meanwhile, used masturbating on their own as a reason girls should perform oral sex, which was typically not reciprocated. As one of a group of college sophomores informed me, "Guys will say, 'A hand job is a man job, a blow job is yo' job.'" The other women nodded their heads in agreement.

Frustrated by such stories, I asked a high school senior how she would feel if guys expected girls to, say, fetch a glass of water from the kitchen whenever they were together yet never (or only grudgingly) offered to do so in return? She burst out laughing. "Well, I guess when you put it that way," she said.

The rise of oral sex, as well as its demotion to an act less intimate than intercourse, was among the most significant transformations in American sexual behavior during the 20th century. In the 21st, the biggest change appears to be an increase in anal sex. In 1992, 16 percent of women aged 18 to 24 said they had tried anal sex. Today, according to the University of Indiana study, 20 percent of women 18 to 19 have, and by ages 20 to 24 it's up to 40 percent.

A 2014 study of 16- to 18-year-old heterosexuals — and can we just pause a moment to consider just how young that is? — published in a British medical journal found that it was mainly boys who pushed for "fifth base," approaching it less as a form of intimacy with a partner (who they assumed would both need to be and could be coerced into it) than a competition with other boys. They expected girls to endure the act, which young women in the study consistently reported as painful. Both sexes blamed the girls themselves for the discomfort, calling them "naïve or flawed," unable to "relax."

According to Debby Herbenick, director of the Center for Sexual Health Promotion at the University of Indiana and one of the researchers on its sexual behavior survey, when anal sex is included, 70 percent of women report pain in their sexual encounters. Even when it's not, about a third of young women experience pain, as opposed to about 5 percent of men. What's more, according to Sara McClelland, a psychologist at the University of Michigan, college women are more likely than men to use their partner's physical pleasure as the yardstick for their satisfaction, saying things like "If he's sexually satisfied, then I'm sexually satisfied." Men are more likely to measure satisfaction by their own orgasm.

Professor McClelland writes about sexuality as a matter of “intimate justice.” It touches on fundamental issues of gender inequality, economic disparity, violence, bodily integrity, physical and mental health, self-efficacy and power dynamics in our most personal relationships, whether they last two hours or 20 years. She asks us to consider: Who has the right to engage in sexual behavior? Who has the right to enjoy it? Who is the primary beneficiary of the experience? Who feels deserving? How does each partner define “good enough”? Those are thorny questions when looking at female sexuality at any age, but particularly when considering girls’ formative experiences.

We are learning to support girls as they “lean in” educationally and professionally, yet in this most personal of realms, we allow them to topple. It is almost as if parents believe that if they don’t tell their daughters that sex should feel good, they won’t find out. And perhaps that’s correct: They don’t, not easily anyway. But the outcome is hardly what adults could have hoped.

What if we went the other way? What if we spoke to kids about sex more instead of less, what if we could normalize it, integrate it into everyday life and shift our thinking in the ways that we (mostly) have about women’s public roles? Because the truth is, the more frankly and fully teachers, parents and doctors talk to young people about sexuality, the more likely kids are both to delay sexual activity and to behave responsibly and ethically when they do engage in it.

Consider a 2010 study published in *The International Journal of Sexual Health* comparing the early experiences of nearly 300 randomly chosen American and Dutch women at two similar colleges — mostly white, middle class, with similar religious backgrounds. So, apples to apples. The Americans had become sexually active at a younger age than the Dutch, had had more encounters with more partners and were less likely to use birth control. They were also more likely to say that they’d first had intercourse because of pressure from friends or partners.

In subsequent interviews with some of the participants, the Americans, much like the ones I met, described interactions that were “driven by hormones,” in which the guys determined relationships, both sexes prioritized male pleasure, and reciprocity was rare. As for the Dutch? Their early sexual activity took place in caring, respectful relationships in which they communicated openly with their partners (whom they said they knew “very well”) about what felt good and what didn’t, about how far they wanted to go, and about what kind of protection they would need along the way. They reported more comfort with their bodies and their desires than the Americans and were more in touch with their own pleasure.

What’s their secret? The Dutch said that teachers and doctors had talked candidly to them about sex, pleasure and the importance of a mutual trust, even love. More than that, though, there was a stark difference in how their parents approached those topics.

While the survey did not reveal a significant difference in how comfortable parents were talking about sex, the subsequent interviews showed that the American moms had focused on the potential risks and dangers, while their dads, if they said anything at all, stuck to lame jokes.

Dutch parents, by contrast, had talked to their daughters from an early age about both joy and responsibility. As a result, one Dutch woman said she told her mother immediately after she first had intercourse, and that “my friend’s mother also asked me how it was, if I had an orgasm and if he had one.”

MEANWHILE, according to Amy T. Schalet, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and the author of "Not Under My Roof: Parents, Teens, and the Culture of Sex", young Dutch men expect to combine sex and love. In interviews, they generally credited their fathers with teaching them that their partners must be equally up for any sexual activity, that the women could (and should) enjoy themselves as much as men, and that, as one respondent said, he would be stupid to have sex "with a drunken head." Although she found that young Dutch and American men both often yearned for love, only the Americans considered that a personal quirk.

I thought about all of that that recently when, driving home with my daughter, who is now in middle school, we passed a billboard whose giant letters on a neon-orange background read, "Porn kills love." I asked her if she knew what pornography was. She rolled her eyes and said in that jaded tone that parents of preteenagers know so well, "Yes, Mom, but I've never seen it."

I could've let the matter drop, felt relieved that she might yet make it to her first kiss unencumbered by those images. Goodness knows, that would've been easier. Instead I took a deep breath and started the conversation: "I know, Honey, but you will, and there are a few things you need to know."