

# GROWING UP too sexy?



In today's world it's only a matter of time before your kids are exposed to sexual content and explicit images. So how do you help them deal with it healthily? Patricia Flokis asks the experts

**R**aising teens has never been easy, but in a culture that seems to encourage our children to grow up before their time it can seem an even greater task. Here, three child and adolescent experts explain what we need to know to help guide our children through this hyper-sexualised world.

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**KIMBERLEY O'BRIEN**  
is a child psychologist at the  
**Quirky Kid Psychology Clinic.**

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## DEALING WITH SEXTING

When it comes to talking to your children about sexting, fearmongering is not the way forward. Saying things like, 'This is going to ruin your life and career' just alienates young people. The best approach is to stick to the facts and then talk it through. Use online articles or TV reports on the pitfalls of sexting to explain what could happen to them if they do it: 'If the images went public you might have to leave school or you could be charged by police if you receive images and forward them on – imagine if that happened?'

At the clinic, we see the most problems with sexting in 13-year-olds, so don't leave it too late to have this conversation with your child.

## MAKE THE MOST OF THEIR TIME

A 12-year-old who has minimal supervision and no structured activities after school is more at risk of trawling the internet, stumbling on inappropriate websites and spending too much time there. Being involved in sports, art or drama classes or other afternoon activities can provide children with lots of supervision and support and helps them diversify their interests.

Homework time between 7pm and 11pm can also be a risk factor, so it's important to help adolescents organise themselves, which often entails minimising distractions like the internet or social media.

## TEACH THEM THAT IT'S OKAY TO TURN AWAY

Most boys (and girls) get their first taste of porn when it's handed around class on another child's phone. As adults we're more likely to look away if we're confronted with a graphic or offensive image or video, whereas an inquisitive adolescent surrounded by their friends is more likely to watch it a number of times and laugh along, even if they're really disturbed by it.

It's important to give your child the strategies they need to deal with this situation if it happens. Explain to them that it's okay to look away and say, 'I'm not into that' and encourage them to talk to you or another trusted adult about what they've seen.

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**DANNIELLE MILLER**  
is an educator and author  
of *Loveability – An  
Empowered Girl's Guide to  
Dating and Relationships*  
(HarperCollins, \$16.99).

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### DEALING WITH PROVOCATIVE POSTS

Parents often worry about their children posting provocative photos online, but you set the boundaries and the guidelines. Say, 'I trust you to use social media, but here's what I expect. If you don't follow these rules you will be removed from that environment.'

Keep in mind, your children can't control what their friends are doing, nor should they be shaming or judging them. Instead of saying to them, 'I can't believe your friends pose like that', praise their good choices in comparison.

### DON'T MAKE SEXUAL JUDGMENTS

Teen girls, in particular, might want to look sexy, but it doesn't mean they want to have sex. If you're really uncomfortable with what she's about to wear out you can say something, but don't make any sexual judgments. If she feels shamed by you over her hemline, then she's not going to come to you if she's pregnant or if some guy is harassing her, because she thinks you already believe she's sending out bad messages.

### GET GIRLS TO CRITIQUE THE CULTURE

Teen girls tell me that the 'pornification' of women makes them angry and this is fantastic. Girls need to be taught to speak up if they're not comfortable with the way they're being portrayed and not to buy products that sexualise them.

In the short-term, this stuff is not going to go away so the best thing we can do is educate and empower, not patronise or police them.

Teen girls are naturally good at critiquing, so rather than critiquing themselves or each other, we need to give them the skills to deconstruct this culture.

### GIVE GOOD RELATIONSHIP ADVICE

Not only are girls in our hyper-sexual culture being encouraged to view their body as their currency, but boys are feeling this incredible pressure to score. I talk to teen boys and they find it just as upsetting.

They actually relate to girls well as friends and have a lot of respect for them, yet this isn't reflected in the music they listen to or the music videos or teen films they're watching.

There's this disconnect in what our young people are naturally wanting and needing in their relationships and what our culture is presenting to them. We can counter this by giving teens the detailed relationship advice they're craving in an honest and open way.

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**DR SIMON CRISP is a clinical  
psychologist and director of  
Neo Psychology in Melbourne.**

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### TACKLE THE MIXED MESSAGES EARLY

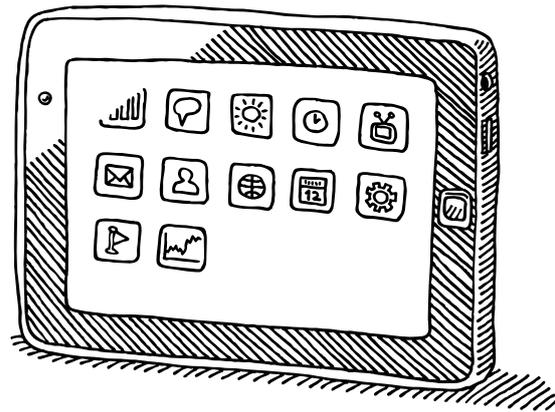
All children have body image concerns, but when adult notions of sexual desirability are mixed with ruthless marketing, it puts huge pressure on girls and boys to look and act in ways that can be inappropriate or beyond their years.

Parents need to help their children see that their value doesn't lie in their appearance but in their actions and character, their beliefs and values, and how they treat others.

And while dressing up is something you can enjoy, it doesn't define you as a person. However, they're going into environments that don't necessarily support this view, so you also need to teach them to be savvy to the marketing mechanisms used to encourage a certain mindset.

### BE THEIR ROLE MODEL

Research shows that while young people are being increasingly exposed to explicit pornography, they're not necessarily becoming fixated on it. In other words, while many children report seeing it, not many report wanting to go back and see it again.



What's critical to a child's sexual development is how their parents relate to each other. You're their main role model. The regard and respect you demonstrate in your relationship is what will be powerful in combating the ideas in porn – for instance, that men are dominant and women submissive. Children are less likely to use what they're seeing online to shape their sexual experiences and desires if their family's culture and values are different.

### KEEP UP WITH POPULAR CULTURE

It pays to know what your children are watching, reading and listening to from an early age so that, at the very least, you know the ideas and concepts they're being exposed to.

Taking the time to understand their world not only helps you find out what they know, but it'll also make them more likely to listen to you. On the other hand, if they think you have 'no idea', you're going to have less credibility in terms of offering advice or guiding them. Making the time to sit down with them also gives you the opportunity to question them about the messages they're taking in without it sounding like a lecture.

### HAVE REGULAR TECH-FREE TIME

I have a strong view that we should be teaching children how not to use technology. In other words, how to routinely set aside time in the day or week where everything including phones, computers and the TV gets turned off.

Children shouldn't feel like nothing happens unless it's on a screen. If the online world is their key reference point then naturally things like porn and sexualised music videos will have a greater impact.