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# Teens and Pornography



# **Teens and Pornography**

COMMON SENSE IS GRATEFUL FOR THE GENEROUS SUPPORT AND  
UNDERWRITING THAT FUNDED THIS RESEARCH REPORT:

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# A Letter from Our Founder

Engaging with pornography has been a rite of passage in many teens' exploration of sex, but since the early days of the internet, their access to the digital world has stoked concerns from parents. Some worry that kids will stumble across pornography when they're too young to understand it, and others are concerned that older teens' exposure to pornography will influence unrealistic or even dangerous representations of what healthy sexual relationships look like.

This new report explores just how a demographically representative sample of teens in the United States engaged with or experienced pornography online, from how old they were when they first encountered it, to how it impacts their views on sex and sexual relationships. The report confirms that the majority of teen respondents age 13 to 17 have watched pornography online—and some have seen it by age 10 or even younger. And while some have discovered it accidentally, a significant number of teens said they were viewing online pornography intentionally on a regular basis.

Here's what else we learned about how teens in this survey engaged with pornography:

- 15% said they first saw online pornography at age 10 or younger. The average age reported is 12.
- 44% have seen it intentionally. Additionally, 58% have seen it accidentally.
- 71% who said they have intentionally watched pornography reported viewing it in the last week.
- Unintentional exposure to pornography could be a common experience for teens, as 63% of those who said they have only seen pornography accidentally reported that they had been exposed to pornography in the past week.
- 45% felt that online pornography gives helpful information about sex.

The results of this research confirm a very important point: It's time for us to talk about pornography. We need to consider conversations with teens about pornography the same way we think of conversations about sex, social media, drug and alcohol use, and more. Kids can and will be exposed to pornography one way or another, often before a caregiver has a chance to tackle the subject.

But what trusted adults have to say about it matters. While under half of the teens in our research reported they've had such conversations about pornography, those who did said these talks encouraged them to find other ways to explore sex and sexuality. We have an opportunity, at home and in school, to help kids build better knowledge and healthier attitudes about sex than what pornography can provide.

That said, pornography isn't for kids, and work must be done to ensure they do not encounter it accidentally. At Common Sense, we support parents and caregivers as they tackle these tough conversations, but we also work to ensure that the biggest players in the digital world are putting protections in place to keep pornography away from those too young to engage with it, and to provide better tools to minimize the accidental exposures that many teens report.

Through our parent resources and our advocacy efforts, we will continue to ensure all kids have the chance to grow, experiment, and explore safely in a digital world.



Founder and CEO  
James P. Steyer

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jim Steyer". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

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# Introduction

What does it mean to grow up in a world where pornography is easily accessible from a young age? Articles in the media express concerns over whether pornography is a public health hazard, whether it harms the brain in a lasting way, and whether it's creating a generation that doesn't understand that what pornography shows may not reflect real life. A major problem underscores these debates—despite a high level of concern, we largely don't know much about what pornography use looks like for children in the United States today. For various moral, ethical, political, and methodological reasons, pornography use among youth is understudied. We are stuck in a situation where there is widespread, immediate concern, but we know fairly little about the underlying issues.

The internet is a place of exploration for many young people, but the ubiquity of internet access on personal mobile devices, laptops, and even school devices means that younger people (including older elementary school students) have constant access to online spaces in ways that can be difficult to monitor and control. Most teens have their own smartphone, giving them nearly constant access to a variety of websites and platforms with pornographic content. And although parents and caregivers might talk with their children about safe sex or drug use, they may not know how or at what ages to broach the topic of pornography. With online pornography easily available, there is an immediate need for research examining the role of pornography in teens' lives, so that figures like parents, teachers, and doctors can give teens the guidance and support they need for healthy physical, social-emotional, and sexual development.

It's especially important to understand how pornography is integrated into kids' lives during adolescence, a developmental period when children are exploring and developing their identity (Schumacher & Camp, 2010). As adolescents undergo the physical and social-emotional changes associated with puberty (see Steinberg, 2016), they begin to explore their sexual development and often turn to the internet to learn about sexual behaviors (e.g., Rothman et al., 2021; Ward, 2003; Wright, 2011).

Teens may turn to different sources for information or advice about sexual behaviors. Parents are often a primary form of support and information during puberty, but adolescents often keep some information from their parents (Kerr & Stattin, 2000), and they may be more likely to turn to their peers and media, including pornography, to learn about sensitive topics such as sex. A 2014 study found that 42% of 10- to 17-year-olds have viewed pornography online (Wright & Donnerstein, 2014), and several reports have suggested that advanced pubertal maturation may be related to more frequent use of pornography (e.g., Beyens et al., 2014; Luder et al., 2011; Peter & Valkenburg, 2006). For some teens, online pornography may be an outlet to learn about sexual behaviors without parental control or judgment from peers. The anonymity, endless choices, and lack of oversight inherent in internet use may cause unique issues for children who use the internet to view pornography.

A common refrain is how much more difficult it was to access pornography before the internet because it required access to physical magazines, movies, and books. Today's teens have more options than previous generations, including generally unfettered access to pornographic websites, social media, and other outlets. Smartphones may also make it easier for children to share pornographic materials with their peers: In 2021, 88% of teens reported having their own smartphone, as well as 42% of 10-year-olds (Rideout et al., 2022). Personal devices enable more pornography access as well as easier sharing with peers, generally undetected by parents. Easy access may even extend outside traditional arenas, like the home, and into unexpected spaces, like schools.

## The Current Report

This report documents the results of a demographically representative national survey of more than 1,300 teens (age 13 to 17) in the United States. It was conducted from September 12 to September 22, 2022. The purpose of the report is to understand the role that online pornography plays in U.S. adolescent life and to establish a baseline for understanding U.S. teens' pornography use. For this report, **online pornography includes any videos or photos viewed on websites, social media, or anywhere else on the internet that show nudity and sexual acts intended to entertain and sexually arouse the viewer. Pornography often features explicit pictures of body parts (such as the genitals) and sexual acts (including oral sex, masturbation, anal sex, etc.).**

The report focuses on the following for teens in the U.S.:

- The percentage of teens who report that they have viewed online pornography, on purpose or accidentally.
- The frequency with which teens view online pornography.
- In what ways teens are being exposed to online pornography.
- The ages at which teens first encounter online pornography.
- What teens say they learn from online pornography.
- Attitudes toward viewing online pornography.
- Exposure to violence and stereotypes in online pornography.
- Who teens talk to about sexual health and online pornography.

This is a cross-sectional research study and, as such, it was not designed to answer causal questions. Instead, this study was designed to reveal answers to basic questions about the scale of pornography use among a sample of U.S. teens, and how teens themselves see the role of pornography in their lives.

This is a national survey that is demographically representative of teenagers in the United States. Because the results come from a non-probability-based sample, the results of this survey apply to this sample specifically, and it is possible that a different sample would find different results. That said, we believe this report provides valuable insights that can help inform the efforts of researchers and advocates working on issues related to teenagers and pornography.

We hope that this data will push national, local, and family conversations about pornography past assumptions about what we think teens are doing to a fact-based foundation that accurately depicts what teens are actually experiencing. In doing so, the parents, educators, and providers in children's lives can better meet their needs.

# Methodology

Benenson Strategy Group (BSG) conducted a quantitative online survey of  $N = 1,358$  teens age 13 to 17 (see Table A for demographic breakdown and weighting information). While teens who have been exposed to pornography were not targeted specifically for sampling, this sample included  $n = 1,007$  teens who have been exposed to online pornography. The sample also included  $n = 259$  LGBTQ+ teens, which was achieved via quotas to ensure representation. The survey was fielded from September 12 to September 21, 2022. Note: It is not possible to calculate a margin of error for a non-probability-based sample. This study was approved by the Advarra IRB in accordance with the 21 CFR Part 50, Subpart D federal

regulations and/or 45 CFR Part 46, Subpart D federal regulations, which provide for additional protections for children as research subjects.

Participants were recruited from online panels. As the [American Association for Public Opinion Research \(AAPOR\)](#) notes, an online panel is a sample of persons who have agreed to complete surveys via the internet. For this research, online panels contacted individuals to invite them to participate in the survey if they had indicated that they are parents, guardians, or caregivers of minors or were believed to be likely to be one of these based on other data.

TABLE A. Demographic profile of survey sample

	Benchmark	Unweighted		Weighted	
		<i>n</i>	Percent	<i>n</i>	Percent
<b>Age</b>					
• 13- to 14-year-olds	40%	471	35%	543	40%
• 15- to 17-year-olds	60%	887	65%	815	60%
<b>Gender</b>					
• Cis boys	48%	697	51%	652	48%
• Cis girls	46%	585	43%	625	46%
• Trans/nonbinary/another gender identity	6%	73	5%	78	6%
<b>Race/Ethnicity (multi-select)</b>					
• White	68%	1045	77%	927	68%
• Latino/a/x or Hispanic	24%	171	13%	326	24%
• Black or African American	16%	209	15%	215	16%
• Asian American or Pacific Islander	6%	63	5%	75	6%
• Another racial or ethnic identity	6%	46	3%	95	7%
<b>Region</b>					
• Northeast	16%	272	20%	217	16%
• Midwest	21%	288	21%	299	22%
• South	38%	557	41%	530	39%
• West	24%	241	18%	312	23%

Given that the study was conducted with minors, the survey included a permission form for adult caregivers that included details of the study, allowing caregivers to make an informed decision on whether to allow their child to participate. Details included the purpose, requirements, risks, benefits, alternatives, compensation, confidentiality, and point of contact for the study. After caregivers granted permission for their child to participate in the study, the rest of the survey was intended for the child to complete. If caregivers denied permission, the child's participation in the survey was terminated.

Participants were asked for their consent to participate, and were shown a note explaining the purpose and design of the study, potential risks a minor might face completing the survey, and the confidentiality of their responses. Participants were allowed to opt out of any questions that made them uncomfortable, and to end the survey at any time. Participants' caregivers were recruited through the panel companies Dynata, Precision, and Prodege, and received compensation in the form of cash or gift cards.

The survey is based on self-reported information. Stigma and sensitivity around the topic of pornography, particularly among the age group studied, may lead to self-response bias. Questions were written in a manner that made space for participants to discuss their experiences with pornography without acknowledging their intentional viewing of online pornography.

Teens are not a monolith. Consumption habits and attitudes toward online pornography may vary widely across demographic subgroups. The study was designed to identify pornography consumption habits and attitudes toward pornography among teens overall, as well as across different demographic subgroups of teens. Demographics studied in this research were age groups, gender, race, sexuality, religiosity, and geography. Throughout this report, designations of "urban," "suburban," and "rural" are based on ZIP codes, not self-assessment of the area in which a respondent lives. This report also refers to cisgender (cis) girls and boys. As the [Human Rights Campaign Foundation](#) notes, cisgender is "a term used to describe a person whose gender identity aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth."

## 1. Most teens (73%) reported that they have consumed pornography.

Many of these respondents (41%) reported having seen pornography during the school day, including roughly one in three (31%) who said they had viewed pornography while attending school in person. Furthermore, among teens who reported that they have viewed pornography during the school day, nearly half (44%) reported having viewed pornography on school-owned devices.

- Among all teens who participated in the survey, most (54%) reported that they first saw online pornography when they were 13 or younger, including 15% who reported they had seen pornography before they turned 11 (Figure 1).
- On average, teens in this survey reported having first consumed pornography when they were 12.

## 2. While the vast majority of respondents said they have seen pornography, just under half of all teens (44%) indicated that they had done so intentionally, while slightly more than half (58%) indicated they had encountered pornography accidentally.

Just under a third (29%) said they have seen pornography both intentionally and accidentally (Figure 2). Among teens in this survey who said they have intentionally watched pornography, 71% reported viewing pornography in the last week.

FIGURE 1. Teens who have seen online pornography, by age

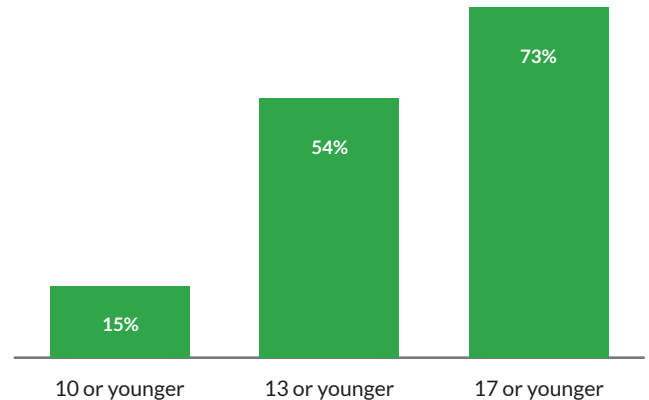
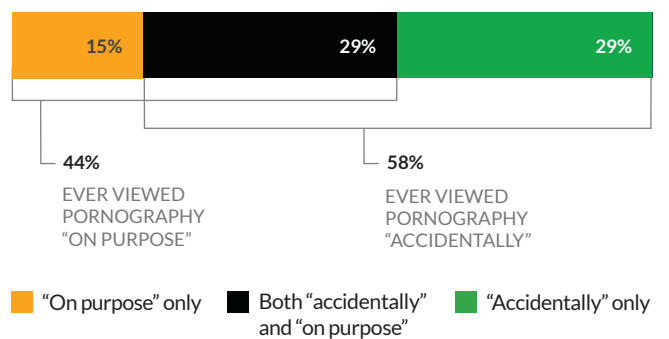


FIGURE 2. Teens who have seen online pornography on purpose or accidentally

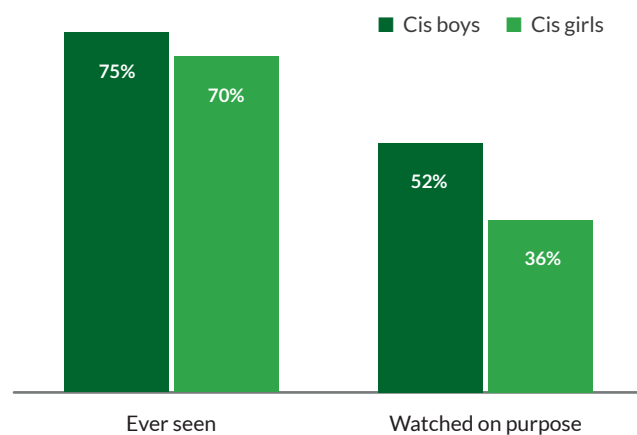


**3.** A majority of respondents who said they had only seen pornography accidentally reported they had been exposed to pornography in the past week (63%), which could indicate that unintentional pornography exposure was a common experience for respondents.

**4.** While the reported rates of exposure to pornography were similar across demographics, there were significant differences by gender in terms of intentional consumption.

Overall, 75% of cis\* boy respondents reported having consumed pornography, and 70% of cis girl respondents said the same (Figure 3). But 52% of cis boy respondents said they had consumed pornography intentionally, compared to 36% of cis girls.

**FIGURE 3.** Teens who have seen online pornography, by gender



Note: Cis is a term used to describe a person whose gender identity aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth.

**5.** Rates of intentional pornography consumption were also higher among respondents who are LGBTQ+ (66%), including transgender and nonbinary respondents (66%).

LGBTQ+ respondents who consume pornography were more likely than other groups to have said that they view pornography “to find out what arouses and excites them,” suggesting that pornography may play a larger role in exploration for LGBTQ+ teens than for other teens.

**6.** There was a tension between respondents’ enjoyment of pornography and their feelings of guilt associated with consuming it.

While most teens who reported in this survey that they had seen pornography said they feel “OK” about the amount of pornography they watch (67%), half (50%) reported feeling guilty or ashamed after watching pornography.

**7.** Teens indicated that they were learning about sex from the pornography they consume.

While teens said they consume pornography for a wide variety of reasons and have learned about different aspects of sex and their sexuality from it, a desire to better understand their own sexual preferences was a top reason for consuming pornography. While more teens who view pornography felt (45%) that pornography gives them “helpful” information about sex than those who did not feel that way (35%), relatively few (27%) said that pornography “accurately shows the way most people have sex” (compared to 52% who disagreed with this).

## 8. A majority of teens who indicated they have viewed pornography have been exposed to aggressive and/or violent forms of pornography.

This includes 52% who reported having seen pornography depicting what appears to be rape, choking, or someone in pain (Figure 4). In contrast, one in three (33%) have seen pornography that included someone asking for consent before engaging in sexual activity. However, only a relatively small share (21%) of 16- to 17-year-old teens who indicated in this survey that they have seen pornography believed that most people like to be hit during sex. (Only teens in this age range were asked this question.)

FIGURE 4. Types of online pornography seen by teens

Aggressive and/or violent



Someone asks for consent



## 9. Teens reported that exposure to racial and ethnic stereotypes in pornography was also common.

Many teens of color across different racial and ethnic groups experienced negative feelings because of these stereotypes. In particular, Black respondents were especially likely to have indicated that having seen a stereotypical portrayal of their identity in pornography made them feel “disgusted” (25%) or “self-conscious” (21%).

## 10. Most teens indicated that they have discussed sex-related issues, such as sex or condoms, with trusted adults in their lives, but less than half (43%) have discussed pornography.

On a positive note, however, most who indicated they have discussed pornography with trusted adults indicated positive outcomes, including 51% who said the conversation “encouraged [them] to think about ways to explore sex or [their] sexuality other than porn.” Even as respondents acknowledged learning about different dimensions of sex and sexuality from pornography, teens were far more likely to say they had learned a lot about sex from a parent, caregiver, or trusted adult (47%) than from pornography (27%).

# Teens and Pornography

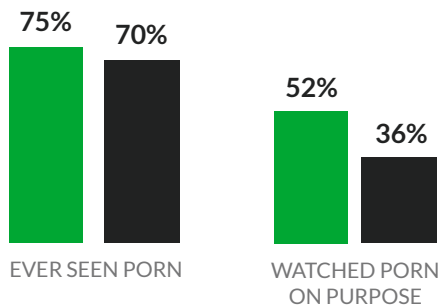


Nearly **3 in 4** teen respondents (73%) have been exposed to pornography, either accidentally or on purpose.



**Cis\* boy respondents were more likely to view pornography on purpose compared to cis girls.**

Teens who have seen online pornography, by gender

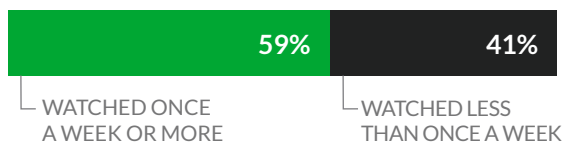


■ Cis boys ■ Cis girls

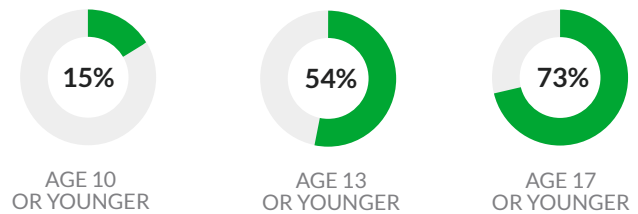
\*Cis refers to a person whose gender identity aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth.

**Most teen respondents who intentionally watched pornography were regular viewers (once a week or more).**

Among teens who watched pornography intentionally, how frequently they watched pornography in the last year



**Percent of teen respondents who have seen online pornography, by age:**

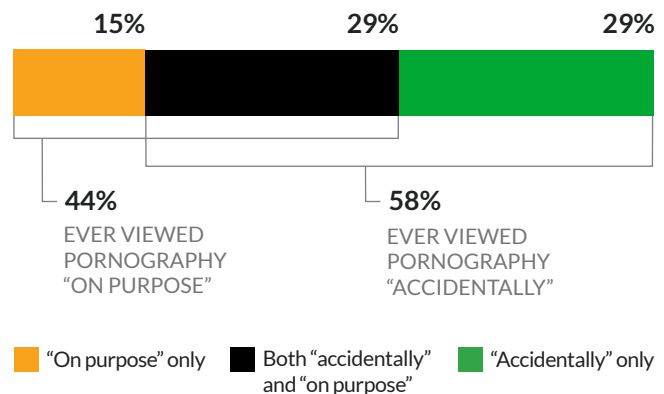


**12** is the average age when children first consumed pornography.



**More than half of teens encountered online pornography accidentally.**

Teens who have seen online pornography on purpose or accidentally

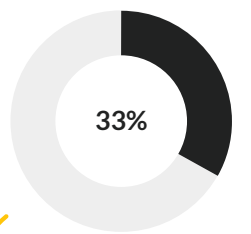




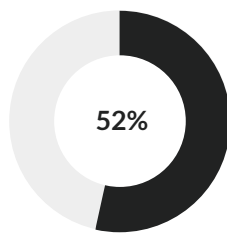
More than half of teen respondents said they had seen violent and/or aggressive pornography, including media that depicts what appears to be rape, choking, or someone in pain.

Many teen respondents believed online pornography gives helpful information about sex, but fewer thought it accurately shows sex.

Teen who have seen ...



PORNOGRAPHY IN WHICH SOMEONE ASKS FOR CONSENT



VIOLENT PORNOGRAPHY

Teens who agreed that online pornography ...

GIVES HELPFUL INFORMATION ABOUT SEX



ACCURATELY SHOWS SEX



Only **1 in 3** said they had seen pornography that includes someone asking for consent before engaging in sexual activity.



Less than half of teen respondents had discussed pornography with a trusted adult.

Teens who have discussed pornography with a trusted adult



Of those, 51% said the conversation "encouraged [them] to think about ways to explore sex or [their] sexuality other than porn."



Methodology:

Benenson Strategy Group (BSG), on behalf of Common Sense, conducted a demographically representative national survey of N = 1,358 teens age 13 to 17 in the United States, including n = 1,007 teens who have been exposed to online pornography and n = 259 LGBTQ+ teens. The survey was fielded from September 12 to September 21, 2022.



# Teens' General Exposure to Online Pornography

In our digital world, teens use the internet to explore and learn about their identities, preferences, and desires, including when it comes to sex and sexuality. This research suggests that pornography has served as one aspect of that exploration for many teens. Overall, nearly three in four teens (73%) who participated in this survey reported that they have seen online pornography, while just 24% reported that they have never seen online pornography (and 3% reported either that they were not sure or that they preferred not to say whether they had ever seen online pornography).

The share of teens in this survey who said they have been exposed to pornography varies by demographics—across age, gender, race, sexuality, religiosity, and geography—but was consistently 65% or higher regardless of demographic group. Pornography exposure was reported to be higher among LGBTQ+ teens (89%) than non-LGBTQ+ teens (70%), and higher among teens who live in ZIP codes designated as urban or suburban areas (77%) than in rural ZIP codes (65%). Teens age 15 to 17 (76%) and cis boys (75%) were both slightly more likely to report having seen pornography than teens overall, though 70% of teens age 13 to 14 and 70% of cis girls reported having seen online pornography.

However, while overall rates of exposure to pornography were relatively consistent across demographic groups in this survey, there was more variation in terms of how teens reported encountering pornography. Teens responding to the survey were given the option to say whether they had seen online pornography only “on purpose,” only “accidentally,” or “both on purpose and accidentally.” This question setup was designed with two thoughts in mind: (1) It is possible that a teen may have encountered pornography unintentionally, and (2) it is possible that some teens may have felt more comfortable reporting accidental pornography exposure than deliberate pornography consumption. (Note: Both possibilities could influence how an individual teen answered this question.)

Twenty-nine percent of teens reported having viewed pornography both accidentally and on purpose. Overall, 44% of teens have sought out pornography “on purpose,” while 58% have ever encountered pornography “accidentally.” In general, demographic groups that more often reported having seen pornography were much more likely to say that they had deliberately done so. LGBTQ+ teens (66%), cis boys (52%), teens living in urban ZIP codes (51%), and 15- to 17-year-olds (48%) were all more likely to say they had viewed pornography deliberately. In contrast, non-LGBTQ+ teens (39%), cis girls (36%), teens in rural areas (39%), and 13- to 14-year-olds (40%) were all less likely to say they had viewed pornography deliberately.

A majority of all teens who participated in this research (54%) said they first viewed pornography (either accidentally or intentionally) when they were 13 or younger; 15% said they first saw pornography when they were age 10 or younger; and 39% said they were 11 to 13 years old. Overall, the average age of self-reported first exposure to online pornography was 12 years old (Table 1).

**TABLE 1. Reported age of first viewing online pornography**  
(among all teens)

Age	Percentage
10 or younger	15%
11 to 13	39%
14 to 15	17%
16 to 17	3%

*The average age of self-reported first exposure to online pornography was 12 years old.*

## Seeking Out Pornography Online

Among teens who said they have ever intentionally consumed pornography, the vast majority (71%) indicated that they had intentionally consumed pornography at least once in the past seven days. Of this majority, LGBTQ+ teens (77%), cis boys (76%), and 13- to 14-year-old teens (75%) were the most likely to have indicated they had consumed pornography on purpose in the previous seven days.

Of the teens who reported in this survey that they have deliberately viewed pornography, 59% indicated that they intentionally consumed pornography every week (not just in the previous seven days). Teens who had deliberately sought out pornography were most likely to indicate they had used pornography websites (e.g., Pornhub or YouPorn) to do so (Table 2).

Overall, 44% of teens who reported in this survey that they have intentionally viewed pornography said they had chosen to use a pornography website once a week or more to consume pornography in the past year, including 47% of all LGBTQ+ teens and 54% of cis boys (see Table 2). Pornography websites were the top self-reported destination to consume pornography for most demographic groups, but very religious teens were more likely than others to have reported that they sought out pornography using social media and non-pornography video sites.

It is notable that more than a third of teens who intentionally view pornography said they seek it out on social media on a weekly basis. While the statistic is alarming and may point to a need for content moderation, it may not necessarily indicate that teens are consuming professionally produced pornography on mainstream social media. One possibility is that teens were reporting their consumption of self-generated nude or nearly nude content by nonprofessionals. Another possibility, given that teens reported seeing pornography shared with them by peers, is that teens were reporting being made aware of content by peers on social media (but that could be hosted elsewhere online).

While two-thirds of cis girls (67%) who reported that they have deliberately consumed pornography indicated they had done so in the previous week, cis girls who were intentional consumers were much less likely than cis boy intentional consumers to say they had sought out pornography on three or more days in the previous seven days (23% for cis girls and 41% for cis boys) (see Table 3). This suggests that while there may be little difference by gender in overall rates of exposure, there are noticeable differences in frequency of deliberate consumption of pornography by gender.

**TABLE 2. Teens who have viewed pornography on the following at least once a week in the past year**  
(among teens who intentionally viewed pornography)

By demographic	TOTAL	Age 13 to 14	Age 15 to 17	Cis Boy	Cis Girl	Transgender/ Nonbinary*	LGBTQ+	Non-LGBTQ+
Porn websites (e.g., Pornhub, YouPorn, Xvideos, etc.)	<b>44%</b>	49%	42%	54%	33%	35%	47%	43%
Social media (e.g., TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, Reddit, etc.)	<b>38%</b>	49%	32%	40%	35%	35%	39%	37%
Video sites/platforms (e.g., YouTube)	<b>34%</b>	45%	28%	40%	26%	35%	30%	36%
Subscription sites for user-generated content (e.g., OnlyFans)	<b>16%</b>	24%	12%	18%	14%	14%	17%	16%
Livestreaming or “cam” sites	<b>18%</b>	29%	13%	18%	20%	12%	19%	18%
Other	<b>19%</b>	29%	14%	19%	17%	28%	23%	18%

\* Small base size; interpret with caution.

**TABLE 3. Teens who viewed online pornography in the past week, by frequency**  
(among teens who intentionally viewed pornography)

By demographic	TOTAL	Age 13 to 14	Age 15 to 17	Cis Boy	Cis Girl	Transgender/ Nonbinary*	LGBTQ+	Non-LGBTQ+
Three or more days	34%	40%	30%	41%	23%	33%	39%	33%
One or two days	37%	35%	38%	35%	43%	23%	38%	37%
<b>Total at least once</b>	<b>71%</b>	<b>75%</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>76%</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>77%</b>	<b>70%</b>

\* Small base size; interpret with caution.

## Self-Reported Accidental Pornography Exposure Experiences

Most teens (58%) responding to this survey reported that they have unintentionally encountered online pornography. Of those, 29% who said they have accidentally seen online pornography also reported that they have purposely sought out pornography (see Figure 2, page 5).

While many respondents across demographics reported having only been exposed to pornography that they had not deliberately sought out, some demographics reported higher rates of this accidental-only exposure, including cis girls (34%) and teens who described themselves as “very religious” (36%).

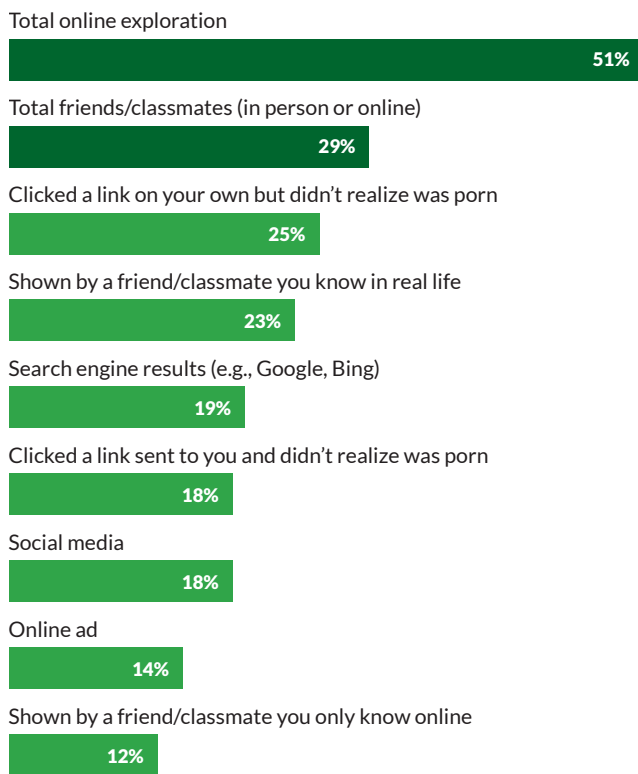
Worryingly, most teens responding to this survey who said they have only ever seen pornography accidentally also reported that they had been exposed to pornography accidentally in the previous seven days, suggesting that unintentional pornography exposure may be a frequent experience for teens who aren’t seeking it out. Of those who reported they have only ever seen pornography accidentally, 63% said that they saw pornography accidentally at least once in the past seven days. Overall, among all teens, nearly two in five (38%) reported that they had seen pornography accidentally in the seven days prior to taking the survey.

*Of those who reported they have only ever seen pornography accidentally, 63% said that they saw pornography accidentally at least once in the past seven days.*

While 23% of all teens responding to this survey said they have accidentally seen pornography as a result of a friend or classmate they know “in real life” having shown it to them, a majority of all teens (51%) said they have accidentally encountered pornography via clicking a link, a search engine result, an online ad, or on social media in some way (Figure 5). Respondents reported that this accidental online exposure came from a diffuse array of sources: links to websites they did not realize were pornography (including those sent to them by a friend), online ads, search engine results, and social media.

Overall, 18% of all teens who participated in this survey said they have ever accidentally encountered pornography on social media, but no single platform stood out as an overwhelming source of self-reported accidental pornography exposure. This survey asked about some of the most popular social media platforms among teens, but no more than 7% of all teens indicated any particular platform was the source of an accidental pornography exposure. Just 1% of all teens indicated that they had accidentally encountered pornography on a social media platform that was not named in the survey.

**FIGURE 5. Ways in which teen respondents have ever accidentally seen pornography**  
(among all teens)



# Online Pornography and Teens at School

Concerningly, this survey found that pornography had played a part in many teens' school days. Overall, 30% of all teens in this survey (41% of teens who said they have ever been exposed to pornography) reported that they have been exposed during the school day (see Table 4). And across demographic groups (gender, age, race, etc.), at least one in four teens indicated that they have seen pornography while at school. LGBTQ+ teens (43%) and those in urban areas (36%) were more likely than average to say they had consumed pornography during the school day.

*Nearly one third of all teens reported that they have been exposed to pornography during the school day.*

Notably, most teens responding to this survey who indicated they have consumed pornography during the school day said that they had done so during in-person school, not remote learning. In fact, teens in this survey were nearly two times as likely to say they had consumed pornography while physically at school (23% of all teens) than to say they had done so during remote learning (12% of all teens). It is important to note that this survey did not define "attending school remotely," and it is possible that respondents understood that term in a way that would preclude certain times during the school day—for example, times when they are not actively engaging in a class with a teacher.

Most teens (60%) who reported having ever seen pornography during the school day in this survey reported seeing it several times a month, including two in five (40%) who said they have seen pornography at school at least weekly. Teens living in urban ZIP codes reported being exposed to pornography in school most frequently, with over one in three reporting that they have seen pornography in school multiple times a week, and half reporting that they have seen pornography in school at least once a week.

**TABLE 4. Teen respondents that have seen online porn during the school day** (among all teens)

By demographic	TOTAL	Age 13 to 14	Age 15 to 17	Cis Boy	Cis Girl	Transgender/ Nonbinary*	LGBTQ+	Non-LGBTQ+
Yes, in person at school	<b>23%</b>	23%	23%	24%	20%	27%	30%	21%
Yes, while attending school remotely	<b>12%</b>	12%	12%	14%	9%	24%	22%	10%
<b>Total seen porn in school</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>27%</b>

\* Small base size; interpret with caution.

By school type	TOTAL	Traditional Public	Charter/Magnet	Home	Private/Religious
Yes, in person at school	<b>23%</b>	20%	31%	11%	41%
Yes, while attending school remotely	<b>12%</b>	9%	21%	16%	19%
<b>Total seen porn in school</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>50%</b>

Overall, about one in four teens who said in this survey that they have seen pornography (24%) said that they “think about watching online porn throughout the day,” with cis boys (29%) more likely than cis girls (18%), and 13- to 14-year-old teens (29%) more likely than 15- to 17-year-old teens (20%). LGBTQ+ teens (27%) were also slightly more likely than non-LGBTQ+ teens (23%) to have said they think about pornography throughout the day.

***One in four teens who said they have seen pornography report that they think about watching online porn throughout the day.***

Furthermore, over two in five (44%) respondents who had seen pornography during the school day said they had seen it on a school-issued device, representing 13% of all teen respondents. Notably, reported exposure on school-issued devices was highest among 13- to 14-year-old teens: Of teens in this age group who participated in this survey, 17% indicated that they had ever seen pornography on a device issued or owned by their school. While this survey did not ask about electronic device access in general, it could be that younger teens are less likely to own or control their own computer or other electronic device and are relying on school-owned equipment as a result.

The rate of reported school-day pornography consumption was relatively consistent across most demographics in this survey, but did vary significantly by type of school: Teens responding to this survey who indicated they attend private schools (including religious schools) were nearly twice as likely as students who said they attend traditional public schools to say they had ever seen pornography during the school day (50% vs. 26%). For comparison, 41% of respondents who attend charter schools or magnet schools said they had seen pornography during the school day, and 27% of teens who are homeschooled said the same.

Teens who said they attend either a private school or a public charter or magnet school were also more likely than teens at traditional public schools to have said they have consumed pornography while attending school in person.



# General Attitudes Toward Online Pornography

Even as this survey suggests that pornography consumption appears to be common among teens, many respondents, including deliberate consumers of pornography, indicated that they have negative perceptions about pornography. Among teens who indicated they have ever seen pornography, slightly more (41%) said they agreed with the statement “I believe watching online porn is wrong” than those who said they disagreed with it (38%). But there were notable differences among teens who reported intentional consumption versus those who indicated that accidental exposure was the only way they had ever seen online pornography, with the former being more likely to have disagreed than agreed. Most teens in the latter group (55%) said they agree that watching online pornography is wrong.

*Half of teens said they “feel guilty or ashamed after watching online porn.”*

Furthermore, half of teens (50%) said they “feel guilty or ashamed after watching online porn.” This was especially pronounced among teens who reported that their only exposure to pornography has been accidental: Of these, 67% said they feel guilty or ashamed after seeing pornography. While it may be the case that these feelings of guilt or shame have led them to not want to disclose intentional pornography consumption,

this research cannot answer with certainty whether these feelings of guilt or shame led to any teens misreporting intentional pornography consumption as accidental.

At the same time, for the most part, teens who have seen pornography reported contentment with the level of their pornography exposure: Of these, 67% said they “feel OK about the amount of online porn [they view],” compared to 25% who indicated they “feel like [they] should watch less online porn than [they] do” (see Table 5). Meanwhile, 9% of teens who have seen pornography indicated they “wish [they] could watch more online porn than [they] do.”

This research found that for many teens, “feeling OK” about their pornography consumption can exist alongside feelings of guilt and shame about consuming pornography. Among those who feel OK about the quantity of pornography they consume, 41% also said they feel guilty or ashamed after consuming, and even 36% of teens who said they wish they could watch more pornography said they feel guilty or ashamed after they do so. These results suggest that teens hold conflicting views about pornography, and for many, online pornography may have both positive and negative connotations. The results also may indicate that shame and guilt are not emotions that ultimately dissuade teens from consuming pornography, though this is not possible to conclude with certainty.

**TABLE 5. Teens who agree with the following statements**  
(among teens who have ever viewed pornography)

By demographic	TOTAL	Age 13 to 14	Age 15 to 17	Cis Boy	Cis Girl	Transgender/ Nonbinary*	LGBTQ+	Non-LGBTQ+
I feel ok about the amount of online porn I view	<b>67%</b>	57%	73%	64%	69%	70%	72%	65%
I feel like I should watch less online porn than I do	<b>25%</b>	31%	21%	25%	25%	19%	20%	26%
I wish I could watch more online porn than I do	<b>9%</b>	12%	6%	11%	6%	11%	9%	9%

\* Small base size; interpret with caution.



# What Teens Are Learning About Themselves from Pornography

Teens are learning many lessons from their online pornography consumption, including some potentially harmful lessons about sex and violence. But much of what teens appeared to be “learning” through consumption of pornography is about their own desires and preferences.

Among teens who were pornography viewers, nearly half (45%) said one reason they watch pornography is to “find out what arouses and excites them” (not just to experience arousal or excitement). LGBTQ+ teens (54%) and cis boys (54%) were the most likely to have said this. Furthermore, most teens who viewed pornography acknowledged having learned at least “a little” about their sexual preferences (both likes and dislikes) from consuming pornography. It is not clear the degree to which teens believe that pornography consumption can shape their preferences in addition to informing them.

Specifically, most pornography viewers said they have learned about “what types of behaviors are likely to feel pleasurable to [them]” (73%), “what types of sexual behaviors are likely to not feel pleasurable to [them]” (64%), “what sexual behaviors [they are] interested in trying” (72%), and “what types of partners [they] find attractive” (72%) (see Table 6).

Similarly, the majority of teens who indicated that they view pornography said they have also learned about sexual relationships and sex as it relates to others from the pornography they watched, including “how to have sex” (79%), “about human bodies and anatomy” (79%), and the “types of behaviors ... likely to feel pleasurable” (73%) and “not pleasurable” (60%) to a partner. Slightly less than half of teens (48%) said they have learned about “how to talk with partners” from the pornography they watch.

**TABLE 6. Teens who say they have learned the following from online pornography**  
(among teens who have ever viewed pornography)

By demographic	TOTAL	Age 13 to 14	Age 15 to 17	Cis Boy	Cis Girl	Transgender/ Nonbinary*	LGBTQ+	Non-LGBTQ+
How to have sex	<b>79%</b>	78%	79%	85%	72%	81%	86%	77%
How to talk with partners	<b>48%</b>	48%	48%	51%	43%	51%	54%	46%
What types of partners I find attractive	<b>72%</b>	71%	72%	80%	61%	76%	80%	69%
What sexual behaviors I am interested in trying	<b>72%</b>	69%	75%	82%	61%	77%	81%	69%
About human bodies and anatomy	<b>79%</b>	78%	81%	83%	74%	87%	85%	78%
What types of sexual behaviors are likely to feel pleasurable to me	<b>73%</b>	70%	75%	82%	61%	78%	81%	70%
What types of sexual behaviors are likely to NOT feel pleasurable to me	<b>64%</b>	64%	64%	71%	55%	76%	75%	60%
What types of sexual behaviors are likely to feel pleasurable to a sexual partner	<b>73%</b>	70%	76%	82%	64%	78%	82%	71%
What types of sexual behaviors are likely to NOT feel pleasurable to a sexual partner	<b>60%</b>	60%	62%	68%	51%	72%	67%	60%

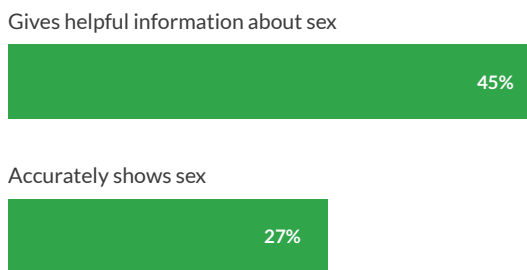
\* Small base size; interpret with caution.

It is important to note that while teens responding to this survey acknowledged learning about sex and their sexuality from pornography, and that more teen pornography viewers agreed with the statement that “online porn gives helpful information about sex” than disagreed (45% vs. 35%), most viewers indicated that they know that portrayals of sex in pornography are inaccurate. Overall, 52% of teens who have viewed pornography said they disagreed with the statement “sex shown in online porn accurately shows the way most people have sex,” compared to only 27% who agreed.

***Forty-five percent of teen pornography viewers agreed with that “online porn gives helpful information about sex.”***

Specifically, 13% of teens who reported in this survey that they have consumed pornography indicated that they believe both that online pornography gives “helpful” information about sex and that sex shown in pornography is inaccurate. Among this group, a majority are cis boys (52%) and 15- to 17-year-old teens (75%). While most of these teens are cis and heterosexual, LGBTQ+ teens are overrepresented within this cohort (32% of these teens are LGBTQ+). This research cannot determine the precise drivers of this dynamic with certainty, but it may be that because teens are learning about their own desires and preferences from pornography, they see it as helpful, even as they recognize that it may not represent what most sex typically looks like.

**FIGURE 6. Teen pornography viewers who agree that pornography...**



# Teen Experiences with Potentially Discomforting or Harmful Content in Pornography

While many teens in this survey reported that viewing pornography has supported their exploration and understanding of their own sexuality in ways that they may personally consider to have been positive, their responses to this survey also suggest that many teens are encountering content that they may find disturbing. The pornography they have consumed may also have distorted their perceptions about the prevalence of sexual behaviors that could be harmful. Specifically, this research examined exposure to and lessons from pornography that depicts violence and also pornography that includes racial, ethnic, and other stereotypes.

## Violence and Aggression in Pornography

Overall, most teens who said they have viewed pornography in this survey also said they have seen pornography showing violent and/or aggressive content, including what appears to be rape (19% of viewers), choking (36%), or someone in pain (37%), and 52% of teen viewers of pornography said they've seen pornography depicting at least one of these things (38% of all teens). In contrast, just 33% reported having ever seen pornography that depicted an ask for consent prior to sex.

***Fifty-two percent of teen viewers of pornography said they've seen pornography depicting what appears to be rape, choking, or someone in pain.***

Notably, there was a relationship between frequency of pornography viewership and the rate of exposure to violence in pornography. Among teens who said they deliberately consumed pornography three or more days in the past seven days, 80% said they have ever seen pornography depicting rape, choking, or pain. This compares to 48% of teens who indicated they have viewed pornography intentionally in the past but did not do so in the week prior to taking the survey.

Overall, 21% agreed that most people like to be spanked, hit, or slapped during sex, and only 14% agreed that it is safe to put your hands around someone's neck during sex. But these numbers are higher among viewers of violent pornography: In this group, 28% agreed that most people like to be hit during sex, and 20% agreed that it's safe to put one's hand around someone's throat during sex.

This research cannot answer with certainty whether teens who already hold these attitudes about violence and sex have sought out violent pornography, or if specific violent behaviors have been normalized through pornography consumption, though the latter could be a possibility.

## Stereotypes in Pornography

In addition to violence, teens in this survey reported encountering racial and ethnic stereotypes in the pornography they have consumed, and this content has caused harm to teens, especially people of color. A majority of pornography-viewing teens (55%) indicated that they encounter pornography portraying Black people in a stereotypical way "often" or "sometimes" (see Table 7 on page 22). Many teens also reported "often" or "sometimes" viewing pornography that portrayed other people of color in a stereotypical fashion, including Latino/a/x people (50%), Asian people (46%), and Middle Eastern people (26%).

Notably, teens from a given racial/ethnic background are more likely to have encountered pornography that treats people of their own race/ethnicity in a stereotypical way. It is unclear if this is because these teens are more likely to seek out pornography that includes people who appear to share their racial/ethnic background, are more attuned to stereotypical portrayals of people from their racial/ethnic background, a combination of those factors, or other factors.

Regardless of the reasons why teens from a given race or ethnicity were more likely to encounter stereotypes of their own identity in the pornography they see, this study found these portrayals have had harmful effects on teens.

**TABLE 7. Teens who say they have encountered pornography that portrays the following groups in a stereotypical way**  
(among teens who have ever viewed pornography)

By race/ethnicity of viewer	Race/Ethnicity of Pornography Actor					
	TOTAL	White	Black	Latino/a/x	Asian American / Pacific Islander*	All People of Color
Black	<b>55%</b>	51%	69%	54%	50%	59%
Asian	<b>46%</b>	43%	44%	49%	46%	48%
Latino/a/x	<b>50%</b>	45%	53%	61%	52%	56%
Middle Eastern	<b>26%</b>	28%	24%	24%	28%	25%
Other people of color	<b>43%</b>	41%	50%	42%	36%	45%

\* Small base size; interpret with caution.

*Teens from a given racial/ethnic background are more likely to have encountered pornography that treats people of their own race/ethnicity in a stereotypical way.*

In particular, Black teens were especially likely to have indicated that having seen a stereotypical portrayal of their identity in pornography made them feel “disgusted” (25%) or “self-conscious” (21%) (Table 8).

Stereotypes pertaining to gender and sexual orientation are also prevalent in pornography. Most viewers indicated that they have seen pornography that depicts people in stereotypical ways based on their gender either “often” or “sometimes” (55%), and half said they see pornography that stereotypes sexual orientation at least “sometimes” (50%).

**TABLE 8. Feelings reported by teen pornography viewers after seeing stereotypes of their own identity groups in the pornography they have viewed**

	Black	Latino/a/x	Asian American / Pacific Islander*
Self-conscious	21%	16%	16%
Angry	18%	13%	22%
Disgusted	25%	11%	16%
Curious	20%	22%	10%
Neutral	27%	23%	27%
Victimized	17%	8%	25%
Good	17%	21%	18%
None of the above	15%	26%	23%
Negative feelings	43%	31%	46%

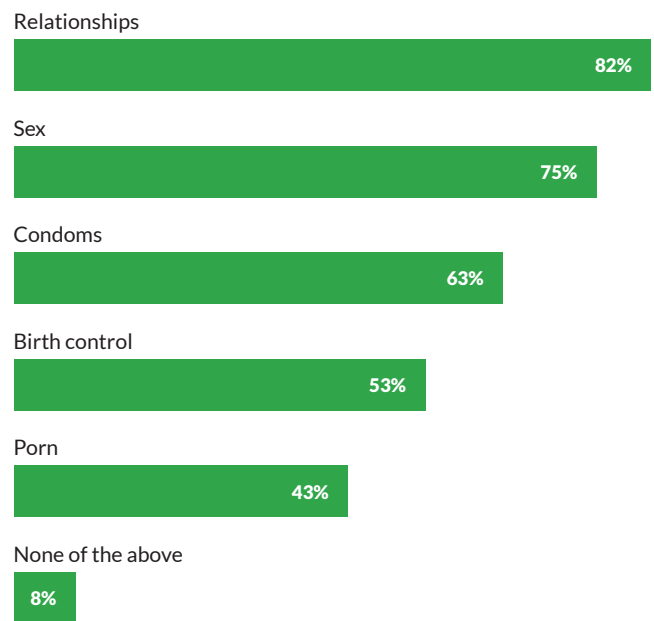
\* Small base size; interpret with caution.

# The Role of Trusted Adults

Crucially, even as teens in this survey acknowledged learning about different dimensions of sex and sexuality from pornography, teens were far more likely to say they had learned a lot about sex from a parent, caregiver, or trusted adult (47%) than from pornography (27%) (see Table 9). Friends (41%) and sex education in school (32%) also scored higher than pornography as sources of information from which teens had learned a lot about sex in general, and teens were nearly as likely to say they had learned about sex from non-pornographic TV shows or movies (25%) as from online pornography.

But while most teens in this survey said they have discussed relationships (82%), sex (75%), and birth control (53%) with a trusted adult, less than half (43%) said they have discussed pornography specifically (see Figure 7). Overall, conversations about relationships and sex were the most common conversations that teens have had with trusted adults, while pornography was the topic that teens were the least likely to have reported discussing with a trusted adult among the options the survey asked about.

**FIGURE 7. Have discussed each with a parent, guardian, or trusted adult (among all teens)**



**TABLE 9. Teens indicating that the following groups have taught them about sex (among all teens)**

By demographic	TOTAL	Age 13 to 14	Age 15 to 17	Cis Boy	Cis Girl	Transgender/ Nonbinary*	LGBTQ+	Non-LGBTQ+
A parent, caregiver, or other trusted adult	47%	42%	50%	46%	49%	37%	41%	48%
Friends	41%	39%	43%	40%	41%	49%	48%	39%
Sex education in school	32%	30%	32%	30%	34%	30%	32%	31%
Online pornography	27%	28%	26%	30%	22%	35%	36%	25%
TV or movies (non-pornographic)	25%	26%	24%	27%	23%	21%	25%	25%
Sex education videos on sites like YouTube, TikTok, or other apps or websites	21%	20%	22%	22%	20%	20%	25%	20%
Books or other things I've read	20%	20%	20%	17%	22%	33%	30%	18%
School or teachers at school	16%	19%	14%	15%	17%	15%	13%	17%
Sibling or cousin	15%	15%	16%	16%	15%	8%	15%	16%
A doctor	13%	14%	12%	14%	13%	10%	11%	13%
My pastor or religious leader	9%	11%	7%	10%	8%	5%	6%	9%

\* Small base size; interpret with caution.

Among those who said they have discussed pornography with a trusted adult, most reported outcomes that can likely be considered positive, suggesting that caregivers should feel confident about initiating these conversations. In particular, these conversations appear to have led to teens feeling like they have access to a wider array of resources to explore sex and sexuality. Among teens who have had these conversations, 71% agreed the conversation “made [them] feel like there are helpful resources other than pornography to explore sex or [their] sexuality.”

Most teens in this survey also reported that their experience of these conversations was that they were non-shaming: Sixty-six percent agreed that the conversation “made [them] feel like it was OK to explore [their] sexuality,” and only 34% said the conversation “made [them] feel bad about viewing porn.”

Notably, many teens indicated that they wish they could have conversations about their experiences with online pornography with a trusted adult, but either felt they did not know how to initiate that conversation (39%) or did not know who to turn to (34%) (see Table 10).

Parents and caregivers should also be aware that online pornography was reported to be a top source of information about sex for teens who said in this survey that they have not learned anything about sex from a trusted adult. Of these teens, 30% said they learned “a lot” or “everything [they] know” about sex from pornography, more than for any other source of information the survey asked about.

Importantly, younger pornography viewers (age 13 to 14) were the most likely to say they want to be able to discuss what they have seen in pornography with an adult but “don’t know how to do that” (48%) or are “not sure who to talk to” (43%).

## Content Filters and Parental Controls

Among all teens responding to the survey, slightly fewer than one in three (32%) said there are currently content filters or parental controls in place at their home to try to prevent them from accessing pornography, while another 15% indicated that these controls are not currently used in their home but have been used in their home previously.

Age appears to be a key driver of the use of parental controls intended to prevent access to pornography in teens’ homes: Of teens responding to this survey age 13 to 14, 42% said these filters/controls were currently in use in their home, compared to just 24% of teens age 15 to 17.

**One in four teens age 15 to 17 said that parental filters/controls were used in their home.**

While more teens responding to this survey agreed that these filters/controls were effective than disagreed (41% vs. 30%), these findings as a whole suggest that active conversations about pornography between adults and the children in their care may be important in shaping behaviors and beliefs around pornography, sex, and sexuality.

**TABLE 10. Teens who agree with the following** (among teens who have ever viewed pornography)

I'd like to talk with an adult about some of the things I've seen in online porn but I am not sure...	TOTAL	Age 13 to 14	Age 15 to 17	Cis Boy	Cis Girl	Transgender/ Nonbinary*	LGBTQ+	Non-LGBTQ+
How to do that	39%	48%	34%	42%	34%	52%	42%	39%
Who to talk to	34%	43%	29%	36%	32%	37%	37%	33%

\* Small base size; interpret with caution.



# Conclusion

Online pornography is a regular part of many teens' everyday lives. With increased access to pornographic material through the internet, concerns about the effects of pornography are more relevant than ever. Existing research on the influences of pornography on young people show several negative outcomes, including:

- Increased sexual aggression (Wright, Paul & Herbenick, 2021).
- Anxiety, depression, and reduced well-being (Kohut & Štulhofer, 2018).
- Interpersonal relationship problems (Wright et al., 2021).
- Dangerous sexual behaviors (e.g., choking, name-calling, etc.), particularly among boys (Wright et al., 2021).

Research shows some positive effects as well (though mostly with adults), including body acceptance and increased knowledge about sex and anatomy (Hesse & Pederson, 2017). For LGBTQ+ youth in particular, who may use pornography more frequently and who are more likely to say that they use pornography to discover more about their sexuality, pornography could be an important part of self-acceptance (Kubicek et al., 2010).

But the reality is that there has been little research on the effects of pornography on adolescents, and so we should remain alert to alarmist headlines about pornography being a public health crisis or destroying America's youth. However, this does not mean there isn't cause for concern. There certainly isn't enough research to suggest that the potential benefits of viewing pornography outweigh the potential harms, only that there may be some benefits to some users under some conditions.

The findings reported here suggest that many teens view pornography (accidentally and on purpose), learn from pornography, and are exposed to harmful stereotypes and violent sexual content through pornography. Combined with other research suggesting negative effects, there is enough evidence to suggest that robust strategies should be in place to address likely viewing. In a world in which a majority of teens have smartphones in their pockets, parents and caregivers

need to reckon with how to approach the topic with their children. Hoping that children will avoid pornography themselves is not a useful strategy, especially given how many teens are exposed to pornography unintentionally. Parents should consider a conversation about pornography in a similar way as they might conversations about sex, relationships, or birth control. Many teens themselves say they want to talk with a trusted adult about what they're seeing. Although these conversations can be awkward or difficult, they are worth it—teens say the conversations help them understand that there are other options besides pornography for learning about sex and sexuality.

Another possible strategy for addressing pornography use could include the delivery of age-appropriate educational curriculum in schools as part of comprehensive sex education. One such curriculum, pilot-tested with adolescents in a non-school setting and showing promising findings, addresses pornography viewing in the context of reducing sexual and dating violence by helping participants understand pornography using a critical lens (Rothman et al., 2018). Another strategy could be technological solutions to prevent teens from accessing online pornography. In the United Kingdom, the government has introduced legislation that would require companies that provide pornography to introduce age verification measures to their sites to prevent them from being accessed by minors ("What Is Age Verification Law in UK?," n.d.). A combination of support from parents, schools, and industry could go a long way toward preventing viewing, as well as give kids the tools they need to critically interpret what they're seeing.

This report shines a light on an issue that many are uncomfortable with but that likely affects most teens in the United States. The stakeholders in children's lives cannot ignore that the majority of U.S. teens are seeing and learning from graphic sexual content—often from young ages—and need to be better equipped with tools to help them. It is unlikely that there are any solutions that would prevent teens from accessing pornography entirely, so additional resources are needed to help support teens, in a nonjudgmental manner, in order to better support their healthy physical, social-emotional, and sexual development.



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## About Common Sense

Common Sense is the nation's leading nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of all kids and families by providing the trustworthy information, education, and independent voice they need to thrive in the 21st century. Our independent research is designed to provide parents, educators, health organizations, and policymakers with reliable, independent data on children's use of media and technology and the impact it has on their physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development. For more information, visit [commonsense.org/research](https://commonsense.org/research).



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