Introducing Clarissa Smith

Clarissa Smith is Professor of Sexual Cultures and Associate Director of the Centre for Research in Media & Cultural Studies at the University of Sunderland. Professor Clarissa Smith researches sex, sexual identities and sexual representations in contemporary culture. She is interested in the different kinds of pornography across different technologies; in how people access and engage with pornographic materials and with other forms of sexualised products.

Since 2014 Professor Clarissa Smith has been founding co-editor of the academic journal Porn Studies.

Top 12 Takeaways from the ‘Get a Grip’ Blog with Professor Clarissa Smith on concerns parents have regarding their teens accessing pornography and ways to promote healthy sexual development in our young people.

1. Professor Smith’s research has indicated that young people access pornography for a variety of reasons. A common impulse in young people seems to be the desire to understand the adult world and pornography and the sexual element of life is seen as an adult secret to be uncovered. Such curiosity is healthy and normal.

2. Technology has opened up to young people a lot of material which is more explicit than it has even been, this perhaps requires parents to have conversations about sexual life earlier and to think about what materials they could offer to address their children’s sexual curiosity.

3. Parents and young people may not find these conversations particularly easy or comfortable, parents may need to acknowledge they will not be the primary educator in this realm, however, they should think about the resources that could be available to their children and think about what they want their children to know.

4. We need to recognise that for some generations the messages their parents and society gave them about sex created lots of feelings of shame and guilt around sex and sexual pleasure which has not been helpful.

5. In a questionnaire study Professor Smith found that a common response given to the question ‘what do wish your parents had told you about sex?’ was people had wished their parents had told them about sex being fun, pleasurable and great bonus to a relationship.

6. Pornography is not a sex education tool, however, young people will turn to it if better resources are not available. For some people in the LGBTQ community pornography was the first space in which they felt they were not alone.

7. It is crucial to understand that no evidence exists that what pornography a person watches is what they want to do.

8. For young people viewing pornography, they may find it pleasurable or it may shock them and feel unpleasant. It is a form of exploration and we can help our young people by enabling them to think critically about media in general as well as pornography specifically.

9. We need to be having lots of conversations with our young people about sexuality, bodily autonomy, issues of consent, mutual enjoyment and pleasure. These are topics that come up in everyday life, not just pornography and there are opportunities to have these softer conversations.

10. For young women there can be a variety of pressures to conform to others’ desires (including sexual desires) and we need to help young women acquire the confidence and
space to be able to articulate what they want and don't want and help young men learn how to listen and recognise signs of ambivalence. Unfortunately, the ages old idea of romance being a young woman submitting her needs to his is still abound (think Rom-Coms and other media) and we need to help our young people think critically about what they are viewing and the messages they are receiving.

11. Having conversations with our children and young people about what good relationships look and feel like is really important, as is acknowledging that everyone has experiences of poor relationships (including bad sexual experiences) and learning how to recognise and move on from these is part of healthy development. This means learning from our mistakes and difficult experiences, knowing you can make mistakes and they don’t have to define you.

12. If we get stuck on what we are not going to let our kids have access to, we miss talking and thinking about what we are going to give them access to explore elements of their sexuality and experience healthy sexual development.

More from Professor Clarissa Smith

Books:
One for the Girls (2012) – By Clarissa Smith

Resources recommended by Professor Clarissa Smith

Organisations and websites which provide balanced sex education information – great resources to signpost your child to. Have a look and decide which are appropriate for your child:
Brook www.brook.org.uk/your-life
BISH www.bishuk.com/about-bish
Scarleteen www.scarleteen.com
NSPCC / Childline www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/friends-relationships-sex
Resources for Parents and Teachers:
Sex Education Forum www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/resources