

SEXUAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS' PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL INFLUENCES ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S SEXUALITY: PORNOGRAPHY, PRESSURE AND INTIMACY

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Background: Although young people can access more sexual content than ever before, particularly through internet pornography, this information is not always conducive to the best psycho-social health outcomes. In addition, research has found young people report they do not get adequate information about sex and sexuality from parents and schools, and look to pornography for this information. Research remains limited on the impact of this changing milieu on young people. Professionals who work with young people in the areas of sexual health and relationships possess unique insight into current sexual trends and the benefits and costs of access to pornography and other social influences on sexuality.

Methods: Twenty professionals who work with young people in the areas of sexual health and relationships participated in semi-structured qualitative interviews. The interviews asked about professionals' views on the social influences on young people's sexuality and psycho-social health outcomes.

Results: Professionals reported that contemporary attitudes and access to information has some positive psycho-social influences on sexuality, including that young people are more open about sex and sexuality, gender fluidity and diversity in sexual orientation than in previously. However, professionals also reported free internet pornography and peer expectations are having negative impacts on psychological health, relational health and sexual functioning. These impacts include: a lack of intimacy in relationships and sexual interactions; pressure (especially on young women) to perform sex acts they dislike and that cause pain and psychological distress; and narrow aesthetic expectations about pubic hair and genitals for both young men and women.

Conclusion: Despite the increased access to online information and sexual content, this information is not always helpful or positive. Sexual health professionals' believe that high-quality, broad-focussed, sex education is vital, providing young people with accurate information about pornography, sex, respectful relationships and sexual rights and responsibilities.

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