

LIFE MATTERS

20.11.2016 / 6

Joanna Fortune

Psychotherapist and attachment specialist



Parenting

An Taoiseach Enda Kenny has called for a national conversation on porn and its impact on our evolving society.

The need for this seems compounded by the experience of Miriam O'Callaghan and a number of other Irish female celebrities at the end of October, who learned that their faces had been superimposed onto naked bodies for the purpose of producing pornographic material.

This is a gross violation, and I support An Taoiseach's call for a national conversation about this topic, as long as it is a conversation that leads to a legislative outcome.

My interest in this topic is specific to how it relates to child and adolescent development rather than adult engagement with porn. We really need to change how we speak about sex and devise/deliver sex education in our school — and porn must be a part of those conversations.

Most parents never imagined they would have to talk about porn with their children but, owing to increasingly premature exposure to an online world, this is now a necessary part of the parent/child narrative.

Porn, specifically the increasingly easy access to online pornography at younger and younger ages is, I believe, the most baleful threat to our children and to childhood in general.

Our children are watching it, seeking their sex education from it and it is warping their views of sex, intimacy, sexuality and relationships. I hear about this in my work with teenagers and at times younger children, many of whom have accidentally accessed porn via a pop-up that appeared on screen while they were watching something else entirely online.

Young people are under immense pressure to be sexually active and one of the dangers of pornography is that it can artificially heighten expectations and normalise behaviour such as unsafe sex. They're unlikely to see condoms used in the pornography they're watching. Most porn performers are fully waxed and as such we have an increase in young teenage girls requesting adult waxing services to remove all signs of body hair as young as 13 years of age.

We have to frame this national conversation in the context of the developing teenage brain. The prefrontal cortex area of the teenage brain is not fully developed, and will not be fully developed until a person is in their mid-twenties.

This is the area of the brain that assesses situations, weighs up outcomes, makes judgments and ultimately controls impulses and emotions. It is also the area



Pornography and the developing teenage brain

Vulnerable to suggestion

The developing brain is often unable to differentiate between fantasy and reality — especially in the case of pornography

of the brain linked to understanding and reading responses in others.

Neuroimaging scans show us the area of the teenage brain that is well developed is the nucleus accumbens, which is the area associated with pleasure and reward seeking drives.

This explains a lot of what we would call "typical teenage behaviour" but also must be a significant cause for concern when we consider the teenage brain immersed in exposure to violent sadistic online pornography for prolonged periods of time and from young ages. The

developing brain is unable to fully differentiate between fantasy and reality and as such a young person's natural developmental pathways through an emerging sexuality is short-circuited by this exposure to pornography.

We should welcome this call for a national conversation on pornography and be open to all options to safeguard what is already a too short childhood for our children.

This would not represent censorship, as some fear — this is all about child protection.

Mental Health News

with Danielle Barron



BEFORE BABY BLUES

Rates of depression in pregnancy may be higher in Ireland than other European countries.

A recent study of 5,000 women by Trinity College Dublin researchers found that up to one in six pregnant women are at "probable risk" of depression during pregnancy.

It was also seen that the risk of depression increased as pregnancy advanced; 12.9% of women are at risk in the first trimester, 13.8% in the second, and 17.2% in the third. The authors of the Well Before Birth study are now calling for screening for depression to be an integral part of any antenatal care plan, saying hormonal changes that happen during early pregnancy can contribute to the development of depression.

"U ok hun?" ask psychiatrists: An opinion piece published recently in *The Lancet Psychiatry* called for the use of Facebook data as a "high priority" to further psychiatry research and mental health services delivery. The authors argued that as research has shown adolescents disclose far more about themselves online than offline, this data could "further our understanding of the onset and early years of mental illness, a crucial period of interpersonal development". Critics have poured scorn on the idea, calling it a breach of privacy, but the authors maintain this would be the best means of using social media to promote positive change.

THE WINTER OF DISCONTENT

Danish researchers have found that the number of depression diagnoses during the month after the clock goes back is significantly higher than normal. The researchers at Aarhus University say that the increase in depression rates is too pronounced to be coincidental.

They also say they are "relatively certain" that it is the transition from daylight saving time to standard time that causes the increase in the number of depression diagnoses and not, for example, the change in the length of the day or bad weather. "The transition to standard time is likely to be associated with a negative psychological effect as it very clearly marks the coming of a period of long, dark and cold days," they note.

