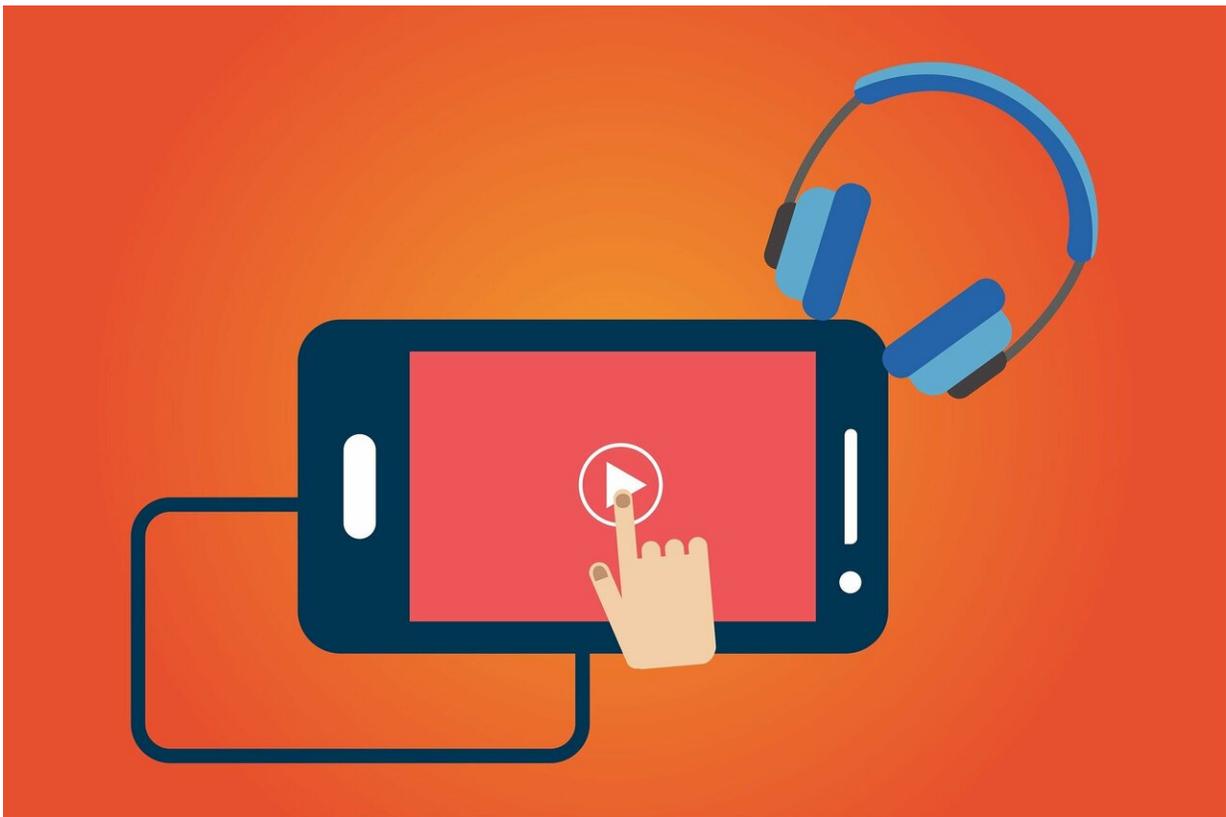


Netflix's Sex Education is doing sex education better than most schools

November 11 2021, by Debra Dudek, Giselle Natassia Woodley



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Netflix's comedy [Sex Education](#), now in its third season, is set among a group of students and teachers at a British high school. In depicting sex education, it teaches viewers about sex and sexuality—often doing a

better job than school-based sex ed classes.

In the first episode of season three, Dr. Jean Milburn (Gillian Anderson) is interviewed on the radio about her new book, *Uneducated Nation: A Sex Education Manifesto for Our Youth*.

When the host asks her to tell him about the book, she replies she was "shocked at the ineptitude" of school sex ed classes. So she created "this easy-to-read manual to help empower our teenagers, and their parents, as they become sexually active young adults."

He responds, "Sounds a bit racy." Jean retorts, "Well, if, by racy, you mean highly researched and completely essential to the health and well-being of our children, then, yes, I suppose it is."

Jean's response could easily be applied to the television series itself—racy but essential. It could also be seen as a comment about how school-based sexual [education](#) programs could improve their communication of relevant information to curious teenagers.

We are part of an international research team working with scholars from Greece, Ireland and Norway to interview adolescents and their parents about their [perceptions of harm in accessing sexual content](#).

As researchers with expertise in the fields of sexology, communication and media studies, we value the knowledge [young people](#) share about their own needs and desires.

Our research with teens—and into stories that represent their experiences—illustrates they are sexual beings who want and deserve sex-positive information. Too often, this positive side of sex is left out of the classroom.

Sexually provocative, but educational

Sex Education is one example of how stories in popular culture can portray teen sexuality positively.

For instance, the opening scene of this first episode of season three is upbeat, playful and sexy.

It cuts between at least 13 different moments of sexual pleasure: heterosexual sex, gay sex between young men, gay role-playing sex between young women, masturbating while watching porn, online sex, virtual reality sex—and the pleasure of reading a book while eating cheese puffs.

This sequence is sexually provocative, but it also educational. It shows a range of desires across ages (yes, teachers and parents have sex, too), races, sexualities and body sizes.

There are none of the messages about abstinence and fear often associated with representations of teen sex, and no coy curtain-wafting standing in for sex.

The premise of the show is the teenagers at Moordale High do not receive adequate sex education classes, so Jean's son Otis (Asa Butterfield) and his classmate Maeve (Emma Mackey) set up a sex therapy service for their peers.

These young people seek information about how to overcome sexual difficulties and become better lovers. They find (usually) correct—and always frank—information from Otis and Maeve, who offer resources and advice.

Teenagers and porn

As we argue in a recent [essay](#), this TV show complicates the idea that pornography is only harmful to teens.

Watching porn can be "a bit of fun," to quote one character, but also a source of misinformation about sex. Sex Education debunks this misinformation, such as when one character mistakenly believes a large penis is required for sexual satisfaction, and another thinks her labia should be tucked in.

Teenagers as consumers and producers of pornographic and erotic narratives can use these stories, and the stories in Sex Education, to develop an understanding of sex and sexuality and supplement the information provided in school curriculum.

This seeming contradiction about pornography aligns with a [report](#) written by the Australian Institute of Family Studies about the effects of porn on young people.

This report highlights the lack of information about how young people access sexual content (unintentionally or intentionally); about the content of pornography they view; and about teenagers' ability to distinguish between the fantasy pornography represents and the reality of their sexual experiences.

The report also found very few accounts from teens themselves about their experiences accessing [sexual content](#) online and any perceived harm from it. It points to a need for further research, which includes the voices of adolescents.

Teaching pleasure

Dr. Jacqui Hendriks, who coordinates Curtin University's sexology courses, believes sex ed should include [discussions of pleasure rather than focusing primarily on reproduction](#).

At present, the quality of [sex education](#) varies widely across the nation, but in Western Australia, a group of researchers have [identified](#) the "need for a greater focus on positive sexuality and relevant contemporary issues" in the classroom.

Sex Education challenges a commonly-held perception teenagers should be protected from the harms of sex and sexual material. The stories told by teens and about teens can be crucial tools to open conversations between children and adults about sex.

The conversation started by shows like Sex Education highlights the need for more comprehensive sexual education not only in schools but in communities and in the family home itself.

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