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Welcome to Resource on the Go, a podcast from the National Sexual Violence Resource Center on understanding, responding to and preventing sexual abuse and assault. My name is Jennifer Grove and I am the prevention director at the national sexual violence resource center. This podcast is the fourth episode in our sex ed series. In our second episode of the series, I talked with Dr. Emily Rothman about the research behind the truth about pornography curriculum. Today I am joined by Jess Alder and Nicole Daily who are facilitators of this program. Jess Alder is the program director of the start strong building healthy teen relationship initiative at the Boston public health commission. She holds her Master's in Public Administration from Suffolk university. For four years Jess was an educator, advocate, and consultant for rape crisis centers in Denver Colorado and Boston Massachusetts. She has been working in the field of teen dating violence for the past eight years in Boston and has over two decades of experience working with young people as an educator, coach and mentor. Jess has conducted local, national, and international workshops on health relationships, healthy breakups, media literacy, and crisis intervention. She is co-creator of the porn literacy curriculum which was featured in the New York Times. Nicole Daily is the former program director of the start strong building healthy teen relationships initiative at the Boston public health commission. She holds a BA from Welsley University and a Master of Public Health from Bolton University School of Public Health. Her expertise is in the field of teen dating violence prevention and healthy relationship promotion. Her work has been featured in the Boston globe and the New York Times, and she firmly believes that if we let teens rule the world our lives would be so much better. In this episode we also refer to peer leaders. Start strong peer leaders are high-school-aged students who are trained to become experts in the field of dating violence prevention and healthy relationship promotion. They come from all over Bolton and each have a passion for critical thinking, challenging unhealthy behaviors, and sharing their knowledge gained. Welcome to the podcast, Jess and Nicole. I'm excited to talk with you both about the Porn Literacy Program for Adolescents. A few months ago, we spoke with Dr. Emily Rothman about the research behind this program, so today, I'm really excited to talk with you both as facilitators of the program. Could you each talk about how you

became involved in this work?

00:23 Nicole: I know, it's amazing, this journey we've been on. I can't believe how many years it's been. But we became involved in this work incidentally through our partnership with Emily, so both Jess and I were working with the Start Strong program and working with our teams, really talking about gender-based violence prevention, and so we always worked collaboratively with Emily.

00:50 Nicole: And so we had learned that she had started doing some research on pornography, and she came in on another just typical day, she came in to talk about some of her research and her gender-based violence research. And in that conversation, Jess shared that the kids were interested, but they've been inundated with the topics before. So they were kind of being teens, as they normally are, and then Jess mentioned to Emily, "Hey Emily, why don't you mention some of the porn work that you are doing?"

01:23 Nicole: And the kids were like, "What? Pornography? You're researching pornography. What does that mean?" And it became this whole conversation about what they were seeing, how it was showing up on their news feeds and the social media, and it just became this conversation.

01:40 Nicole: And so when Jess came back to me and mentioned what had happened, I was like, "Wow, we have been doing this work with teens for," at that point, easily five years, and we had just never thought to talk about pornography with them. And that is a critical place where they're learning scripts about negotiating sex, consent, what does it mean to be a healthy partner and their sexual nature.

02:06 Nicole: So I was like, "We should do something about that." 'Cause part of the thing about Start Strong is we often are, just try to think about, "What are creative ways to have conversations with young people about being in healthy relationships?" That includes being healthy sexual partners whenever they choose to have sex and preparing them for that whenever that should arise. And so that's...

02:30 Nicole: We went back to Emily and we started talking with her about operationalizing the research and what it meant to really engage young people in understanding it, and that's the start of where this work began to evolve. I don't know if Jess has any more, 'cause you were in the room that day.

[chuckle]

02:53 Jess: Oh goodness, that was such a memorable day. We've had a decade worth of meetings with our young people, and that's a day that stands out because the enthusiasm that they had, just at the mere mention of the word "porn". They were, it just got them talking

about... They felt more comfortable opening up because we mentioned something that is rather taboo, and it allowed us to bridge this unspoken divide.

03:26 Jess: It also aligned very nicely with our work, in that a large part of our programming is around media literacy. We don't show porn but we do analyze and critically examine media messages, and we have a number of tools that allow young people to evaluate the messages that they're learning from media and whether or not they agree with those, or they align with their values. And this was just another opportunity to apply that framework to sexually explicit media.

04:00 S1: Thank you both so much for talking a little bit about how, yeah, how you both became involved in that work. I remember when we talked to Emily and you all, she said you all had said, "What? You talk to who? Young people about... " Your work around porn. [chuckle] And she said, yes, the ears perked up in the room. Like, "What?"

04:21 S1: So I could just imagine, I was not in that room, but I wish I was sort of a fly on the wall there that day. [chuckle] Could you also both talk to us a little bit about the content of the programming and how it's being implemented?

04:36 Jess: Yes, so there are nine sessions in the Truth About Pornography, and I do wanna just highlight that the title is really important to the content in that there are many truths when it comes to understanding sexually explicit media. We're not here to be pro-porn or anti-porn, it's just, "Here's the information, what do you think about that?" And it's teaching consent, communication, critical thinking, we call them the "three Cs".

05:07 Jess: Within those nine sessions, we discuss, we kind of get a pulse in the first session to understand how our young people understand pornography, what are their thoughts around it, and that creates a baseline for how we continue conversations throughout the curriculum. Session two, we start to dive into censorship, who controls media, what are the implications of that, and then we just kind of continue on building off of those blocks.

05:38 Jess: So we'll discuss gender, social constructs, we'll discuss the impact on the adolescent brain. We of course discuss child-sexual exploitation and the laws around revenge porn and sexting. What's really great about Start Strong is that everything we do is either peer lead, peer inspired or peer created, which means that our young people are involved every step of the way with our work.

06:09 Jess: So in the first pilot test that we conducted with our young people, they actually mentioned that they didn't quite understand what intimacy meant, and it was pretty limited and saying, "Oh well, it's probably just holding hands," or a little bit more

physical intimacy. And that encouraged us to embed content around healthy intimacy and healthy flirting, and that was a nice combination of implementing some promotion-based work as opposed to only preventative-based conversations.

06:41 Jess: And our young people are peer leaders, as I mentioned in our programming, which essentially means that they're young experts in the work of violence prevention and healthy relationship promotion. So over the summer, they've learned... They're with us for about six weeks, and I calculated the hours, and it's approximately 90 hours worth of content over a span of six weeks, with prevention around teen dating violence, promotion around healthy relationships, understanding systems of...

07:13 Jess: Understanding systems of oppression and how those intersect with one another, and of course, media literacy. So by the time they learn this content around sexually explicit media during the academic year, they are trained and prepared to both absorb the content and then ready to teach it to their fellow peers at after school sites. Nicole, I'll hand it off to you.

07:34 Nicole: Awesome, I don't think I have too much more to add. I think the way you framed it is perfect. That the heart of this curriculum is really about gender-based violence prevention, and so we're really always thinking about how do we help young people think about consent? How do we help them think about the influence of race, gender, sexual orientation, into how they're understanding the world in their relationships?

08:12 Nicole: And in this case with sexually explicit media, how they're negotiating sex with their partners in a way that will be healthy and supportive and violence-free. So I think when we designed the content of this programming, it was with that in mind, and just realizing that porn was just another way that young people are forming their values during this critical time in their life course and their development.

08:37 Nicole: And so as we're implementing it, we take the positive youth development framework as well, and so we see them as partners in this work, so we're not talking down to them around the issues, we're really talking with them around the issues. And so, Emily probably shared this in her podcast, but the research, there's definitely signs that there are issues with in pornography, but the research also clearly said there are some benefits as well.

09:07 Nicole: So we really do present it to them with all the complexity that's there, and we simplified it in the way that we're walking them through it, you're not giving it to them all at once, but we really aren't hiding that there's some complexity to this. Because human sexuality is complicated, it's not monolithic, so we present

that to the teens in a youth friendly way, allows them to have fun, there's lots of laughter.

09:35 Nicole: There's also lots of challenging questions, helping them to think, "Why do I believe what I believe?" "Where does that come from?" And really just helping them to really explore their value system, through this process.

09:49 S1: Thank you both. The more that I hear and learn about this program, the more I really wish I would have had access to a program like this when I was a young person in school. I love this positive youth development approach that you talked about, youth as partners, you talked about that Nicole.

10:11 S1: And Jess you mentioned going into this in a nonjudgmental way, here's the information, what do you think about it? And really that trusting young people to be able to be... This concept of having young people become critical thinkers and critical consumers of the research on pornography. So in thinking about it in that way, and everything you've talked about so far, I'm really interested to know, how have young people responded to this programming?

10:47 Jess: Our young people really love having conversations with us around this, and in addition to having guardian and parent consent and youth assent, the guardians are very grateful that we're willing to have these difficult conversations and complex conversations with the young people in their lives.

11:07 Jess: So enthusiasm is an understatement when it comes to this. I think the most common feedback we hear from our young people at the very beginning is that they're disappointed that we're not showing porn. So we have to remind them that that's illegal and we're not going to be doing that. But they do, they really enjoy having conversations that they've never had an opportunity to discuss with an adult, and we do hold these spaces using a trauma-informed lens as well as a brave space conversation.

11:42 Jess: We're really encouraging young people to not just stop themselves at, "This is what I think," but to rather explore why you think that, and where do those messages come from, and how do those messages align with your values? And that's really the crux of it, and I think why they also have a tremendous amount of fun. The amount of laughter we have is just, I got abs from laughing so hard. It's just outstanding.

12:09 Nicole: The only thing I wanna add is, that the program is also designed for the young people to talk to each other, and so I think they respond really well to having this dialogue amongst their peers. So hearing what their friends and their colleagues are thinking, and honoring when there are differences and really not always coming to

consensus, but coming to some kind of common ground and understanding what that means. And also the fact that they can bring some of their experiences into the room.

12:46 Nicole: So we didn't design the program assuming every young person has watched porn, but given the ubiquitous nature of pornography, sometimes that comes into the room, and so having them be able to bring their real experience into the room and received in a non-judgmental way, or as we say, not judgmental to a fault, 'cause again, we're about gender-based violence, so as long as it's consensual and no one is being harmed in that process, we are open. And so they feel that, they understand that, and they respond really, really well to it.

13:28 S1: That's so great, thank you for sharing that, and it's great to know that and the guardians and parents are also really on board with this as well. Can you talk... You mentioned a little bit about the peer education leadership part of the program. Is there anything else you want to share about that piece of it?

13:50 Jess: Yeah, I think since our young people aren't here, I'll share some of the stories that we have of the great work that they're doing. So there's a few that come to mind. And Nicole, this was when you were with us too, so you might remember. Nicole... Adriana, a peer leader of ours, who had been with us, I think at that point for two years.

14:16 Jess: We were at Harvard University talking to a number of graduate students about our work, and Adriana started off by saying, "We have opportunities to discuss safe sex at schools, but if someone's having sex, they're probably in a relationship, and we often don't have conversations about healthy relationships." And I just remember Nicole and I looked at each other and we thought, "Oh. Well, that's true." And she just summarized the crux of our work in one sentence.

14:51 Jess: I think that really, it's really nice to hear a worldview of our young people because they can really speak to the conversations that they are having, but also the conversations that they're not having and want to have. And so we like to take advantage of those opportunities, which is why it's so wonderful to have them be partners in our work.

15:16 Jess: Another story from a young person in our work, Cynthia, she was actually attending a training full of adults, it was a trauma-informed training to become a facilitator in trauma-informed work. It's an 18-hour training total over a course of three days. And all of the adults were discussing how we need to...

15:44 Jess: There's a debate about whether we should use the phrase

"empower young people", because that kind of connotes that young people don't have power and that we want to give them agency, etcetera, and it was a very interesting meta conversation. Cynthia spoke up and she said, "Just because adults don't take adolescent relationship seriously, doesn't mean serious things don't happen in relationships."

16:12 Jess: And that again, was just a moment where it was calling to attention that even if we are doing this work in an adult space with young people, that their world is different or also involves spaces where that isn't the case, and they have to navigate that independently, and so that's been really powerful.

16:37 Jess: The last story that I'll share, Isa, who was in our program for about two years. Three years. Oh, goodness. The average span of a young person in our work is about three years, they typically come as a sophomore and stay for their whole high school career. And he was sharing that they might receive education around safe sex, but no one discusses how it feels afterwards, and that the fact that you've been intimate with somebody and how vulnerable that can feel immediately after the fact, and what that means, and how do you have those conversations?

17:21 Jess: And so he was really grateful for the Truth About Pornography curriculum because it kind of honored the truth that it can be really vulnerable, and that can mean quite a bit, especially when it comes to gender roles and what a young man might be expected to do, or a young woman, etcetera. And that was really meaningful to hear.

17:47 Nicole: Yeah, just to build on what you're saying, Jess. Another reason why peer leadership is so valuable to our program, is this really around what young people bring to the table. Since the inception of Start Strong, we have always thought of young people as thought leaders in this work, and that if we are gonna resolve the issue of gender-based violence, sexual violence, that really young people are key and instrumental to the work, and for many different reasons.

18:23 Nicole: And so one is youth culture along with all culture is evolving, but I think youth culture evolves much more quickly, and so having young people at the table to understand how social norms are being formed, how they're being tweaked, is really, really critical. And then the piece around the research that young people really do look to their peers who are just a step older than them. So adolescent development is a unique period where young people are trying to define themselves away from adults.

19:00 Nicole: They really are thinking about their peer groups in a different way, and so the value of having a peer leadership approach

to this work has been really, really instrumental, and we see that. We see it in the feelings of success that the peer leaders themselves have by going out in the community, working with younger teens, working with their direct peers. But we also see it in the conversations too, that we're observing amongst the community centers and after-school programs where they're going.

19:34 Nicole: So I think this peer leadership element, it's been so valuable for all parties involved, and I think this is where we try to encourage other organizations when people are thinking about doing this work. You definitely can do it as adult-led program or teacher-led programming, but we do strongly encourage anyone to think about utilizing the peer-led model as they're thinking about these important conversations.

20:12 S1: Thank you, this concept of young people needing to be at the table for a multitude of reasons, I like that you mentioned that. I think a lot of us who've done prevention education work, myself included, have learned that the hard way. In the old days. [chuckle] And still, I think this still happens, where we would take a boxed curriculum into a school, a community center, for me, it was a youth drug and alcohol rehab facility, and I mean, they will hand it right back to you and say, "We're not doing this," right?

20:55 S1: I remember as a young prevention educator thinking, "Oh no, what did I do wrong?" And I just completely forgot that, "Hey, yeah, young people have to be... " It has to be for them and by them and of them, and working with them and not delivering something to them and expecting that they're gonna be like, "Yeah, this is great."

21:20 S1: Because if they're not involved in those core conversations, and if they're not brought to the table from the beginning, for all those various reasons, it's not gonna be a successful program at all. So I really appreciate that you both talked about that and the importance of that in the peer education and peer leadership portion of the program.

21:43 S1: So our last question, I would love to know what advice you have for people listening who may want to implement this Truth About Pornography... Sorry. Sorry, Amanda. Poor Amanda. [chuckle] Okay, let me say this over time, So what advice would you give to people listening who may want to implement this Truth About Pornography?

22:19 Nicole: Yeah, there's lots of advice. I definitely think the word "pornography" can feel very scary and overwhelming to individuals, so I think one piece of advice is really thinking and exploring your value system around sexually explicit media, sexual relationships, what does it mean for teens to be involved in sexual relationships? Just to prepare for delivering this curriculum.

22:51 Nicole: In terms of the actual curriculum itself, there's so much that is built into it, so there's not a lot of reading, but there still are some very interesting podcasts that are out there. This one is a little bit dated, so you have to sleuth around for it, but it's called the Butterfly Effect, and so doing just a little bit, but again, so much of the information is built into the curriculum, that it would be fine.

23:20 Nicole: We are always, again, proponents of peer leadership, so even as you're thinking about this work, if there are peer influencers, even if they're college-aged students, I think it's valuable to think about engaging and having the conversations. We actually do recommend if you haven't seen porn in years to just take a quick a look. [chuckle]

23:46 Nicole: You can go incognito via the web browser you're using, but just take a quick look, because it has changed a ton in the years, and then from when maybe someone has explored it or seen it last. And so young people can pretty much understand when they know you're not coming from that space of understanding, so again, it's not watching to watch it, but just for educational purposes, and then just be prepared to have a lot of fun.

24:18 Nicole: Be prepared to have a lot of fun. Be open-minded to what the young people are bringing to you as they're moving through the curriculum. I think the last thing is logistically, we get this question a lot in our trainings, "How do you handle parents?" "How do you handle the school community or the context?"

24:39 Nicole: And so, one piece of advice also is doing your due diligence to make sure you're communicating ahead of times to parents, just because of the specific nature of the conversations that can happen, and so even if you already have blanket consent, which we often do at Start Strong, we still make it a point to call parents before the young people are engaging in the curriculum. And so we highly recommend that, whether it be via letter or direct calls to parents, just to make sure everyone feels grounded in the conversations that are being had.

25:13 Jess: Yeah, I think the only thing I would add to that is having conversations with the agency that you work with, to ensure that you're on par with where their values are, in the messaging that you want to share. And then of course, whatever site you enter, having the conversation with the colleagues at that site, to ensure that they're okay holding space for these conversations.

25:41 Jess: And again, just to emphasize what Nicole said, to truly understand what your own biases are that you're bringing into the space. Because you as the facilitator do very little talking, a lot of it is really listening to the young people, reflecting what you're

hearing and then asking questions to explore it further, and the more neutral you can remain, the stronger the comments and thoughts will be. And that's valuable.

26:10 S1: Well, this has been such a wonderful conversation. Jess and Nicole, I wanna thank you very much for joining me today. I know I learned a lot today. And that's always a good thing. We invite folks to learn more about the Truth About Pornography curriculum by checking out the links in the show notes. Thanks for listening to this episode of Resource on the Go. For more resources and information about preventing sexual assault, visit our website at www.nsvrc.org. You can also get in touch with us by emailing resources@nsvrc.org.