

From red pill to 80/20:

A thought-piece to
support conversations
with young people in light
of Netflix's **Adolescence**



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In our fast-paced, ever-evolving digital culture, simplistic solutions or rigid scripts are not effective for addressing complex issues such as misogyny, incel culture, patriarchy, and toxic masculinity.



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So, what are these issues? What do they mean?

Misogyny is the hatred, dislike, or prejudice against women. It manifests in various ways, from overt acts of discrimination to subtle, everyday biases that undermine women's rights, opportunities, and wellbeing. Misogyny can be deeply ingrained in societal structures, perpetuating inequality and harm towards women and girls.

An **incel** (short for "involuntary celibate") refers to a person, typically a man, who feels unable to form romantic or sexual relationships despite desiring them. Some individuals in incel communities express frustration and resentment, often blaming women or societal expectations for their lack of success in relationships.

Patriarchy is a social system in which power, authority, and opportunities are predominantly held by men, leading to inequality and discrimination against women and other genders. It shapes expectations, roles, and behaviours based on gender, influencing personal relationships, institutions, and cultural norms.

Toxic masculinity refers to harmful cultural norms and behaviours traditionally associated with masculinity, such as the suppression of emotions, the need for dominance, and the devaluation of traits considered "feminine." These attitudes can contribute to harmful behaviour, including aggression, emotional repression, and an unwillingness to engage in healthy, respectful relationships.

These are not new issues

These are not new issues; they have been around for a long time. These types of conversations have been historically happening in small, isolated groups of a few individuals. However, advancements in technology, the onset of social media and the associated algorithm use, coupled with a divided, fragmented, disconnected society have made these issues more accessible and widespread. The internet has provided a space where these ideas can be shared, amplified, and discussed more easily, meaning these conversations are happening on devices in our homes, often out of our awareness, in our children and young people's bedrooms.



Along with this increased accessibility, we are also witnessing the devastation it's causing. The widespread reach of these harmful ideas can lead to greater polarisation, misinformation, and the reinforcement of negative behaviours. Young people especially can become more prone to isolation, radicalisation, and disconnection from healthy, respectful ways of engaging with others because of changes in the brain and body that happen during adolescence.

Whilst these brain and body changes bring about opportunities, they also bring an increase in vulnerability, which can be exacerbated by an innate drive to belong. This can have a detrimental impact if they are exposed to influence and extremism around the issues discussed.

The consequences of this accessibility are far-reaching, affecting individuals and communities in profound ways. Silence or avoidance of important issues can lead to several negative consequences, including radicalisation and isolation, as children and young people may turn to extremist spaces that prey on feelings of alienation and resentment in the absence of reflective dialogue.

These extremist spaces can perpetuate harmful norms, such as gender stereotypes, which contribute to mental health challenges, hinder personal development, and negatively impact relationships. Failure to address these topics openly can cause psychological harm, intensifying confusion, anxiety, and depression while reinforcing internalised harmful beliefs. If young people perceive adults as unwilling or unable to engage in meaningful conversation, trust breaks down, leading them to withdraw or disengage, ultimately weakening vital support networks.

Digital connectivity and social media have enabled these previously isolated conversations about misogyny, incel culture, patriarchy, and toxic masculinity to occur at a greater scale than ever before. As a result, these issues have moved to the forefront of public conversation, making their impact more visible and increasingly difficult to ignore.

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Understandably, dealing with these topics can be challenging because, naturally, we want all the answers right away. The uncertainty can make us feel anxious, and there's often a desire to know exactly what we need, how to do it and when to do it so that we 'get it right'. However, we must accept that this process will take time. This is a journey which will require us to learn and adapt as we go and no one person can do this alone. We need to come together as communities and multidisciplinary teams to shape a culture of understanding, and to support one another in developing the skills needed to help children and young people who may be experiencing these issues.

So, what can we do as a starting point?

- **Being curious not furious**

Approach conversations with authentic interest in young people's experiences and viewpoints. Ask open-ended, exploratory questions without imposing immediate judgement or correction.

- **Using active, reflective listening**

Prioritise hearing and understanding over immediate response. Reflect back what young people share, ensuring they feel heard, valued, and understood.

- **Adopting a non-judgemental stance/presence**

Develop trust by avoiding immediate criticism or defensiveness. Validate their feelings and perspectives as genuine expressions of their lived experience, even if they differ from your own views.

- **Modelling humility and openness to learning**

Admit when you don't have all the answers. Model humility and openness by learning alongside young people, demonstrating that it's ok – and essential – to grow and change one's views.

- **Supporting with critical thinking and encouragement**

Gently prompt young people to reflect critically on the information they consume. Support them to ask questions about sources, motivations, and potential biases.

- **Recognising the emotional context**

Identify and sensitively engage with underlying emotions, such as fear, insecurity, or a desire for acceptance, which often drive beliefs or behaviours.

- **Establishing patient boundaries**

Establish respectful communication norms, clearly stating that derogatory or harmful language isn't acceptable, while remaining patient and flexible enough to revisit difficult topics when necessary.

- **Being comfortable with the uncomfortable**

Recognise these conversations may evoke discomfort or resistance. Stay calm, provide space, and allow conversations to unfold naturally, knowing trust deepens over time.

- **Supporting media and cultural literacy**

Adults should familiarise themselves with contemporary expressions of these ideologies, including the language, symbols, and forums used. Understanding how these views are communicated online and offline strengthens meaningful dialogue and early intervention.

Who holds responsibility?

No one person or service is accountable. It requires shared responsibility and collaborative, multidisciplinary efforts from parents, carers, educators, community workers, and beyond. Each of us must actively engage in both personal reflection and joint action.

Adults are individually responsible for initiating meaningful conversations with a young person. While families and communities play a key role in normalising open dialogue, educational settings should seamlessly integrate these discussions into daily interactions, modelling positive attitudes and creating reflective, safe spaces.

By embracing this reflective, flexible approach, and acknowledging the collective responsibility across all levels of society, we empower children and young people to critically engage with these challenging topics, creating meaningful change for themselves and future generations.

It will require patience, open hearts, and a willingness to embrace the unknown. Along the way, we will need to support each other as a community, sharing knowledge and offering encouragement. Together, we can navigate the complexities of how to offer support and ensure that we approach this with empathy and understanding.

Useful links

Thrive: www.thriveapproach.com

Lewis Wedlock: www.lewiswedlock.com

Tender: www.tender.org.uk

Everyone's invited: www.everyonesinvited.uk

Catch22: www.catch-22.org.uk

From red pill to 80/20: decoding Netflix's Adolescence to support mental health in education



Emojis and coded language are often used in ways that may not be immediately clear to educators. Recognising these hidden meanings can help strengthen communication with children and young people and support more open, informed conversations. Curiosity, context and keeping up to date with social trends will help educators to stay abreast of emoji meanings as and when the emojis are repurposed by young people.

Emojis mentioned in the show



Red pill – Represents incel ideology. They 'see the truth' about women.



Blue Pill – Represents those who are "blind to the truth" or still believe in mainstream views about relationships and gender dynamics.



Dynamite – Represents an exploding red pill, meaning someone is deeply entrenched in incel ideology



100 – References the 80/20 rule; a belief that 80% of women are attracted to 20% of men



Kidney bean – Can be used to mark someone as an incel – connected to manosphere slang



Red heart – Love



Purple heart – Lust/horny



Orange heart – Friends



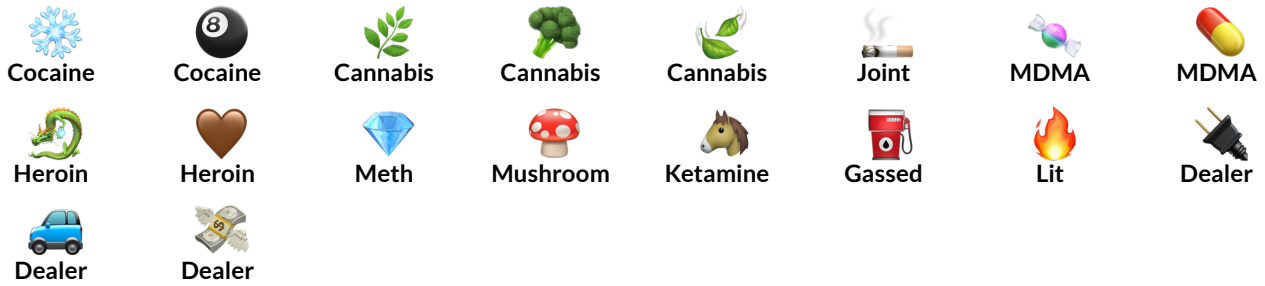
Yellow heart – I'm interested



Pink heart - Interested but not in sex

Additional emojis to watch for

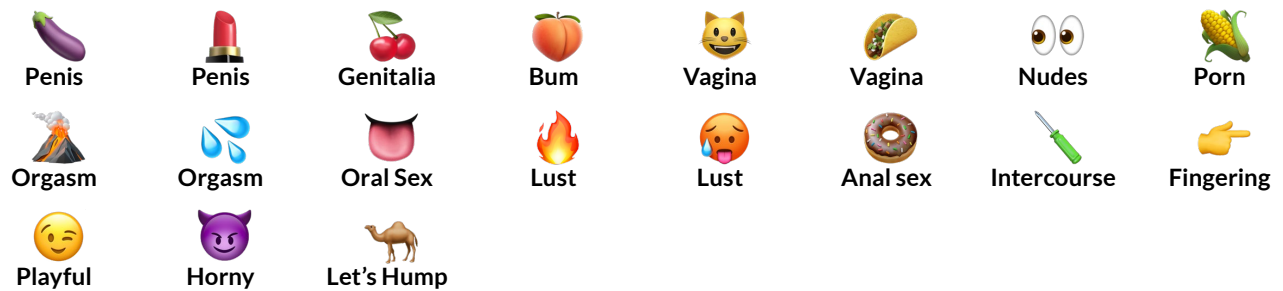
Drugs-related



Violence



Sex



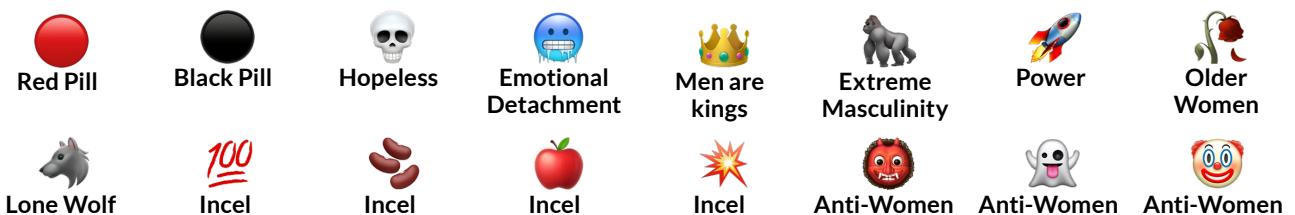
Self-harm



Extremism



Incel culture



Hearts



Stay connected

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