



When Children View Pornography

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by Rob Jackson

No healthy parent wants to think about his child viewing pornography, but it often happens. Some researchers have stated that the average age of exposure to pornography is down to eight. Before the days of the Internet, children were typically between the ages of eleven to thirteen when they began by viewing soft-core pornography found in magazines like *Playboy*.

Today's child lives in a culture where hard-core pornography abounds. Our children are being seduced daily, and we need to bear this fact in mind whenever we have the occasion to redirect them away from pornography.

It is also extremely important that parents not direct all their efforts toward their sons at the expense of their daughters. Pornography and other sexualized media can adversely affect girls as well as boys and often leads to significant damage in their ability to form healthy relationships as an adult.

The goal

We want to be intentional parents. It's our privilege and responsibility to educate them about sexuality. We want to begin early, and continue throughout their time with us in the home.

The ultimate goal for our children's sexuality is that they will be able to see the dynamic interplay between sexuality and spirituality. As Christians, we want to help them understand, for example, that sexual intercourse is an act of love shared between a husband and wife. This sacred act symbolizes the spiritual union that will occur between Christ and His bride, the Church, upon His return to earth. We hope our sons will see themselves as a type of Christ as they relate to their wives, and that our daughters will see themselves as a type of the church as they relate to their husbands. What we model today in our marriages will likely reproduce itself in our children's marriages.

By helping our children to see the big picture about the sanctity of sex, we are better prepared to confront the problem of pornography when and if it occurs in our children's lives.

Do you and your spouse share the same core values?

Ideally, parents will share the same core values that promote sexual purity. This unity will facilitate your child's recovery. On the other hand, if a child's parents are divided about pornography, that child's rehabilitation will be more difficult.

A child's repetitive involvement with pornography can be a symptom of an unhappy home. Once the child's issues begin to surface, his parents may benefit from marital therapy if they continue to be at odds on pornography in general or fail to agree on how to facilitate their child's recovery.

Before you start beating yourself up, however, any exposure to pornography can harm children—even otherwise healthy children. The point here is not to blame parents but to help them identify any problems that may be negatively affecting their children's understanding of sexuality or recovery.

Did my child view pornography intentionally?

I'm convinced that children are victims of a covert form of sexual abuse¹ whenever they are confronted with sexually provocative materials. With this in mind, our children need us to be healthy advocates for their well-being – even if we must confront their willful exposure to porn.

If a child has been found with pornography, it's important to not jump to conclusions. A harsh, impulsive interrogation will most likely just shut down your child. An unhealthy shame often leads to more acting-out with pornography.

You will want to learn how your child found pornography. For example, did someone introduce your child to pornography? Mental health professionals recognize the power differential that occurs as result of age, and if the person who introduced the pornography was older by three or four years, it constitutes a type of sex abuse.² These incidents should be reported to local authorities.

Was this my child's first exposure?

It will also be important to learn if this was his first exposure to pornography. The frequency of exposure matters, as a child becomes increasingly desensitized over time. As desensitization occurs, a child typically begins to seek a greater frequency of pornography, and a harder or more severe quality. Greater frequency and a shift to hard-core pornography are indicators that the brain has begun to seek more stimulation, which can lead to addiction.

If you learn that your child has developed a habit of viewing pornography, it will be important to seek the services of a specialist who is trained to facilitate recovery.

Just exactly what did my child see?

What types of pornography did he see? Sadly, with the Internet a child can be exposed to a wide range of sexual perversions in seconds. If your child has an e-mail address, chances are he or she is being exposed to pornographic e-mail. One recent study found that 47 percent of school-aged children received porn spam on a daily basis. This study also found that as many as one in five children open the spam they receive.³ It will be important to learn about the types of pornography that your child viewed. For example, was the pornography heterosexual or homosexual? Was it limited to body parts or did it include sex acts? Was sexual violence a part of the pornography, and did it include bestiality?

Many parents will seek the help of a therapist at this point. Wisely, they want to safeguard their roles as parents, and avoid harming the relationship by making the teen feel interrogated or ashamed as they ask such difficult questions. The therapist can also delicately approach the job of ascertaining to what extent he or she has been exposed to more severe types of pornography, without inadvertently planting ideas the teen has never even imagined.

Regardless of what was viewed, it will be more important to rehabilitate your child than to merely correct or punish him.

How can you prevent future occurrences?

Frankly, there is no guarantee that even the best parent can prevent his child's exposure to pornography. As with parents of any age or culture, we seek to do the best we can with the resources we have. Should another incident occur, it will be another teachable moment where you restate the precepts and principles that guide us toward wholeness.

Fortunately, the probability of future occurrences can be diminished by taking a four-pronged approach.

Behavioral. Behavioral approaches attempt to prevent a scenario from developing in the first place. The house and grounds, for example, should be purged of all pornography. Media should be carefully screened for "triggers" that serve as gateways to acting-out. If the problem occurred with the Internet, a filter can be one of your strategies, although it can never replace parental supervision and involvement.⁴ Other common-sense approaches include moving the computer to the family room where others can easily view the screen, limiting the time on the computer so that no one is alone on the Internet, and developing a mission statement that directs the family's the use of the computer and the Internet.

Cognitive. Pornography is propaganda and generates destructive myths about sexuality. Once exposed, it will be critically important that a comprehensive sex education gets underway, if it has not already been initiated. The child will need to learn what and how to think about sexuality. More than mere behaviors, parents will want to communicate the core values of sexuality, the multifaceted risks of sex outside of marriage, and their ongoing compassion for what it must be like to grow up in this culture.

Emotive. Sex is inherently emotional. Premarital sex has even been linked with codependency, where at least one person becomes compelled or addicted to be in relationship with another. The youth culture would lead you to believe that sex is not necessarily emotional for them – don't you believe it. Sexual relations of any type bond the bodies, minds, and spirits of two individuals. At the conscious level, this attachment is largely emotional. Our children need to understand that emotional attachment is often involuntary, and especially when the relationship has been compromised sexually.

Spiritual. At its core, sexual integrity comes down to a spiritual commitment. The Christian message of how Christ loves His bride, the Church, is our inspiration. The prohibitions and consequences of sexual sin are secondary to the intimacy that one experiences in obedience to God. Our children need to see how our lives are different because of His love. With confidence, we can share with them that God's true love will empower them to avoid the trap of pornography.

Has your child's exposure to pornography triggered you?

A child's exposure to pornography often triggers a parent's unresolved issues. It may be that a mom will be reminded of sex abuse in her past, or a father will be reminded of his own struggles with pornography and other sexual sins. Because these kinds of memories can be painful, coping with a child's exposure to pornography can become even more difficult. For these reasons, family therapy may be particularly helpful.

A final thought

If we really believe that sin is a powerful barrier between our child and God, we will move past a mere "sin management" approach to mentor them into a loving relationship with us and, more importantly, with Him. Wherever pornography or sexual sin is found, whether in the lives of our children or in our own, we can surrender ourselves and those we love to the greater care and compassion of our Father. His purity remains and cleanses us.

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¹Sex abuse can occur without physical touch. The brain is the most important organ that responds to sexual stimulation.

²Sex abuse can be distinguished from child play whenever the power differential of three or four years of age exists between the two children. The older child will be more experienced and sophisticated, while the younger child will be more vulnerable and naive.

³"Symantec survey reveals more than 80 percent of children using e-mail receive inappropriate spam daily," *Business Wire*, June 9, 2003.

⁴Internet filters are effective, but not perfect. For children and adolescents, a combination of a filter and an accountability web application like Covenant Eyes is better. If one willfully and repeatedly attempts to get around a filtered Internet, the computer is like a "Skinner box" which actually reinforces the compulsion to find more pornography.
