

Parenting in a Porn-Saturated World

It's addictive, has devastating consequences, and nearly all of our kids will be exposed to it. What can we do?
By *Corrie Cutrer*

My husband and I have decided to talk to our son about porn before he starts kindergarten next year.

We may not use the word *porn* at first. But as we continue to teach him to respect his own body and the bodies of others, we need him to understand that there are images and videos out there that don't honor the dignity of others and that looking at these pictures can harm him in serious ways.

If this seems a bit premature, consider the statistics on kids and porn. While some studies indicate the average age children first view pornography is between 11 and 13, a growing number of experts believe this number is changing.

"I've seen children struggling with porn as young as nine," says Sharon Cooper, a forensic and developmental pediatrician and faculty member at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill's School of Medicine.

Dawn Hawkins, executive director for the [National Center on Sexual Exploitation](#), believes the average age is closer to eight, but she's seen even younger children struggle, including a growing number of very young girls. "There are quite a lot of six year olds I've heard about and have been introduced to who are dealing with an addiction to porn," she says.

Numbers like these are leaving families scrambling to catch up with the harsh reality that the efforts of the porn industry paired with a generation of kids who are growing up never having known life apart from a smartphone is resulting in an increasing number of children who are regularly viewing erotic images and videos before they even fully learn how to read.

Perhaps the most sobering realization is that for today's generation of kids, the likelihood of a child progressing through adolescence without being exposed to porn (even accidentally) is pretty much impossible, Hawkins says. "It doesn't matter if a kid is homeschooled or attends private school. Trying to raise kids completely separate from this and thinking that because of our parental efforts our children are not going to be exposed is wrong," Hawkins believes. "Kids will be exposed to it, no matter how hard we try. While we want to protect our kids, what's really the most important is that we prepare them."

The Realities of Early Exposure

While [research has shown](#) that young adults ages 18 to 24 seek out and view porn more often than any other generation, what parents today may be slow to realize is that even pre-pubescent kids are being drawn to it, often accidentally. (It's worth noting here that according to a [small survey](#) of Philadelphia families in 2015, 75 percent of children have received their own mobile device or tablet by age four and frequently use it without adult supervision.)

Lacy A. Bentley, a researcher at Utah Valley University, completed a survey on early pornography exposure this spring; nearly 50 percent of those Bentley questioned about their first time viewing porn disclosed that it was another child who'd shared it with them. Subsequently, 79 percent of them intentionally went back to search for erotic material again after their initial exposure.

"Parents cannot imagine that their children would want to look at pornography, because they don't see their kids as sexual beings," says Kristen Jenson, founder of the blog and parenting website [Protect Young Minds](#) and author of *Good Pictures, Bad Pictures: Porn-Proofing Today's Young Kids*, a read-aloud book for children explaining what pornography is, why it's dangerous, and how to reject it. "They think, 'Well only after puberty will my kids actually have sexual feelings.'"

But even young children have become sexualized, whether it's through an early introduction to porn or even just by walking through the mall or seeing magazines and commercials. Once their sexual "light-switch" is turned on, so to speak, it's not easily turned off, Jenson explains.

The other reality when it comes to kids viewing porn is that they're using it as sex education, Jenson says. "They feel like, 'If I don't watch it, I won't know how to be a sexual person.'"

According to a [survey of college students](#) in Britain, 60 percent consult pornography, at least in part, as though it were an instruction manual. This is the case even though nearly three-quarters say that they know it is as realistic as pro-wrestling, writes Peggy Orenstein, author of the recent book, *Girls and Sex*.

This makes the impact of today's porn even more brutal. "The images today are not just sexually violent, they are also misogynistic," Cooper says. "They promote a hatred of women and violence in sexual relationships." (In a [study](#) of behaviors popularly depicted in porn, Orenstein writes that nearly 90 percent of 304 random scenes contained physical aggression toward women, who nearly always responded neutrally or with pleasure.)

The violent turn porn has taken against women has not stopped them from viewing it. What again may surprise parents is that girls are consuming porn at average ages just as young as boys. Bentley's survey, which asked adults ages 18 and older to share about their initial exposure to porn as children, revealed the average age for first-time viewing for both boys *and* girls was 10—and this was for adults who are currently in their mid-thirties and grew up before the introduction of high-speed internet in the home, the invention of the iPhone, or YouTube.

For kids now growing up in the smartphone age, porn has become a topic of conversation in every middle-school cafeteria in America, Jenson believes. "By high school, kids are not talking about it as much because it's not new. They're just using it, and making it themselves."

This kind of pattern played out with the oldest son of my longtime friend, Annie (whose name I've changed for privacy), a mom of four who lives in the Southwest. Annie says her son first asked for Instagram on his smartphone as a sixth grader, but only two days after he installed the app, he confessed it was too difficult to refrain from viewing all the erotic images and videos easily found on the app's real-time, worldwide feed. While Annie continued to have open dialogue with her son about the dangers of porn and removed Instagram from his phone (along with using a Covenant Eyes monitoring system), her son faced an uphill battle.

Throughout the next few years, boys on his cross-country team continually talked about porn while running. Classmates passed it around on their phones on the school bus. An upperclassman athlete tried showing it to him. "The hardest thing is that you can put all the filters on your kid's phone, but he may as well not have one because his friends' don't have filters," Annie says. "He can see anything he wants through his friends' phones."

Around Christmastime during her son's freshman year, Annie allowed him to install Safari on his phone in order to complete research for a school project. Afterward, in the busyness of the season, she forgot to make him remove it. A few months later, Annie's son confessed he'd been watching videos of porn in his bathroom when he came home and showered after school.

Porn and the Developing Brain

In the 1990s, scientists discovered a brain function called the mirror neuron, which many physicians have come to believe plays an important role in our perception of something we've visualized. "Instead of just seeing something, these neurons convince our brain that we are experiencing what we've seen," physician Cooper says.

Cooper believes the developing brains of tweens and teens experience the effects of how these neurons interact to a greater extent. Watching videos of porn, subsequently,

makes these children feel as if they are actually experiencing the sexual acts they're visualizing, Cooper says. "It also teaches them that sexual interactions are unrelated to relationships. It fosters in children a robotic response. There is no message in adult porn of caring, love, concern, or empathy. None."

The degree to which kids and teens feel as if they're actually experiencing the porn they're watching may explain the rise of child-on-child sexual abuse cases that some believe are increasing throughout the U.S. "Kids are wired to imitate," Jenson says. "They watch enough porn and then become perpetrators themselves."

Among girls it's also causing what some psychologists and researchers are labeling as compassion fatigue. "We're concerned about PTSD and sexual trauma that may be coming out of pornography exposure as girls essentially are watching other women being raped over and over again," Bentley says.

For boys, it can result in porn-induced erectile dysfunction, a disorder recently explored in a *Time* magazine [article](#) that revealed a growing number of young men are convinced their sexual responses have been sabotaged because "their brains were virtually marinated in porn when they were adolescents." In short, they can only achieve an erection while looking at porn, not during an actual sexual encounter with a partner.

Where Should Parents Begin?

For many parents, the added responsibility they now bear to monitor the digital lives of their children can feel overwhelming—especially when they realize their best efforts (as in Annie's case), likely won't be enough to fully keep their kids out of harm's way.

But here is what's giving me, as a mom of three, reason to feel hopeful. The reality of porn and its reach is causing me to have the most intentional, challenging, and yet deeply meaningful conversations possible with my children about the things that matter most when it comes to sexuality, truth, and the inherent dignity of every person made in God's image. When talking with my kids, I'm focusing on these three goals:

Discuss issues related to sexuality openly and frequently. With young children, this means using the correct terminology for body parts, Jenson says, so they become comfortable with information about their sexuality right from the start. Also, begin establishing the truth of the reality of porn and the need to turn away from it. "You can gently explain that some people take pictures or videos of each other without any clothes," Hawkins says. "You can say, 'That's called pornography, and it's not good. We're not supposed to do that because it doesn't respect the dignity and worth of others.'"

As children grow, Cooper recommends regularly asking kids questions such as: What kind of things make you feel uncomfortable? Are there girls at school who are acting

sexy? Boys who are saying sexual things? Does that make you uneasy? Why do you think that's wrong?

Ask children if they've ever seen erotic photos or images (don't assume they haven't just because they haven't mentioned it). Tell them to come to you if they see them, assuring them you won't be upset. If they have a question about a certain sex act or term, ask them not to google it but to ask you and you'll explain it to them. "You want to establish yourself as their best source of information," says Jenson.

If you learn they've already seen porn, don't shame your child, Cooper emphasizes. Remember that your child isn't the enemy—porn is. "Becoming angry only causes children to go underground in their behavior," Cooper says. "Keep the message of love in your relationship as you devise a plan and ground rules to address what's happening."

Don't just tell your kids not to look at porn, but share reasons why. Talk with them about how porn can affect future relationships. Show them the research. Communicate that it's absolutely addictive, just like alcohol or tobacco, Cooper says. Let them know how it impacts the brain. "This generation of kids is cynical about government and religion, but they're very persuaded by science," Jenson says. And take solace in the fact that if all this feels uncomfortable, you're doing something right. "If you wait until everything feels comfortable, you've waited too long," Jenson adds.

Build media literacy. It may surprise some parents to know the Children's Online Privacy Protection rule mandates 13 years of age as the minimum age to open an account on virtually all social media sites. Yet according to [one study](#), nearly 60 percent of children have already used a social network by the time they're 10.

Parents may do well to consider fostering a family environment where mobile devices, Internet surfing, and social networking are considered an extreme privilege instead of a right, Cooper says.

For kids who are navigating the Internet and social media, use monitoring software. Know what kind of technology your kids are using and how it works, Hawkins says. Let them know the boundaries. "If you don't want your child speaking to strangers online, uploading certain kinds of photos, or interacting during certain hours of the day, make that clear. If your kids are using social media, teach them what they can and cannot do. For example, tell them they can't search random hashtags without first asking permission," she explains.

Tell the truth about the porn industry. Ultimately, no amount of monitoring is necessarily going to equip children to ultimately make wise choices online when no one is watching and the opportunity arises. What may help them gain the strength to turn away from the harmful lures of porn more than anything is the truth about the people on the other side of the camera.

“Help your kids understand that when they see porn, they’re using someone and violating their dignity,” Hawkins says. “While porn may seem glamorous, often times the people in the images or videos don’t have any other way to support themselves. Maybe they didn’t have a mom or dad who made them feel loved. Perhaps they don’t understand they’re worth more than this.”

Explain how porn feeds the industries of prostitution and human trafficking. For kids who’ve already been exposed, humanize the images they’ve consumed. “You can say, ‘I know you saw this woman’s body, but did you see the empty look in her eyes?’” Hawkins says.

That’s the approach my friend, Annie, finally took with her son who confessed he’s been watching pornographic videos. “I told him: ‘These are real people. Somebody’s daughter, sister, or mom,’” she says. “Nobody would choose this life. So many of them are slaves. They’re forced into it and trafficked. It’s a dark world—nothing like it looks.”

The truth about trafficking actually broke her son’s heart for the first time, Annie says. It was the catalyst that began helping him fight the addictive lures of porn.

This is the transforming power of the gospel. When the Holy Spirit allows our children to see others as Christ does—important, valuable, esteemed, and loved—then our kids learn the true meaning of dignity. And this seems like *everything* when it comes to helping them establish a framework of thinking that will see them through today’s porn-saturated world.



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