



SPOTLIGHT

Dangerous Exposure The Startling Effects of Porn on Children

written by:
Alysse ElHage

This article appears in the Spring 2016 edition of *Family North Carolina* magazine, a publication of the North Carolina Family Policy Council.

“It felt like my stomach was rotting from the inside out.”

That is how Joseph, a 12 year-old boy from Canada, described his reaction to viewing pornography on the Internet. During an interview with W5, a Canadian TV program, he shared how he was first exposed to porn at the age of nine. He said it began accidentally, with pop-up ads on gaming websites, and then progressed to intentional searches on Google, and eventually became an addiction he could not hide.¹

As the mom of a tween daughter and pre-school aged son, stories like Joseph’s scare me. One of my greatest concerns for my children is how to protect them from being exposed to sexually explicit material, especially online. It is why our daughter does not have a tablet or cell phone like some of her friends, and why we are exploring filtering software for all our media devices. I am, admittedly, overly cautious with my kids when it comes to the Internet, but with the deluge of porn that is available at the click of a mouse or swipe of a screen, I would rather be safe than sorry when it comes to preserving their innocence.

According to the American College of Pediatricians (ACPed), my concerns about the threat of online pornography are well founded. In a recent position statement, ACPeds notes that “pornography has become pervasive throughout American culture,” and warns that young people report being exposed to porn as young as age 10.² Additionally, a new Barna report found that 71 percent of young adults and 50 percent of teens report being exposed to porn at least once a week, the majority through online videos.³

Just as Joseph described in his TV interview, the ACPeds statement explains that, “pornography exposure at these young ages often results in anxiety for the child,” with children reporting, “feelings of disgust, shock, embarrassment, anger, fear, and sadness after viewing pornography.” The statement highlights the following detrimental effects of viewing porn, including that it:

- **Distorts young people’s view of sexuality.** For boys, this negatively impacts how they view women, who are seen mainly as sex objects, rather than multifaceted human beings. But it can be equally harmful for girls, negatively impacting their self-esteem, causing them to see themselves as sexual objects, and leading them to accept abusive behaviors, including rape, as “normal.”
- **Leads to earlier sexual activity and more lifetime sexual partners** for both boys and girls, which can increase the risk of teen pregnancy, abortion, and sexually transmitted diseases.
- **Destroys relationships.** A 2014 study of 20,000 adults who had ever been married found that those who had watched X-rated films were more likely to: report being unhappy in their marriages, have had extramarital affairs, and be divorced.⁴
- **Increases the risk of porn addiction.** Similar to drugs and alcohol, the younger a person starts viewing porn, the more likely he or she is to become addicted. In fact, one study by Cambridge University scientists showed that brain scans of avid



pornography viewers were similar to those of drug addicts.⁵ As one young man who is seeking treatment for porn addiction explained on the blog, *I Believe in Love*, his need to view porn progressed from “once in a blue moon” in elementary school, to three times a week in college. “If I didn’t use porn in a certain period of time,” he wrote, “I suffered from... withdrawal symptoms,” including “highly elevated heart rate, anxiety and irritability, and mild to severe tremors in my hands.”⁶

What Can We Do to Protect Our Kids?

In light of the pervasive effects of pornography, ACPeds recommends that parents take a number of steps to protect children from being exposed to sexually explicit material online, such as:

- **Placing home computers in public spaces in the home**, never in a child’s room (including cell phones, iPads, gaming devices, etc.);
- **Equipping all media devices with Internet filtering** and monitoring software;
- In the case of pornography addiction, **seeking out services that “offer the ability to create accountability partnerships [between parents and children] that increase the success of breaking free from pornography addiction.”**

In addition to doing what we can to protect our media devices from pornography, perhaps the most important step we can take is to prepare our children for how to handle sexually explicit material when they are exposed. Even though it is a difficult discussion to have, experts advise that we talk about the dangers

of porn with our kids early on, and let them know they can and should come to us first, if and when they encounter porn.

“I encourage parents to just assume the worst,” warns ACPeds president and pediatrician, Michelle Cretella, M.D., who recently discussed the harms of pornography on NC Family’s radio show “Family Policy Matters.” She added, “The chances of accidentally coming across porn at some point is probably close to 100 percent for most kids.”⁷

Dr. Cretella said parents should be up front with their kids about the dangers online, and keep the lines of communication open. “I encourage parents to let their children know, ‘sometimes pictures might come up that surprise you or make you feel yucky or confused or guilty,’” she said. “[Tell them] ‘If you ever see something that bothers you, or that makes you feel yucky, please tell me, and I will help you.’”

Joseph, the 12-year-old Canadian boy who developed a pornography addiction, echoed this important advice for kids and parents:

“Tell your parents ... say ‘that pop-up happened, please help me,’” he said. “Deal with it as soon as you can, because it will eat you like an acid.” ☹

Alysse ElHage is Associate Director of Research for the North Carolina Family Policy Council. For a footnoted version of this article, please visit www.ncfamily.org.

Resources for Parents

There are a number of excellent resources available to help parents navigate the Internet and discuss the harms of porn with their children, including the following:

- Internet Safety IOI, sponsored by Enough is Enough, at www.InternetSafetyIOI.org
- NetSmartz Workshop, sponsored by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, has an interactive Internet safety website for kids at www.netsmartz.org/NetsmartzKids/BeSaferOnline
- The Internet Keep Safe Coalition’s parent resources page: www.iKeepSafe.org/parents
- The National Center on Sexual Exploitation parent resource page: <http://endsexualexploitation.org/resources-parents/>
- *Good Pictures, Bad Pictures* is a new picture book for kids about a mom and dad who explain “what pornography is, and why it’s dangerous, and how to reject it.” The authors of the book also have a website, www.pornproofkids.org, with tips on how to address the topic with kids.

The chances of accidentally coming across porn at some point is probably close to 100 percent for most kids.

Endnotes

1. National Center on Sexual Exploitation, "This 12-year-old boy speaks out about the dangers of porn addiction," 10/5/15, as found at: <http://endsexualexploitation.org/articles/this-12-year-old-boy-is-speaking-out-about-the-danger-of-porn-addiction/>
2. American College of Pediatricians, Position Statement, "The Impact of Pornography on Children," October 2015, as found at: <http://www.acpeds.org/the-college-speaks/position-statements/the-impact-of-pornography-on-children>
3. Kinnaman, David, "The Porn Phenomenon," Barna Group, 1/19/16, as found at: <https://barna.org/blog/culture-media/david-kinnaman/the-porn-phenomenon#VvBBAkuudFJ>
4. Doran, Kirk and Joseph Price, "Pornography and Marriage," *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, v. 35, issue 4 (December 2014), as found online: <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs10834-014-9391-6>
5. Withnall, Adam, "Porn addiction leads same brain activity as alcoholism or drug abuse, study says," *Independent*, 8/22/13, as found at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/pornography-addiction-leads-to-same-brain-activity-as-alcoholism-or-drug-abuse-study-shows-8832708.html>
6. Anonymous, "How I Tried to Fight my Depression With Porn," I Believe in Love, 1/10/15, as found at: <http://www.ibelieveinlove.com/2015/10/01/how-i-tried-to-fight-my-depression-with-porn/>
7. Radio Interview with Michelle Cretella, MD, "Pornography can damage your child's self-image," Family Policy Matters, Aired 12/3/15, Transcript and Audio: <http://www.ncfamily.org/pornography-can-damage-your-childs-self-image/>



North Carolina Family Policy Council
PO Box 20607
Raleigh, NC 27619

www.ncfamily.org