

My Kids Have Looked at Porn! What Do I Do Now?

By Nicholas Black

Sexual Integrity

Parents are protective creatures. Healthy parents will guard and protect their children from just about any danger and harm. Kids are strapped into seat belts and constantly told not to run into the street. When they are older, they'll listen to countless mini lectures on how to drive safely, how to stay away from drugs and to be home by 10:00PM.

But some dangers keep lurking along the edges of life. You can't protect your children from every potential danger that's out there. Even for the best of parents, "protective fatigue" sets in, resulting in reduced vigilance in areas that aren't as visible as other dangers. When parents let down their guard—and we all do somewhere—it allows our children to walk through some doors that can do great harm and damage.

Pornography is one of those doors.

When a child or teen walks through that door, pornography can capture their minds and hearts almost in an instant, setting the stage for years to come of inner turmoil, a polluted mind, secretiveness, deceit and deeply broken sexuality. Porn warps their view of sexuality and relationships which can, years down the road, explode into the life of a dating relationship, marriage, family or vocation with destructive force.

Here is a fact: Almost every adult who struggles with sexually addictive behavior was introduced to porn at a young age. The sexual addictions that are sparked by pornography usage go on for years, unnoticed, hidden in secret by the struggler, with parents totally unaware.

Today, the technology of the Internet, cable TV, movies, Social Media and downloadable video entertainment is woven into the fabric of everyday life. Society is being transformed at every level by it. And like everything man puts his hand to, it has both a good and bad side.

It's the bad side which parents today are failing to notice, failing to address in a way that will protect their children. To give children unrestricted access to the Internet is like unleashing them alone in a large urban city to find their way around. No loving parent would do such a thing! But with media today, some parents are not realistically aware of the dangers ("My kids won't do that stuff!"), while others are overwhelmed by technology they can't seem to fully understand. On top of that, parents rarely bring the subject of sex up for discussion in the life of the family (except to say: "Don't! Wait till you're married"). This combination can leave children and teens ill-equipped to handle their emerging sexuality while being bombarded by a technology that puts sex in front of their eyes every chance it gets.

If you have discovered your child or teen has been looking at porn, the shock of the experience can be overwhelming. Some parents respond with anger and a hastily assembled response plan—they punish their child by temporarily removing his computer or mobile devices, and then "locking down" access to porn by installing parental filters. Maybe some brief discussions ensue about sex and what is right and wrong. Once the protective measures are in place, and the crisis begins to fade into the past, the feeling that the family is safe again takes hold. The family can then move on. Everything feels OK at this point.

But it's not.



What has happened when you discover that your child or teen has looked at porn is not a singular incident that needs to be quickly addressed and then you move on. As devastating as it is to discover your child has looked at porn, now is the time to see this situation as a “gospel opportunity.” That is, see it as an opportunity to engage the heart of your child and not as a disturbing event that you will make sure doesn’t happen again.

Ps. 119:67 says, “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word.” Affliction whether it comes by unexpected suffering or consequences from our own or someone else’s sin, is an opportunity to renew our relationship with God and learn to practically apply the gospel to our everyday lives.

What is a Redemptive, Healthy Response?

Control your anger. It’s OK to be angry when you discover your child has been looking at porn. But keep this in mind about your anger—direct it to the sin and not to your child. Direct it to the brokenness of this world and to the evil one who uses such material to corrupt and destroy. You also need to keep in mind the world in which your child or teen lives. They are being assaulted by this stuff. When you do that, you will be in a better position to constructively help your child, because you will understand the difficulty of trying to live a life of sexual integrity in a world that has gone sexually insane. You probably know this from your own life. Allow compassion that flows from understanding their struggle in this area to transform your anger, directing it to the real culprits, and allow God to comfort your own grieving heart as you work with your child at understanding what kept driving their behavior to porn.

Go after their heart, not their behavior. Whether you have discovered your child’s porn usage or whether your child has admitted it under questioning, work to stay calm and engage your child’s heart. Ask him questions not just about his porn usage, but about what was driving him to do this—How did it start? How did you feel about doing this? How long have you been looking at porn? What do you think about what you have been seeing? What were the occasions in which you felt drawn to look at porn? Inquire whether they can understand some of the “messages” that porn communicates and “teaches” (power, control, “false intimacy,” escape from stress, degradation of women and men, etc).

Your child or teen may not be fully able to comprehend why porn was able to have such a hold over him or her, but by asking heart-directed questions, you will be helping them to do valuable life-work, work they need to keep doing their entire life—that is, how to examine the motivations of their own heart, motivations which drive their behavior and which their behavior exposes. This is one of those “gospel opportunities” in the midst of this pain. Don’t just attempt to shut down access to porn as if that was the end of the matter. Your children need to learn that all of us do what we do for a reason, not just because we have access to it or stumble across it. If your response to the crisis is to re-direct the behavior through parental control, you will not be helping your child at all.

To engage your child’s heart teaches them something fundamental about themselves—They have longings for someone or something that will give them meaning and purpose for their life. Our longings drive our behavior, but our longings have been fundamentally broken by the fall of Adam. Now these desires are disordered and twisted. The deepest longings of our heart—what we were created for—are for love and relationships, first with God and then for others, and it is this “mechanism” of the heart that porn utilizes for its destructive work.

Our children need to be taught that longings or desires, corrupted by the fall, lead us to find fulfillment apart from God and His design (that’s what sin fundamentally is). Those longings, whether actually felt or not, are painful, and our behavior moves in the direction



of soothing that pain. That's where the desire to keep looking at porn originates. It's meeting a need for (fill in the blank: escape from pain, comfort, power, intimacy, control, pleasure, confidence, relationship, etc), and until they understand the "need" underneath the porn usage, they will fill their hearts with it (even if you try to block it). Paul wrote in Romans 1, disordered, sinful living is the result of fallen hearts that "exchange the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles." Sexual sin is about active idolatry, where we all "exchange the truth of God for a lie" and live for something—anything—that can fill our desperate hearts instead of turning to God. Do you see how this event is not just about behavior? It's much deeper than that.

By engaging them with questions and biblical teaching you will be communicating your love for them, a love that is strong enough to address their hearts and shepherd them through the difficulties of life. The chances are good that your child is struggling with shame and guilt over their behavior, and a loving, grace-filled approach will give them a flesh-and-blood taste of the love and grace that Christ gives to sinners. As you do this, direct your child to turn to Christ and ask for His forgiveness and for His grace and strength to handle his or her sexuality in a God-honoring way.

Keep a Discussion Going about Sex. Your child's porn usage may open a door that you may not have fully opened. That door is discussing sexuality, about God's design for it and about their own emerging sexuality as adolescents. Here is another "gospel opportunity" that can emerge from the brokenness.

Here is where you must teach your child about God's design for sex; that it is good and created for our good, and that its expression is best displayed within the safe and healthy boundaries set by God. Acknowledge the difficulty everyone has—but especially adolescents—to live God-honoring lives of sexual integrity in a world of 24/7 sensuality. However, when honestly acknowledging the difficulty, give them hope that by clinging to Christ and His word, this is not something that is impossible.

One way it won't be impossible is this—you will keep this conversation going. They need your shepherding to grow up well, and that includes being shepherded through the turbulent years of their sexual development. There is no such thing as having a one-time talk about sex and then sending them on their way. Pornography will have engaged your child's heart about sex in significantly harmful ways, and you must be up to the task of guiding them toward the healing that comes from learning, understanding and following God's wonderful design for sex.

Do not underestimate their need for you to talk about sex in healthy ways! Unless you talk about sex in its good and healthy aspects, your child will be left with conflicting messages—that sex is something that is engaged in but never talked about; that sex is shameful; that information about sex is secret. If you don't keep talking about sex at opportune moments, your child will be left, alone, with all the memories and images of the porn they have seen. One of the insidious dangers of porn is to leave the person with volumes of images that pull and tug on the mind and heart, leaving the person with a greater desire to view more porn, and further distorting the way they think and act about sex.

Examine your own heart. Of course, if you are going to own your parental role of shepherding your child's sexuality, then you must first be living within God's design for it. You will not be able to help your child if you are engaging in porn or other out-of-bounds sexuality. Here is another "gospel opportunity" where the grace of God can surprise—He will use suffering and struggle in your own children to show you what you need to learn about your own relationship with Him. Now the opportunity afforded by this crisis is not just about your child, it includes you.



If your own sexual behavior is sinful, now is the time to draw near to Christ for His forgiveness and grace. You cannot lead someone where you are not first willing to go yourself. Accept his forgiveness and grow in His grace, and as you grow in this area of struggle you will find yourself being an honest and authentic help to your child.

Should you admit and confess your own struggle to your child? It depends. If he or she is young, it's probably not wise. But if your child is an older teen, it may be a great opportunity to appropriately share some of your own struggles and the way you are finding grace and obedience in Christ. Our children can grow tremendously in the faith when they see their parents, not as perfect, but as persons who struggle like them, all the while grasping hold of Christ in their own walk of growing faithfulness and obedience.

Blocking the Doors. You also need to take steps to restrict Internet and media choices. The thing to keep in mind is that you can't just put controls and filters on the family computer anymore. Families access the Internet through desktop computers, laptops, netbooks, tablets, smart phones, iPod Touches, Internet-enabled DVD players, cell phones, game consoles and Internet-connected TV's. A good protection plan must encompass all these devices. (Read *"Is It OK to Snoop On My Family?"* at www.harvestusa.org for some great tips).

Don't Let Up nor Give Up. Remember, this is not just a behavior issue to be fixed with controls. Though it is appropriate to be saddened that your child has seen and engaged in porn usage, at least you know it and can take steps to shepherd them forward. Most kids never get discovered or caught. They are the ones who wrestle most terribly with deeply entrenched sexual addictions. It is always God's mercy when our sin is exposed!

Will your kids be in the clear once you engage their hearts, talk about God's design for sex and "block the doors?" Yes and no. You will help them by doing all these things, but keep in mind that they remain sinners, like you, always prone toward moving away from God and His design and toward false gods and idols. Anticipate struggle and even failure at times. See these stumbles as further "gospel opportunities" to shepherd your child toward a deeper faith in Christ, for them and for you.

Further Considerations for Parents

Should You Pursue Professional Counseling or Other Outside Help for your Child?

It depends on a number of factors. You need to carefully discern the following to see if you as their parent(s) are able to shepherd them through this or whether it would be best to seek outside intervention. Whatever direction you take, what is most important is that you must intervene for your child. Do not let your child "get through this" by merely blocking further access to porn. If you don't help them address and respond to the "porn inside their mind" you will be leaving them defenseless for the future. Whether a counselor is the primary help for your child or whether it is you, your involvement is the key.

Whether or not your child may need more help than what you can give will depend on your child and your ability to intervene. Julie Lowe, counselor at the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation (CCEF) says, *"There are many considerations: how long the exposure has been going on, how graphic and disturbing the images are, how sensitive/ naive a child was to the subject matter and how the parents/adults in the child's life respond. Parents must understand that every child is different; **the most significant consideration will be how a child processes the experience and how pro-active parents are in helping them re-interpret their experiences.**"*



One of the key things you need to determine is to what degree has your child's imagination been held captive by the images he has seen? Porn has the ability to "stick" inside the mind and cause the individual to re-imagine what they have seen online. This is not unusual. The issue here, however, is whether your child keeps turning over these images in their mind again and again, unable to turn them off or redirect their mind over time. For example, are they consistently daydreaming about these images? The only way to know this is to ask your child (unless they offer the information first). "Do you keep thinking about what you saw online? When do the images tend to keep appearing in your mind?"

It is important at this point to make clear to your child that these questions are not a form of punishment for having looked at porn. Be clear with him that you are asking these questions because of your desire to help. Your child is not entirely responsible for the thought-images that remain in his or her mind. In asking such questions, then, don't bombard them with too many at one time, nor keep asking them day after day after day. That would just heighten the issue way too much and possibly frighten them that their actions in looking at porn have put them beyond hope of getting beyond this. This is especially true for very young children. Keep such interactions as casual as possible. Again, how you respond to your child's usage of porn will be crucial in helping him or her to resist being enslaved by the activity and keep retreating to it (in their mind or by pursuing more ways to look at porn).

It will be important to know if your child keeps re-imagining the images when he is under stress, bored, at home, at school, etc. Determining whether there is a "place" that is most prone to this can help you come up with some strategies to help. Here is where you will be helping your child to look at their heart motives (why they keep retreating to the images). If, for example, you determine that they are most prone when they feel angry or anxious, then talk to them about what they are feeling and why, and then help them respond with different ways of thinking and behaving. If your child/teen keeps retreating to the memories of porn under stress and anxiety, then patiently teach your child how to come to you to talk through and pray about his fears. Fear and anxiety are amplified when one doesn't know how to seek help from someone else.

In addition to asking questions about how they are doing, it's important to bring the truth of God's word into their minds. Your child will need specific, intentional, consistent help to recapture their thoughts/minds to what is pure, holy, true, lovely, etc (Phil. 4:8). Reading and memorizing Scripture together can be an effective strategy. Help your child write out 1-2 Scripture verses on index cards to which they can turn when they begin struggling with their memories or when they feel pulled by the lingering images in their minds. This isn't meant to make Scripture a "magic pill" but to help your child understand how to take steps in actively taking their thoughts captive to God's truth, rather than being free to roam here, there and everywhere. You want them to be influenced by sources that point them to God, His beauty, His truth, rather than the ugly evil to which they have been exposed. Listening to worship music can help redirect their minds, as well.

Also, as was previously mentioned, all these interventions must include, over time, you teaching them a healthy and godly perspective about God's design for sexuality. What they saw and interacted with about sex in viewing porn must be countered by what the Scriptures say about sex and how it should be properly expressed.



A parental decision to pursue counseling is usually grounded upon several factors.



One, if your child is a teen, it may be (it depends on the quality of your relationship) that issues of shame are too great for him to openly keep talking about the matter with his parents. In these cases, a counselor can provide a safer environment to talk about the issues. You will want to consider meeting with the counselor, as well, to hear any suggestions from him or her about ways you can specifically help your child through this process. In addition, be open and willing if the counselor suggests family counseling sessions. Issues may arise in your child's counseling, and if you keep your focus on his or her healing, you'll be willing to take additional steps if needed.



Two, another reason for considering outside intervention is if your child has been viewing hardcore pornography, frequently, for a significant amount of time, and you discern that they may be showing signs of addiction. Keep this in mind: hardcore porn, if viewed consistently over a period of time, will "desensitize" your child. In other words, your child will become desensitized to the "regular" porn he may have been viewing and will need to view more extreme porn, just like a porn addict. Therefore, it will be important to ask or find out what kind of pornography your child was viewing. Was it sexual acts on video; violent sex; extremely perverted sex such as bestiality? If that is the case, or there are other indicators that your child may be exhibiting addictive behavior, then it would be wise for you to get more help. Other indications that your child may be dealing with addictive behavior would be repeated and continued attempts to look at porn after the initial disclosure or compulsive masturbation or acting out what they saw.

Three, another reason for seeking outside help might be if your child was viewing homosexual porn. Gay porn is not worse than heterosexual porn; both are sinful examples of sexuality outside of God's design. However, if the porn your child was viewing was gay porn, then it would be wise, first of all, to read additional resources from organizations like Harvest USA, Exodus International and the Institute for the Study of Sexual Identity. If you can, try to talk with someone from one of the above organizations to get more insights into this issue.

Some final helpful guidelines:

First, you do not want to shame your child because of the kind of porn they were viewing. You want to come alongside him or her and talk with your child, helping him or her examine their heart, their sexual desires, their relationships and how to align a Christian view of sexuality with their struggle. They will need this kind of discussion with you.

Second, you want to be careful not to "label" their sexuality based on what they've viewed. The pro-gay agenda says that if you feel attraction to your same gender, then you're gay. This can be premature, especially as a teen is still wrestling with their emerging sexuality. You don't want to be in denial if your child is struggling with same-sex attraction, but nor do you want to rush forward and label your child as gay, which is what the culture would advocate.

Third, if your child is not able to talk to you about these matters, then a counselor may be very helpful. Here it will be ***crucial*** to select a Christian counselor whose faith position is solidly Scriptural, who understands issues of sexuality and children/teens, and will help them to take steps to align their decisions about who they are with Scriptural principles.

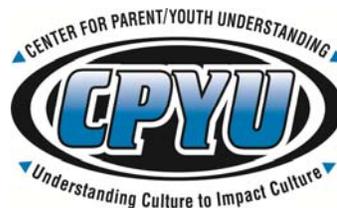
Fourth, consider seeking outside intervention if you sense that you are not capable of adequately dealing with this issue. If you find you are unable to frankly and unemotionally talk with your child about pornography and matters pertaining to sex and their sexuality, then by all means seek outside help. Many parents would feel that all this is beyond their grasp of knowledge, wisdom and/or experience (it's OK to feel inadequate, as this is what teaches us to depend upon Christ and His word). However, if you just feel overwhelmed by it all, and you know you need someone else to step into the life of your child, then don't hesitate to get outside help. This would be a good time, too, for you as a parent to seek assistance on these matters, either from a counselor, a pastor or a good, wise close friend. There may be past or current issues about your own sexual history or behavior that need examination and the healing grace of Christ. Or, you may need to learn better ways to effectively communicate with your child so that you can step into their lives as their shepherding parent.

Finally, Mom or Dad, remember that you are not alone in this journey that may feel daunting! God gave you your child and He is your shepherd to guide you, sustain you and cause you to walk in wisdom. Trust His word to be true for you in the circumstances you are facing:

"Do not be fearful for the Lord your God is with you. Do not be dismayed for the Lord is your God. He will strengthen you and help you and uphold you with His righteous right hand!" (Isaiah 41:10)

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