

A photograph of a man in a dark jacket and jeans carrying a young boy on his shoulders. They are on a sandy beach, looking out at the ocean under a bright, hazy sky at sunset. The man is pointing towards the horizon.

CONFIDENT

Helping Parents Navigate Online Exposure

How to Use This Book

This book will take you about an hour, give or take, to read from cover to cover. The chapter titles and section headings are meant as a guide to help you find the most relevant portions for your situation.

We recommend you read the entire book before having a discussion with your child or teen about pornography. It is worth being as educated as possible because *your child is worth it*.

- » In the first part, you'll learn about why having a discussion about porn is important, especially when your child has already been exposed to it.
- » In the second part, you'll learn how to prepare well for this discussion.
- » In the third part, you'll read about having the conversation.
- » In the last part, you'll learn about practical next steps to prepare your home.

As parents, we must keep in mind that there are no quick fixes or easy solutions to this kind of situation. The goal of this book is not to “fix your kid,” but to provide you a way of

thinking about growing your relationship with your child as you provide him or her with guidance and formation he or she needs.

This book may take you deeper than you desire to go. It may be very uncomfortable at times. Embrace this. When we settle for quick tips and easy answers, the real underlying problems in life are not addressed.

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Introduction

She sat down to enjoy a cup of coffee and check her email on her iPad. Trying to find a website she visited the day before, she opened the browser's history. Instead, what she found completely shocked her. One after the other, a list of sexually explicit titles of pornographic websites appeared in the history log.

Slightly panicked, but paying careful attention to the details, she noticed these sites were all accessed in the afternoon the day before. Her husband had been at work then, so it wasn't him. Then she remembered letting her 11-year-old son borrow the iPad to play some games. Reality sank in. From what she could tell, her son had spent at least an hour or so glancing through these pages.

The question that plagued her was: **What should she do now?**

This resource will help you answer this question. We will provide practical steps that any Catholic family can implement in their home *right now* regardless of whether a young person is actively looking at pornography or not.

The statistics surrounding porn consumption in young people are shocking. According to one survey conducted at a large, Catholic high school in 2017, 49% of students who completed the survey responded that they seek out porn more than once per week.¹

Distressing as this might seem, your discovery of your child's porn viewing is not unique. These are not uncharted waters. Millions of parents have faced this situation. Millions have wondered how to handle this. Millions more will face this situation in the future. The critical question is: Will they face it well?

You, as a parent or guardian, must know at the outset that finding evidence of your child looking at pornography can be very upsetting, but this is not the end of the story.

Do not panic. Let me say it again – stay calm and do not panic!

There are changes you can make as a family to protect your child from the dangers of pornography.

As a parent, the wisdom you impart and the example you give to your kids at this critical time in their lives has the power to lead them their entire lives. Your wise guidance and example can equip them to not give into sexual temptation and embrace a life of chastity and holiness.

01.

Porn Impacts Children

Reality: Many boys and girls are looking at porn

Porn used to be hard to come by for young people. Kids would have to stumble on a parent's or uncle's "stash" of magazines or video cassettes (or get it from another child who did). Today, this is not the case. The internet has made sexual content available in nearly every home—and to any age. According to a survey of today's college students, more than half of men and a third of women say they first saw pornography before their teenage years.²

It isn't just boys, either. If there ever was a time in our culture when porn was an exclusively male habit, that time is long gone. While it is still generally true that girls are less likely to seek pornography, about a quarter of young girls, on at least

one occasion, will spend 30 consecutive minutes or more viewing pornography online.³

In adulthood, 20-30% of women become regular consumers of pornography or participants in sexually explicit chat rooms.⁴ And girls are actually more likely than boys to become someone else's pornography by sending nude or semi-nude pictures or videos of themselves online.⁵

“This material is more aggressive, more harmful, more violent, more degrading and damaging than any other time in the history of the world. And this generation growing up is dealing with it to an intensity and scale no other generation in the history of the world has ever had to.”

— Clay Olsen, Co-Founder and CEO
of Fight the New Drug⁶

Is it any wonder that when a child or adolescent is directly exposed to pornography, the following effects have been documented?⁷

- » Having sexual intercourse earlier.
- » Lasting negative and traumatic emotional responses to seeing porn.

- » The belief that the best sexual satisfaction is attainable without having affection for one's partner.
- » The belief that being married or having a family are unattractive prospects.
- » An increased risk for developing sexual compulsions and addictive behavior.

If your child is exposed over and over to incorrect information about human sexuality, long before he or she is able to understand this information, the result could be a lifetime of hurt.

Parents Must Act Now

These facts are not presented here just to be shocking, but rather to bring us a healthy dose of reality.

One of the most powerful tools we have when it comes to teaching our children about the beauty of their sexuality in the digital age is conversation. Real, honest, “look them in the eyes” conversations about their deep questions. In the digital age, passive parenting is not an option – the Internet never rests. Parents must engage actively with their children on the deep questions of their hearts even if it's awkward for them and/or you. It's important. The constant flood of

influence that comes through the internet and social media in all of its various forms, along with social pressures from peers and their poor choices make it difficult for a child of God to live a virtuous life.



One exposure [to porn] can create a lifetime of viewing and struggling

And, regrettably, all of this, including internet pornography, is teaching our children how and what to think about sex and marriage. Again, in the digital age, it's not a matter of if your child will see something inappropriate online. It's only a matter of when. Regrettably, at least once a month, 49% of teens stumble across porn.⁸ One exposure can create a lifetime of viewing and struggling.

As parents, the time to act is now. As awkward as talking to our kids about porn is, the cost of not talking about it is too high. Sex is a God-given gift, and we do not want our children to see it cheapened by pornography.

02.

The Stages of Porn Use

If your child has been exposed to porn, your response should be based, in part, on how deeply your child is into porn and how long it has been going on. Keep these stages in mind as you read the rest of this guide.

Stage 1: Experimentation and Curiosity

Most initial porn viewing that happens in childhood, or even the teen years, is born out of curiosity. Boys want to know what the girls look like with no clothes on, and vice versa. Before puberty, it is natural for boys and girls to be curious about gender and the sexual differences. During puberty, as sexual feelings grow, it is also common for boys and girls to be drawn by provocative images online, desiring to see more.

Stage 2: Regular Use for Masturbation

In this stage, your child has gone from curiosity to “using” porn or online chatting for sexual gratification and orgasm. While this stage is more common among teens, younger children can also enter this stage. In this stage, while there may be feelings of shame, the porn use is seen as recreational.

Stage 3: Risky Use

What constitutes “risky use” is not the same for all children. The almost undetectable shift into this stage happens when kids start to seek porn despite the negative consequences. They might stay up late into the night bingeing on porn, losing sleep and the ability to focus during the daytime, only to return to porn the next night. They might start looking at porn in riskier settings (at school, with a parent’s smartphone, when someone could walk in at any moment, when they should be watching a younger sibling, etc.). Getting caught is less of a concern to them, and in fact, the fear of it becomes part of the “high” they get from the experience.

Stage 4: Dependence and Addiction

Masturbating to pornography taps into the neurocircuitry of our brains, signaling the release of dopamine, serotonin, opiates, oxytocin, and other hormones and neurotransmitters.

This hormonal cocktail is part of our body's natural response to sexual activity, but when combined with graphic porn, the brain experiences a sexual "high" at unnatural levels. Those who have developed an addictive relationship to pornography experience an overwhelming craving for porn, seemingly uncontrollable sexual fantasies, and even withdrawal symptoms. The types of porn that used to satisfy no longer do; harder and more graphic pornography is sought.

There are no hard lines between these stages, but they exist on a continuum.

03.

Preparing to Talk

Realizing your child has been accessing porn repeatedly can be frightening, upsetting, and unnerving, but with some preparation, you can have an informed and productive discussion with your child about it.

Our conversations with our children are to direct them to real love. The goal is to help them see their bodies as beautiful gifts to offer and not objects to be used in the way that internet pornography teaches. Online influences, especially pornography, tell kids many horrible lies. The millions of pornographic images and videos available online and in apps kids use daily communicate the lies that sex can be casual and that people are objects to be used and discarded.

These exact same electronic devices that we depend on as parents to stay in touch and have a sense of safety and

security with our children are the very same devices that give our children a doorway into pornified content that diminishes innocence, challenges holiness and confuses relationships, sometimes for a lifetime.



Our conversations with our children are to direct them to real love

If at all possible, delay having the conversation with them for a day. If you find out on Tuesday that your child has accessed pornography, there's no harm in waiting until Thursday or Friday to talk with them. You need time to process what you need to say and how you need to say it.

Do Your Homework

You should know as much as you possibly can about your child's porn viewing experiences before you have the conversation.

Check the browsing history of any internet device in the home. If you have multiple browsers (like Firefox, Internet Explorer, Safari, Chrome, etc.), open them all and access the history. Look back several weeks, or even months if you continue to find evidence of porn viewing. Take note of the types of sites that were accessed. Check any browsing apps on mobile devices as well.

If the history logs on these internet browsers appear to be blank, this is an indication that someone has tampered with the data. This might have been your child, which means they are not only savvy enough to cover their tracks, but also desire not to be caught. Among teens this is very common today. According to a recent survey, 71% of teens have done something to hide their online behavior from their parents.⁹



It is relatively easy to use internet browsers in “incognito” mode (sometimes called “private browsing”). This is a setting that can be easily turned on and off, giving the user the power to hide all their Internet activity from the history logs.

Use a browser’s “autofill” feature to give you some hints about what search terms were used. Often, previously searched terms will appear as you start to type in the search bar. Walk through the alphabet, typing a couple letters at a time, and see what search terms may have been used.

Perhaps your daughter was searching for “what is sex.” Perhaps your son has a crush on a cheerleader at school, so he typed in “cheerleader.” Perhaps your child saw a billboard for Hooters and looked it up. Perhaps your child heard a sexual word at school that they wanted to know

about. Or maybe your child has been into porn or erotic chatting for a while, and he or she is searching for more graphic terms.

If your child has a smartphone or tablet, review all the installed apps. Some apps may be disguised as innocent apps (an app labeled “Calculator!” may actually be for trading porn, for example). Other apps, such as Instagram and Snapchat, contain back doors to sexually explicit images. Make sure you set up restrictions to prevent installing apps! Use iPhone®’s built-in Screen Time settings. On Android™, install an app locker (the Covenant Eyes app contains one).

The goal of this knowledge is not to say “Gotcha!” When you question your child about what they were looking at and why, you are likely to hear the phrase like, “I don’t know,” a couple dozen times. Having this conversation will probably be very difficult for your son or daughter. The more information you can volunteer, the less of a burden he or she will have explaining everything to you from start to finish. “I noticed you were searching for___,” you might say. “What made you curious about that?”

Talk It Through

If you are married, talk with your spouse about the situation. Listen to one another’s perspectives.

If you have a trusted mentor or priest you can speak with, confide in them about the problem. Listen to how they might

approach the situation. It goes without saying, these are people you need to be able to trust not to gossip about this information with others.

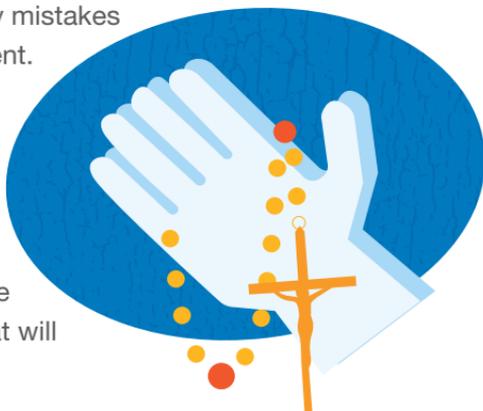
As you listen to others, take time to “rehearse” the thoughts going through your mind out loud. Get feedback from others about what you say and your tone.

If you find yourself bewildered by what your child is looking at (i.e. a feeling of “I just don’t get why my child likes looking at this stuff”), try to find someone who can relate to this area of temptation.

Pray About It

The most important thing you can do to prepare is to ask God to give you compassion for your child. If your gut instinct is fear, ask God to take away your timidity. If your gut instinct is a sense of parental failure or shame, ask God to instill in you a deeper sense of trust that His love and mercy is greater than any mistakes you have made as a parent. If you are angry, ask God to fill you with a deep sense of compassion for your child.

Pray that God will change your attitude into one that will



not distance your son or daughter from you or the Lord. Go to Mass and offer your child and the conversation as your sole intention. You may also want to consider participating in the Sacrament of Reconciliation as you prepare for the first conversation with your child.

Brace Yourself For More Than One Conversation

The end goal is not having one conversation with your child but maintaining a type of relationship with your son or daughter that communicates safety and acceptance. This paves the way for future conversations.

Since there is a lot that can be said about pornography and sexuality, the material in the pages that follow might need to be stretched over several conversations.

Remember: Tone Is Everything

Well, almost everything. Certainly, what you say to your son or daughter is important, but how you say it will be critical. It is likely that your child or teenager is experiencing some fear, uncertainty, shame, or guilt about having viewed pornography. It is very important that in your conversations with him or her you do not approach the situation with sharp criticism or an overbearing sense of fear, bewilderment, or shame.

04.

How to Talk Through It

Open the Dialogue

Don't surprise your child or teen with this conversation. Talk to your son or daughter beforehand. Say, "I notice you don't have anything on your schedule on (planned date), so there are a few things I want to talk to you about. I need some of your time."

When you begin the conversation, start with what you know. Tell the story of the discovery of the evidence and why you believe he or she is the one who was looking at the sexual content.

Give him or her time to respond. Ask if your observations are correct.

The point of this step is to feed them whatever you know to help them begin talking. They may admit to everything and talk for quite a while. They may be very silent, unsure of what to say. Don't feel the pressure to make them say anything specific. This step is just about helping them to open up.



What if they deny it?

Stay calm. Inevitably, some children or teens will respond by lying, denying they are the ones who saw the sexual images.

If this happens, it is important not to lose sight of the bigger goal. This is a teachable moment between you and your child. It is a time for you to impress on him or her important lessons about human sexuality. It is a time to build your relationship and keep the door open for future discussions.

Don't become easily angered if you believe they are lying to you. Remember, minimizing or denying something is not an *adolescent* response to failure and sin—it is a *human* response. It is what we all tend to do. Recognize, this is how you might respond if you were the one in the hot seat.

Don't call him or her a liar. It's important not to make identity statements. Ask your son or daughter who they think

accessed the websites. Shift your approach and model vulnerability for them. Talk about a time in your life when you were exposed to porn or when your sexual curiosities got the best of you. You might say something like this: “I wanted to ask you about this because I know how tempting this stuff can be. When I was a child/teenager...”

If you suspect your child is in the curiosity phase, talk about how you were curious when you were young and how tempting it was to search for answers, sometimes in the wrong places. If you suspect your child is past the curiosity stages and is masturbating to pornography or watching it habitually, talk about how easy it was for you to be tempted to lust and act upon it.

The goal is to help them understand that you are a safe person in whom to confide. If they continue to deny it, don't feel a need to press them to tell the truth. Use it as an opportunity to tell them that if they ever see pornography, they can talk to you about it. If they ever are curious about sex, they can ask you.

Curious or “using”?

Your child or teen may not have an accurate grasp of their involvement with porn, but it is worth it to ask them. Say, “How many times do you think you've looked for these kinds of pictures or videos online?” They will likely not be able to answer, so give them some options: “Would you say you've

been looking at this stuff for the last month or longer than that?” “How many times have you seen it in the last week or two?”

For some children, especially younger children, they will be in the stage of experimentation and curiosity. For others, they will be regularly using porn to masturbate, and they may have even progressed from that stage to something akin to an addiction (see chapter 2, “Stages of Porn Involvement”).

Other Sexual Experiences?

Depending on the nature of the conversation and what is being shared, this is the time to ask about other sexual experiences. You might start with asking, “Have you ever done anything in real life—like what you’ve seen in these images or videos?”

Perhaps your son or daughter has been sexually active, by choice, through coercion, or even by force. Ask them specifics one at a time, from the most benign to the most severe.

- » “Have you ever kissed anyone on the mouth?”

- » “Have you ever touched someone else’s private areas?”

- » “Has anyone ever asked you to get naked in front of them?”

- » “Have you ever had sex?”
- » “Has anyone ever touched you or forced you to touch their private areas?”

Sadly, some children or teens are first exposed to pornography in a sexually abusive setting. An abuser might show them pornography—even child pornography—and this can lead victims to seek more pornography due to their trauma.

Own Up to Your Own Shortcomings

To someone in the curiosity phase, you might say, “These naked pictures and videos are all over the Internet, and I should have talked to you about them before today. I am sorry I didn’t help you with this earlier. What I should have said to you before is that if you see any images online that make you uncomfortable or anything that cause you to ask questions, you can always come to me. I want to hear your questions. I want to see if I can answer them. I don’t want you to have to learn answers from people who are trying to put bad stuff out there.”

Listen. Really Listen.

No matter what, don’t lose sight of the person sitting across from you. When you ask him or her a question, don’t be quick

to fill the awkward silence with your voice. Give your son or daughter time to respond. There's likely to be some awkward silence, so constantly remind yourself to hold your tongue and give your child space to talk. Listen with a compassionate heart. Don't use silence as a means to "glare down" at your child in disappointment. Let your eyes communicate tenderness.

Meet your child or teen exactly where he or she is. You've done your homework. You are equipped with at least some information about what your son or daughter has seen or done online. As more information is divulged, listen for questions, curiosities, or emotions in what your child says or the tone of his or her voice.

Remember: this conversation is not ultimately about porn; it is about you getting to know your child. This initial conversation is about unearthing your child's motivations for viewing pornography. As you listen, try to pick up on any fears, lust, insecurities, questions, guilt, or shame you see in your son or daughter.

Before you launch into anything about pornography itself (Step 4), get your child talking about what he or she found tempting, interesting, or even enjoyable about it. Don't act disgusted or shocked by what your child or teen says, even if your child seems unremorseful about looking at porn. Be genuinely curious. Ask him or her what was confusing about it.

Encourage openness whenever possible. If he or she admits to something, even something small, praise your son or daughter for the honesty. Say, “Not many people would be willing to talk about this. I love how honest you are being right now.”

Listen with your face. Look your child in the eye. Respond with affirming words. Repeat phrases your son or daughter uses, showing you really are hearing what is said.

Be a great listener and don't lose sight of the big picture.

05.

Sex is God's Good Idea

Critical to the effectiveness of this conversation is your own openness. The more this sounds like a lecture, the less receptive your child or teen will likely be. The more you use personal examples from your own life, and the more transparent you are, the less likely he or she will be to shut down emotionally.

What does transparency look like? Don't be afraid to share the temptations you faced or still face when it comes to sexual sin. Don't shy away from statements like, "When I was growing up, I remember how difficult it was for me when..." or "The tough part for me with this is..." or "I didn't always get this right growing up."

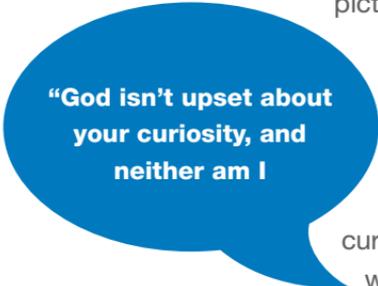
Example Conversations About Different Themes – Younger Children

The body is an amazing creation.

“The human body is a beautiful thing. When human beings were created, God made us male and female, just like it says at the beginning of Genesis. We are made in the image and likeness of God, which means everything about us, inside and out, reflects the God who made us. It is perfectly normal to want to know what the human body looks like, because just as Psalm 139:14 says, we are wonderfully made.”

Nakedness is meant to be a private thing.

“The human body is also private. We shouldn’t go around the neighborhood, peeking in people’s windows, trying to see if they are getting undressed, right? That’s because the human body is so special, we wouldn’t want to show it off to just anyone. Husbands and wives see each other naked, but they don’t get naked in front of anyone else. We also shouldn’t look at pictures of naked people. The people taking those pictures are taking something very special—an image of a naked body—and showing it off for the whole world to see.”



“God isn’t upset about your curiosity, and neither am I

“God isn’t upset about your curiosity, and neither am I. But God wants us to guard our eyes when

we see images of people who don't have clothes on or who are almost naked, because He made us and the people in the images for something so much greater: love. We should turn our eyes away and think, 'Nakedness is a private thing. I'm going to look away.'

My job is to help you understand how God made us.

"It is great that you want to know more about the human body, but I don't want you to seek those answers on the computer [or TV or wherever the pornography was seen]. I'm happy to talk to you any time if you have questions about our bodies, what it looks like, or the way it works."

It's okay to feel embarrassed. God isn't ashamed of you and neither am I!

"It's OK to cry. I know you're embarrassed. I also know you're sad you've been struggling with this alone. You haven't felt free to share this with me and possibly not with God. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you when you needed me. You said you knew it was wrong, but you did it anyway and that made you even sadder."

"This sorrow is normal and is even a good thing because it moves us to want to do better next time. I have struggled with sexual sins too. I found forgiveness, peace, and grace to grow and overcome my struggles by going to Confession (Sacrament of Reconciliation). This sacrament takes away our sadness and we ask for forgiveness...we also have daily prayer to strengthen us."

Example Conversations About Different Themes – Older Children

Sexual arousal feels good and it should.

“Your attraction to the opposite sex is very good and normal. God designed you that way. Wanting to experience sexual pleasure is also good and normal.”

“In Sacred Scripture, God said that husbands and wives should enjoy one another. In the Song of Songs, the woman sings about the pleasure of having sex with her husband: ‘Let him kiss me with kisses of his mouth, for your love is better than wine’ (Song of Songs 1:2). God has made sexual experience very pleasurable. The desire you feel when you look at porn is part of a drive God gave you, and it is an important part of who you are, but is not helpful to you and your growth as a Christian.”

You’re becoming a man/woman and that’s good.

“Your body has been going through a lot of changes. Your body is becoming less like a child’s and more like that of a man/woman. Sometimes this is very confusing and frustrating, I know. But remember, there’s a purpose to this.”

“You can enjoy knowing that God is changing your body and your mind so you can serve Him in the future as an adult leader. Just like Jesus when He was a young teen, you are growing in wisdom and age (Luke 2:52). As you mature as a man/woman, you can serve God as a loving older brother/

sister to others, and some day as a father mother to others (1 Timothy 5:1-2).”

“The changes in your body are preparing you for sex when (and if) you get married. The Bible says that as you have sex with someone over the course of your life, you ‘become one body’ with him/her (Genesis 2:24)—you are united to that person in a very intimate way. Your changes also mean your body is maturing to be able to create children, just as God calls us to do in Genesis 1:28.”

Burning passion is right but not right now.

“Your maleness/femaleness is a God-given quality, and your sexual attraction is a God-given drive. But when we allow passions to overtake us in our fantasies, this is called lust. Jesus said if we look at someone with lustful intent, we are committing adultery in our hearts (Matthew 5:27-28).”

“It is like a fire. We love sitting in a living room with a fire in the fireplace. But if we take that same fire and put it in the middle of the floor, it could burn the house down. That’s the way sexual passion is. There’s a fitting place to start that fire—in the setting of marriage—but if you stir up that passion outside of marriage, it only ends up hurting you and others.”

“Sexual passion is designed to create oneness with a person. This kind of oneness should only be experienced when you are totally united to a person in the lifelong commitment of marriage. Marriage is the fireplace where sex warms and blesses our lives.”



“Until then, you shouldn’t *deny* you have this passion inside you. Instead, *use* it to ‘build your fireplace.’ Work to become the kind of man/woman who can serve and love someone else as a husband/wife. Get wisdom from me and other adults about how to become a holy man/woman with healthy sexual desires. Learn the best time and way to start dating or get married.”

Sex on the screen only cheapens the goodness of sex.

“There are many reasons why using porn is sinful.”

“First, porn is *selfish*; sex is *giving*. When you watch porn, you get to imagine that you are the star of the show. You get to imagine yourself being with beautiful men/women or being an attractive man/woman. You are the focus of their attention

in the fantasy. But having sex in a loving manner is about both receiving and giving pleasure. You don't want to train your mind to love masturbation more than sex with a real person. You don't want to train your mind to see the opposite sex as a thing to be used rather than a person to be loved."

"Second, porn bonds you to an *image*; sex bonds you with a *person*. You are physically and emotionally wired for intimacy. That's why God made sex so pleasurable, because it bonds a man and woman together. But when we lust after pornography, we are bonding to those images, not to a person."

"The people in porn are all playing a part. They are actors and actresses in a movie. Then the films are edited to take out all the boring parts and make the actors look their best. All the hormones that surge through your brain when you watch porn or fantasize about sex are the same hormones you experience when you have sex. Just like sex is designed by God to help you bond with your husband/wife, when you masturbate to porn you are bonding with the images of people on the screen. When the time comes to get married, what if your husband/wife doesn't look or act like all the scenes you've seen in pornography? No person is as clickable and customizable as a person on a screen. This only takes away your enjoyment of sex in the future."

"Third, porn is *abusive*; marital sex is *nourishing*. What you don't see when you watch pornography is what it's like when

the camera stops recording. Often, men and women in porn don't like the work they do. They have to take drugs and alcohol just to be able to have sex on screen. Many times, the men and women were abused when they were young, and they continue to be used and abused in the industry. By watching pornography, we only give incentive to those who abuse men and women to keep doing it. Porn stars are paid to make their lives look fun and glamorous, but many of them are dying on the inside.”

“Fourth, porn *dishonors* God; marital sex *honors* Him. God has told us His will for us is holiness and to refrain from immorality (1 Thessalonians 4:3). God will judge the immoral because He wants the marriage bed kept pure (Hebrews 13:4). As a young man/woman of faith, don't dishonor God with your body by filling your mind with sinful images.”

Bottom Line: Communicate God's Goodness

You want your child or teen to stop using porn. Fair enough. But remember what inspires real repentance in a person: “the *kindness* of God [is to] lead you to repentance” (Romans 2:4, italics added).

Yes, your child may be guilty of selfish fantasy and lust. Yes, if he or she has been lusting after pornographic images, your child or teen has sinned against God, his or her neighbor, and

against his or her own body. But God is rich in “kindness, forbearance and patience” (Romans 2:4). A merciful God loves us.

In every law He gives, He gives it not only for His honor but for our good:

“Now, therefore, Israel, what does the LORD, your God, ask of you but to fear the LORD, your God, to follow in all his ways, to love and serve the LORD, your God, with your whole heart and with your whole being, to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD that I am commanding you today *for your own well-being?*”

– Deuteronomy 10:12-13 (italics added)

God does not simply want your child to avoid pornography. In His kindness, He is pointing your child toward something far better—becoming a mature man or woman of God, the true meaning of life, love, sex and marriage, loving others well, freely pursuing his or her vocation and ultimately one day spending eternal life in Heaven!

06.

It Starts at Home

As you move forward, remember that raising your child to be responsible and virtuous on the internet is not a quick process. It is ongoing. In these weeks and years ahead, remember that sometimes the most practical steps are the most effective. A few are explained below.

An Enlightening Survey

In 2016, a large United States Catholic high school anonymously surveyed its male students on pornography use (even though pornography isn't only a male issue).

The survey asked several questions, including: “How often do you view pornography?” “What device do you most use for viewing?” and “What feelings do you usually experience before viewing porn?”¹⁰

What the survey brought to light is that a high percentage of pornography consumption by high school students happens on smartphones, in the bedroom, and when they are bored. Here are the actual statistics:

- » 57% of the high school students surveyed view pornography on their phones
- » 61% look at pornography in their bedrooms
- » 48% consume pornography when they are bored

The survey also showed that 88% of the students said they intentionally viewed pornography between the ages of 10-15 years old.

In 2016, the Barna Group published its study *The Porn Phenomenon: The Impact of Pornography in the Digital Age*, wherein it states that 88% of most *teens* (child ages 13-17) have a phone and 82% of teens sleep with their phone in their bedroom. Further, the survey explains that 48% (nearly half) of *preteens* (children ages 9-12) have a phone, and of those, most (72%) sleep with their phone in their bedroom.¹¹

Looking at these two studies together, a few things stand out. Almost every teen sleeps with their phone in the bedroom — but about half of all porn use happens when teens are bored and playing on their phones in their bedrooms. Thankfully, these are things parents can control.

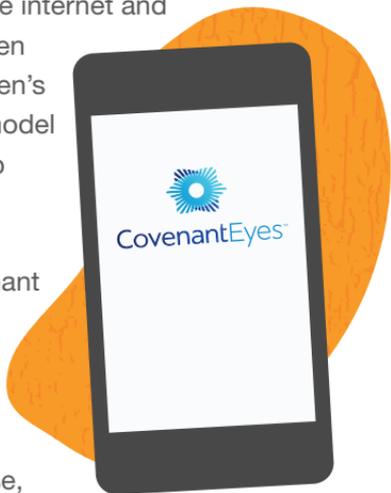
Key Take-Aways from the Survey

If you're like the majority of parents, you've chosen to provide your children with a smartphone and internet access. Sometimes, this decision is made without fully understanding all of the ways in which our children can access pornography. But the following tips can help limit your child's exposure to inappropriate content.

Lead by example

Even more important than the language of *words* that dads and moms give to their sons and daughters, the language of the *body*—their bodily actions and their example—matters even more. Parents are models and examples for them. Parents influence their children at every level. So why then wouldn't parents' use of the internet and pornography impact their children and most likely even their children's friends? Parents need to be a model of internet accountability to help their children see the value of it.

As a first step, download Covenant Eyes to all devices you, as the parent, use on a regular basis. Find others to be your Accountability Partners as well. These might include your spouse,



but they can also include any trusted friends or colleagues. These should be people you trust to receive Accountability Reports of your own activity on your computer and phone.

Why is this critical? Children and especially teens need to know they are not being targeted because they are kids. Accountability is valuable for everyone. This is ultimately something you hope they will continue to use into their adulthood. Show them how valuable it is by starting with yourself.



Show them how valuable [accountability] is by starting with yourself.

Protect your family's devices

Use parental controls, and if a device doesn't provide or allow parental controls to be downloaded, don't buy it for them. As another layer of protection, use Covenant Eyes on your family's smartphones, tablets, and computers.

No smartphones, tablets, computers, or TVs in the bedroom

Keep computers in an open room. Don't allow devices in your children's bedrooms that can access the internet or cable.

Talk to your children

I think we've made this abundantly clear throughout this resource.

Use the regular accountability reports from Covenant Eyes to strike up good conversations. The aim is to manage small issues before they become big problems. Parents have the biggest influence on their kids' behaviors—more than their friends, school, or parish church. Put that influence to use. Set aside times to talk to your kids about their God-given sexuality. Also, be prepared to talk to your child or teen on the fly when opportunities present themselves. Talking isn't preaching. Be willing to listen, too.

Give your kids responsibilities and encourage life-giving hobbies

It's more and more common that our young people aren't given responsibilities at home or in the broader life of the community. God has given them many gifts to use and share, so give them the opportunity! Both young and teenage children can really thrive when given responsibilities like folding clothes, drying the dishes, mowing, and meal planning or helping cook once a week.

Also, children are just bursting with energy and ways to be creative. Pay attention to what they enjoy and what comes naturally to them and cultivate that in the child. Are they

good at drawing? How about the guitar? Does your son enjoy wood working? Maybe your daughter likes taking photographs? Encourage growth in these areas and other hobbies they have interest in. This will get them away from the TV and smartphone, which decreases their likelihood of ongoing use of pornography.

Again, in the digital age, it's not a matter of *if* your child will see something inappropriate online. It's only a matter of *when*. Although no plan is 100% safe, we believe that following the steps above will significantly decrease the opportunities for our pornographic culture to have undue influence on the hearts and minds of your children. Don't give the culture the opportunity to take away your role as the first educator and formator of your children. With the guidance of the Catholic Church, it is your role, privilege, responsibility and joy as a parent to be the first and primary educator (CCC 2223) of your child and this includes teaching them God's plan for human love and sexuality in a way that it can be integrated and lived out.

Conclusion

When we are caught or stuck in certain sins, we are kept from experiencing the deepest part of ourselves. It's like layers of muck, smothering the real you, so you can't experience the truth of yourself or the fullness of who God has created you to be.¹²

Pope Saint John Paul II explains that when a person for the first time goes against temptation (when we are used to giving in), the person experiences himself or herself as a person, he or she experiences true freedom. For example, a married man who doesn't even know he is lusting after his own wife—he's not conscious of it because of the sin of lust and the layers of muck that is a result of sin. But, once he opens himself to the Holy Spirit in the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the Eucharist, he is able to have a full body-to-body and thus person-to-person encounter with his wife; he *experiences* loving and being loved in a way that was inaccessible previously.¹³

Pornography consumption feeds the sin of lust. It is one of the sins that keeps us from the fullness of ourselves and ultimately from who God created us to be.

Both pornography and Jesus appeal to the deepest longings in our hearts. One offers bondage. But only one offers freedom. That one is Jesus.

God loves us just as we are. Even in our shame, our sin, our discouragement, etc. But He loves us too much to leave us there. The Christian life is about character and virtue; not about our talents and gifts, because no matter how good we are at something, how skilled we are in a particular class, sport or art, every one of us is going to fail—to fall to sin in our lives. It's not *if* we sin, but *when* we sin and how we respond in those times.

Parents have a unique and irreplaceable role in forming their children in these truths. This formation goes well beyond books and religion classes. To build a family culture of virtue and holiness, children must have their parents' guidance and example to know how to authentically respond to today's pornified culture and live the life of a Christian disciple in the here and now and as they grow into adulthood.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q. Should this all take place in one discussion?

A. The discussion about porn can be done in one sitting. Of course, if your child volunteers more personal information or asks a lot of good questions, you might need to postpone parts of this conversation for a later date. Having a really good discussion that needs to be split up due to time constraints is not a problem; it's very encouraging.

If you do have to postpone parts of this conversation, make sure to put it on your personal calendar so you don't let the opportunity slip away.

If you are unaccustomed to sitting alone with your child for times of instruction or discussion, this conversation will seem like an uncomfortable stretch, but it is a necessary one. If your tone is compassionate, if you are transparent and personal, and if you listen well, the conversation will seem much less like a lecture.

Keep in mind, this should be the first of many discussions about sex, sexuality, intimacy, and lust. This discussion will only help to set a pace for future conversations. This another benefit of using accountability software—when Covenant Eyes delivers a regular report of everything your child

or teen sees online, it reminds you to talk with him or her about the temptations found on the internet.

Q. What if my child emotionally shuts down during the discussion?

A. Don't press the matter. If they seem completely closed to the conversation, they may just be embarrassed. During Steps 1 to 3, if you notice your child shutting down, you might choose to cut the conversation short until later.

Say something like, "I can see this is very uncomfortable for you right now, so I don't want to press this today. Instead, let's end this discussion for the day. But I do want to finish talking to you about this soon.

"Before we go, I want you to understand something: Both God and I love you very much and we don't want anything to hurt you. You may not want to talk about this with me, but if we ignore this, I would be letting you go down a dark path that can have terrible consequences. I want to talk to you about this because I want the best for you."

Q. Is there merit to any sort of punishment for looking at porn?

A. This is a complicated question. As a general rule, if this is the first discussion about pornography, avoid punishments. Rather, take responsibility for not preparing your son or daughter adequately. Don't place all the blame on him or her.

Yes, your child may feel guilty for looking at porn, and he or she may have intuitively known that looking at it was wrong. Affirm this gut response in their conscience as a good reaction. Though obscured by sin, God's law is written on hearts of all people (Romans 2:15), so be encouraged if they show signs of guilt.

But this area of disobedience is surrounded by an enormous amount of shame today. In these early conversations, your primary goal is to keep the lines of communication open and to foster a sense of comfort in talking about this topic. Don't compound this shame with immediate punishment.

Only when your child has breached specific household rules and expectations should punishment come into play. *Where there is clear defiance after clear discussion*, only then are consequences fitting.

Q. What if my child approached me?

A. This is the ace in the hole. Praise your child for being brave and telling you about this. Express how proud you are of them for taking that step, even though it must have been uncomfortable.

Q. How much of my own sexual history should I share with them?

A. Authenticity and transparency with your child or teen is key. You are not only speaking to your son or daughter as a

parent, but as a fellow sinner. Your child needs to know he or she is not alone in temptation. You should not speak as one “above temptation.” Appropriate disclosure is important.

Contrary to popular belief, by sharing our weaknesses, we are not giving license to our kids to make the same mistakes we did. We are not the standard for our kids. Christ is the only standard of perfection.

Still, use discretion when talking to your son or daughter. Your child is not your accountability partner who needs to know all the gory details of your struggle. Keep your sharing relevant to the issue at hand. A parent doesn’t need to talk about all the kinds of porn they have seen, all the people they have slept with, all the erotic novels read, or how many times they visited a strip club.

If you used to watch porn, it is appropriate to say so, and it is appropriate to talk about how difficult it was for you. But in the end, the focus should be on how God, in His love and mercy, has forgiven and transformed you. You want to impress on your son or daughter your desire for a pure heart and a pure marriage and that pornography is not the answer.

Q. Should mom or dad do this talk?

A. You know your child best, but generally, if it is your son you are concerned about, dad should talk about it, and if it is your daughter, mom should talk about it. There are enough

nuances to male and female sexuality that dads and moms might be more effective speaking to the same-gendered child.

If you are a single parent speaking to an opposite sex child, don't let this throw you for a loop. While preparing for this talk, use an opposite sex friend as a sounding board to help you get a grasp on what you need to say.

Q. Should I use the word “porn” when I talk to my child?

A. Generally speaking, the words “porn” or “pornography” are appropriate, especially if the child is older. “Pornography” is a word he or she will hear at some point in the future, if not already. For younger children, you can use more descriptive terms like “naked pictures” or “videos of naked people.”

If you do use the word “porn,” don't expect your child or teen to know what it is. It should be clear from how you use the word what you are talking about.

Q. Won't this conversation awaken more sexual curiosity in them?

A. The fact that your child/teen has been exposed to porn has already provoked a curiosity about sexual matters. This is not the time to hold back because you are afraid of speaking too soon. Your son or daughter needs your wisdom, not your silence.

Dr. Margaret Stager from Case Western Reserve wisely says that “too much too soon” is a rare circumstance in today’s world. The opposite extreme—your children not knowing your values as they pertain to sex—is far more common and far more dangerous.

“Because of the society we live in,” she writes, “the consequences of avoiding these conversations far outweigh the consequences of giving too much information too soon.”¹⁴

And there is good news in these conversations! A 2016 study contrasted users of Covenant Eyes Accountability with those who used only filtering software. It found that kids who were raised to have conversations about accountability were much less likely to seek out pornography. The data proves that **accountable families who take the spiritual formation of their children seriously are successful in passing on their values to the next generation.**¹⁵

Q. What if I’ve never spoken with my child about anything sexual?

A. If this is true, then this conversation will be making up for a lot of lost time. It is best to admit this to your child: “I should have been talking to you a lot sooner about these matters. I apologize for not being prepared.”

From infancy, children should grow up in a home where sexuality and gender differences are not taboo subjects.

In their earliest years, use the correct names for body parts. Even young children, if they are attentive and can understand basic terminology, are old enough to be taught about the acts of sex as well as the value you place on marriage and intimacy. Every child is different, in terms of maturity and attention span, but there is nothing wrong with a young boy or girl knowing what sexual intercourse is when framed around Christian values.

Ideally, children should grow up in a home where they receive many small conversations about sexuality, procreation, intimacy, love, and how we should guard our eyes and hearts from inappropriate images and relationships. Then when they are developing as preteens or adolescents, conversations about their sexual development seem far more natural.

You may be playing catch-up as a parent, but it is better to start now rather than never. The most important thing you can do as a parent is to get over your own insecurities of talking about sex around your children (they will see insecurity coming from a mile away).

And remember, God's grace is bigger than your parenting oversights. Your mistakes are opportunities for God to work.

Q. What if my child/teen has been to sexual chat rooms?

A. Chat rooms are online locations where conversations take place between individuals who often do not know one another in "real life." Sometimes, chat rooms are forums for

all manner of sexual discussion. In fact, some chat rooms are dedicated to erotic conversations.

Many erotic chats are text-based, but webcams also provide a means to chat through live video.

Aside from the lust-driven conversations, chat rooms are dangerous for multiple reasons. First, children who use them are becoming someone else's pornography. Individuals who view or capture pictures and videos of children in sexually provocative situations are consuming child pornography, which is crime in many nations of the world.

Second, erotic images are difficult—even impossible—to erase once they are in another person's hands. Some children's and teens' reputations have been ruined by just one image let loose online. Children need to be warned about this.

Third, erotic images or conversations can be later used as blackmail. While it is rare, there have been many cases where adults or teens blackmailed others using the videos or photos sent to them online.

Fourth, and most disturbing, are the kinds of relationships that can be forged online. Teens who meet adults on the internet can develop deep emotional attachments. Adults who meet teens online often use chat rooms or social networks to introduce themselves, and through a slow

process of “grooming,” the adult can endear himself to a teenager, securing that teen’s trust and friendship. By exploiting common teenage vulnerabilities, predators can manipulate teens online, making them feel “special,” slowly introducing sexual topics into conversations, whittling down that teen’s defenses. Finally, the adult invites the teenager to meet him offline. In the vast majority of cases, when the teen finally meets with the adult, these are not instances of abduction. Rather, in most cases the victim willingly meets with the adult for sexual purposes on more than one occasion and would even describe him/herself as friends with or “in love” with the predator.¹⁶

If you notice your child or teen venturing into chat rooms, these are important facts to mention.

Q. If my child has been masturbating to porn, how should I talk about the issue of masturbation with him/her?

A. This might be better for a separate discussion that follows on the heels of a discussion about porn. To a child you suspect is using pornography for masturbation, you might say, “I should have talked to you about pornography long before today. I am sorry I didn’t. I know that watching images like this can really stir sexual desire in you. But I should have talked to you more about these kinds of desires before this. I apologize.”

“When you watch porn and if you also masturbate, both actions hurt you. It teaches you to close in on yourself, to focus on your own desires. It ultimately teaches you to be selfish, not how to give a free, total, faithful, fruitful gift of yourself to another in marriage, which is what sexual climax was created for.”

Create in Me a Clean Heart: A Pastoral Response to Pornography states: “Pornography use is connected with or can lead to [...] masturbation. Masturbation, which is deliberate, erotic stimulation often to the point of orgasm, commonly occurs together with pornography use. While popular culture largely sees it as acceptable, masturbation is always gravely contrary to chastity and the dignity of one’s body. Like other sins against chastity, it seeks sexual pleasure outside of the mutual self-giving and fruitful intimacy of spouses in marriage, in this case, even outside of any relationship at all. In addition, engaging in masturbation has powerful neurological effects that can make it into a highly addictive behavior.”¹⁷

Fantasizing about sex to achieve orgasm is problematic for many of the same reasons that porn is problematic. If your child understands why pornography should be avoided, they can also naturally understand why sexual fantasy should be avoided.

Masturbation is fruit from a rotten tree.

For more on what the Catholic Church teaches regarding masturbation, please see:

- » *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2352
- » *What's Wrong with Masturbation?* <https://chastity.com/qa/whats-wrong-with-masturbation-i-think-of-it-as-getting-rid-of-your-temptations-without-leading-anyone-into-sin/>

Q. What if my child is addicted?

A. If you discover your child has developed a habit of looking at porn, or even something that looks like a full-blown “addiction,” ask for help. You may not feel equipped to handle this situation, and that’s okay. When habitual sin has taken over our lives, we often need help from experts to guide and restore us.

What drives an addiction to pornography? Certainly, there is a biological component at play. Through overexposure to pornography, a person’s brain releases a rush of hormones and neurotransmitters, and in some cases, these are similar to the chemicals released during the use of illegal drugs. A drug addict and porn addict are similar in that both, in a sense, are addicted to the high their brains produce. Sin doesn’t just affect our mind. It also affects our bodies and brains.

Therefore, like other addictions, there are methods that are helpful for allowing a person to “detox.” A good counselor can help you and your child.

Addiction to pornography is also a matter of the core desires of the heart. Pornography is often not a stand-alone issue, but is a symptom of much deeper, more hidden struggles.

For instance:

- » A boy might live his young life feeling rejected and inadequate, so instead of turning to parents and God, he turns to the fantasy world of porn to feel accepted by the women on the screen who never tell him no.
- » A young woman might struggle with a deep insecurity about her body-image, so instead of turning to parents and God for her sense of worth and identity, she turns to the fantasy world of porn to make her feel desirable.
- » Teens might desire to be in romantic relationships, but they fear the vulnerability of getting close to someone else. Instead of trusting in God to work through their relationships—even their failed relationships—they turn to the “safe” digital world of porn where they can feel “connected” to images that don’t require them to be vulnerable.

Of course, other traumatic circumstances can also cause teens to turn to porn as a refuge—divorce, family dysfunction, abuse, and many other problems.

There are many underlying sins and issues that might turn a young boy or girl to pornography, but once children are using porn habitually, it is no longer mere curiosity that is driving their behavior. They are getting wrapped up in “the story” pornography is telling them, the fantasy world where they can escape and “feel right,” if only for a brief moment.

Unpacking these underlying sins and beliefs should likely be handled by a skilled counselor or priest who has experience in this area.

Q. What if I discover my child/teen has been sexually abused?

A. Sadly, child sexual abuse is common today. Conservative estimates say 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 20 boys are victims of sexual abuse. Children are most vulnerable between the ages of 7 and 13.¹⁸

Some sex abuse victims seek out pornography, not out of sexual curiosity or lust, but triggered by the sexual trauma itself. If your child is victim of sexual abuse, this must be dealt with first before concerns about pornography are addressed. If your child tells you about an episode or many episodes of abuse, set aside any agenda you have about coaching them on sexuality or pornography. Respond

with compassion and tenderness, affirm that the abuse was not their fault, and immediately seek out professional help for your child. Sexual abuse must be reported to law enforcement.



THEIR PROTECTION IS IN YOUR HANDS

Protect Your Family from Online Pornography

Parents today face increasing challenges in protecting their children's innocence. Pornography can enter the home through a variety of doors. Covenant Eyes Screen Accountability™ and Filtering helps parents monitor digital doors and teach their children to use technology well. While this could be an overwhelming task, Covenant Eyes has the resources to help you be the parent your children need.

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Resources

Clean Hearts Online

Clean Hearts Online is an educational website that provides resources **for clergy, parents, educators, and even those who struggle with pornography**. Available content includes video courses, online certification, information regarding local diocesan training workshops, local counselors and more.

cleanheart.online/

The Chastity Project

Chastity Project is a ministry of Jason and Crystalina Evert that promotes the virtue of chastity through seminars, resources, clubs, and social media.

<http://chastityproject.com>

Protect Young Eyes

Protect Young Eyes uses a constantly updated website and engaging, in-person presentations to educate concerned, but busy parents and hyper-connected kids about how to use technology in a God-honoring way. They specialize in social media apps and device-level parental controls.

www.protectyoungeyes.com

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