

PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM THE DANGERS OF PORNOGRAPHY

GUIDANCE FOR TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY PARENTS

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ABSTRACT

Despite the ever increasing availability of pornography to young people in today's culture, little has been done to equip parents to educate their children about the dangers pornography presents. Scripture compels parents to instruct their children, but they are left pondering the questions of how, when, and what they should tell their kids about pornography. This paper encourages an approach to parenting that includes education about and protection from the dangers of pornography as a part of a child's sex education. This thesis defends the adoption of a lifelong development of a child's sexual character over and against a one-time "birds and the bees" talk. This thesis summarizes the dangers presented by pornography and stresses the importance of parents providing the child's first perspective on pornography. The writer provides information to assist parents in inoculating children of all ages against the dangers of pornography and to prepare them for what to do when exposure to pornography occurs. The paper also addresses what steps parents should take when a child has developed a curiosity for or has begun using pornography. The thesis concludes that strategic parenting can significantly reduce a child's risk to the spiritual and physical damage caused by pornography.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
LITERATURE REVIEW	4
SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLES.....	7
I. The Dangers of Pornography	9
<i>Pornography is Anti-God</i>	9
<i>Pornography is Anti-self</i>	10
<i>Pornography is Anti-sex</i>	11
<i>Pornography is Anti-relationship</i>	12
<i>Pornography is Anti-woman</i>	12
<i>Pornography is Anti-human</i>	13
II. Instruction – Warning and Protecting Kids against the Dangers of Pornography.....	13
<i>Early and Often</i>	15
<i>Sex-Ed for Toddlers</i>	16
<i>Create a Comfortable Relationship</i>	19
<i>Talking about Pornography</i>	21
<i>Taking the Offensive</i>	26
III. Correction – What to Do When Kids Look at Pornography	28
<i>Don't be Hasty</i>	28
<i>Love the Child</i>	29
CONCLUSION.....	36
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	37
APPENDICES	39

INTRODUCTION

Ask ten people what they think the hardest job in the world is and more than one of them will say it is parenting. That's a matter of contention of course, with some protesting that there are jobs far more taxing and less rewarding than parenting. Whether or not one can say parenting is the hardest job ever, it is safe to say that it is not always easy. Since the introduction of internet pornography in the 1990s it has not become any easier. Today, parents are faced with answering some rather daunting questions: How, when, and what should we tell our kids about pornography; and how can we protect them from the dangers it presents?

It's not as though pornography was never a problem before the 1990s, but since the arrival of the World Wide Web, pornography and the dangers it brings have become endemic. The internet has brought pornography to every corner of the world, even into our own homes. The troubling thing is, few parents have reacted accordingly. One of the leading reasons for this is that porn simply is not what it used to be. As a result, many have underestimated the dangers pornography poses to their children and few experienced any interaction or communication concerning pornography as they were raised by their parents.

Twenty-five years ago, if an eleven-year-old wanted to look at pornography it was far more difficult than it is today. First of all, the volume of pornography available was significantly smaller. In addition to that, while pornography was available in the form of magazines or even in video form those forms of media were not readily accessible and certainly not to minors. Furthermore, pornographic magazines and videocassettes were not free. Consequently, in order to obtain pornographic material a child would have had to steal it or find a friend or acquaintance who had access and ask them to obtain the material for them.

That was the scene leading up to the mid-1990s. Enter the World Wide Web. In 1995 the internet was being utilized by less than fifteen percent of adults in the United States.¹ The ease with which the Web allowed people to access the internet caused its user numbers to soar. Since then, the user rate has grown to over eighty-one percent and it is estimated that all but two

¹ Susannah Fox and Lee Rainie, "How the Internet Has Woven Itself into American Life," *The Web at 25 in the U.S.*, last modified February 27, 2014, accessed October 30, 2014.
<http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/02/27/part-1-how-the-internet-has-woven-itself-into-american-life/>.

percent of the American population has ready access to the internet² and over ninety percent of adolescents between 12 and 18 make regular use of the internet in the US.³

The impact that the rapid spread of the internet has had on the industry of pornography is astonishing. By 2005, global revenue of the pornography industry had surpassed 57 billion dollars a year,⁴ and by the very next year it had sky rocketed to over 97 billion dollars.⁵ Today, the industry is so vast that it is next to impossible to determine the total value of global revenue. Such drastic spread has taken place with very little interference from the government. The rights of the pornography industry have been upheld again and again by the Supreme Court.⁶

What these numbers tell us is that pornography is without a doubt the most powerful it has ever been. What has happened is that industry of pornography has taken advantage of the “Triple-A Engine,”⁷ capitalizing on the three biggest factors for any substance addiction: availability, affordability, and anonymity. Pornography is now available in almost every home, it is accessible at the click of a button, and for the most part, it is free (ninety percent of pornography viewers only look at free content).⁸ Compare that to the scenario above where a child did not have the benefit of those three elements. The world has changed in leaps and bounds over the last few decades and along with that progress pornography has become a formidable force.

What is perhaps even more appalling to many parents is the variety of pornography that is available on the internet. Pornography is addictive, and to feed the addictions of their viewers

² Ibid.

³ Michelle L Ybarra, and Kimberly J. Mitchell, “Exposure to Internet Pornography among Children and Adolescents: A National Survey,” *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 8, no. 5 (2005): 474.

⁴ Jerry Ropelato, “Internet Porn Statistics,” *Internet Filter Software Review*, last modified 2006. Accessed October 28, 2014, <http://internet-filter-review.toptenreviews.com/internet-pornography-statistics-pg2.html>

⁵ Stephanie Pappas, “The History of Pornography No More Prudish Than the Present,” *Live Science*, last modified October 11, 2010, accessed October 30, 2014, <http://www.livescience.com/8748-history-pornography-prudish-present.html>.

⁶ Morgan Bennet, “Internet Pornography and the First Amendment,” *The Witherspoon Institute*, last modified October 10, 2013, accessed November 7, 2014, <http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2013/10/10998/>.

⁷ Sam Black, *The Porn Circuit: Understand Your Brain and Break Porn Habits in 90 Days*, (Owosso, MI: Covenant Eyes, 2013), 15.

⁸ Kristen A. Jenson, and Gail Poyner, *Good Pictures Bad Pictures: Porn-Proofing Today’s Young Kids*, (Richland, WA: Glen Cove Press, 2014), xii.

the pornography industry has made their content increasingly more graphic and violent. Pornography is no longer relegated to still photographs in a magazine, today it is available in formats of the worst imaginable kinds. Simply by clicking their way through the internet our children now have viewing access to rape, incest, sadism, masochism, homosexual acts, bestiality and much more.⁹

The purpose of the statistics and facts is to make it clear that pornography is a problem. One faced not only by adults, but also by children. This is not an issue that parents can turn a blind eye to, regardless of how awkward or embarrassing confronting it may seem, to do so would be at great detriment to their children.

So what can parents do? First, they must educate themselves. If parents are to protect their children from the dangers of pornography they must have a competent understanding of what those dangers are. With a firm grasp on the dangers that their children face, parents can then develop a parenting strategy that will inoculate their children against the lies and traps presented by pornography and equip their children with an action plan for what do when they are exposed to pornography. Understanding the dangers and mechanisms through which pornography works will also arm parents to help their child should pornography ever become a struggle or addiction.

Pornography is a powerful tool of Satan which he has used to trap many souls. Ready or not, parents find themselves on the front line of the battlefield when it comes to defending their children against pornography. It may seem like a formidable task, but with God's help, through strategic, educated, Christian parenting it is a battle that parents can win.

⁹ Jill Manning, *What's the Big Deal about Pornography? A Guide for the Internet Generation* (Ann Arbor, MI: Sheridan Books, 2008), 15-17.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While pornography itself is nothing new, the concept of a structured parental approach to protecting children from the dangers it presents has only begun developing over the last few decades. As a result, the literature available to parents who are seeking further guidance in that area is sparse. Although there are many articles and books that refer to pornography and many more that discuss parenting, there are almost no published works dedicated to giving a comprehensive presentation of parental responsibilities regarding pornography.

As stated in the introduction, while pornography itself is nothing new the format in which it is now available is vastly different than it was even as recently as one or two decades in the past. Consequently, any resources predating the turn of the century have little practical use for parents. Again and again the worst case scenario presented in any literature published in the 90s or earlier is that a child discovers his father's stash of pornographic magazines in a closet or is handed a picture or magazine from someone at school.

There is a definite need for current, practical articles and books dealing with youth exposure to pornography. Fortunately, over the past ten years there has been a fair amount of research done over the increase of pornography brought about by the internet. Much of this research, however, is strictly statistical. While that certainly helps to confirm that pornography is a problem and that it has only grown stronger in recent years, it does little to benefit anyone is suggesting how to address the issue.

Another issue is that as technology advances the danger of pornography continues to escalate. Damon Brown, a frequent author for Playboy Magazine, paints a grim but accurate depiction of today's society: "If we invent a machine, the first thing we are going to do—after making a profit—is use it to watch porn."¹⁰ A century ago it was film, twenty years ago it was the internet, today it is handheld mobile devices, tomorrow there is no telling what methods the pornography industry will be utilizing. What this produces is a constant need for new material that addresses the most current problems that parents are facing as they deal with their children and exposure to pornography.

The methods for distributing pornographic material may be constantly changing, but the effects that pornography has on individuals and on society in general is a far greater constant.

¹⁰ Luke Gilkerson, *When Your Child Is Looking at Porn: A Step-by-Step Guide for Christian Parents*, (Owosso, MI: Covenant Eyes, 2013, PDF), 13.

This is beneficial to parents because it has allowed for a substantial amount of literature that delineates the damaging potential of pornography. Even this material has undergone improvement in recent years as recent advances in neuroscience have proven the addictive properties of pornography and the effect that it has on the human brain.

One treasure trove of information for parents is the collection of resources made available through the Covenant Eyes website.¹¹ Covenant Eyes has produced fact spreads, infographics, numerous articles, and several electronic books that sum up the dangers of pornography and even make scriptural and practical applications to parenting.

Dr. Jill C. Manning is another excellent source on the dangers of pornography. Manning is a certified family therapist who has dedicated much of her career to the damaging effects of pornography on society. She has written several books and articles on the subject. Her 2008 publication *What's the Big Deal About Pornography?* provides an excellent summary of her research. While Manning does provide some advice to parents, her work is focused more at informing adults about pornography.

As publications concerning the dangers of pornography have increased, they have been accompanied by an explosion of self-help literature geared at assisting adults in overcoming addiction to pornography. This collection of literature seeks to provide a solution to a problem that has become increasingly more publicized in recent years: pornography is addictive. While such books may be helpful in correcting the problems pornography can cause they also help to further illustrate the gap that has been created. In other words, if the issue of pornography were addressed before exposure and the development of addictions ever took place, the problems addressed in self-help literature could be avoided rather than corrected.

One of the best available resources to parents as they seek to “nip pornography problems in the bud” is literature dealing with sexual education of children. Pornography education is an enormous part of sex education and while many books may not make that clear the guidance given for sexual education can be applied in most cases to pornography education.

What parents will want to look for are books that provide a biblically view of parenting. Also of importance is finding literature that views sexual education of a child as an ongoing process that begins from day one and continues throughout the growth of the child. This is

¹¹ <http://www.covenanteyes.com/>

another aspect that has garnered considerably greater attention in recent years. Most adults today can attest to the fact that the concept of an ongoing dialogue about sex and pornography was unheard of in their childhood. Many never had a single conversation with their parents about pornography through the entirety of their formative years. This is a large contributing factor to the proliferation of material regarding breaking pornographic habits that now available.

Of the sexual education guides reviewed by this author by far the most beneficial were the works of Stan and Brenna Jones. It is this author's opinion that when it comes to parental sex education in the home, "keeping up with the Joneses" would be an adequate endeavor. The Joneses do an excellent job of presenting a biblical perspective of parenting and their works are divided into sections dealing with different stages of a child's development starting at infancy and going right through the teenage years.

Finally, when it comes to helping a child overcome a habit of viewing pornography, Covenant Eyes once again has numerous timely and practical resources for parents. In addition to current resources available on the internet, most handbooks for counseling youth, especially those which specialize in sexual disorders, will contain useful principles for parents even if the sections that deal with pornography predate the age of the internet.

At the end of the day, the information that parents need in order to equip themselves to train and instruct their children about the dangers of pornography is out there, but it has yet to be effectively compiled into resources that deal specifically with that challenge. The need to protect children from pornography is great, any literature produced in the coming years that facilitates that need will be a tremendous blessing.

There are signs that such resources are on the horizon. In early 2014, Kristen A. Jenson produced a wonderful book designed to lead parents through a discussion about pornography with their young children. Although the book, *Good Pictures Bad Pictures*, targets only one specific age group, it is a beacon of hope for parents who are waiting for similar resources to be released.

SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLES

One of the clearest, most concise treatments of parenting in all of God’s Word is found in the sixth chapter of St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians: “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4). A careful examination of the original Greek will illuminate several key truths.

First, it may be noted that only the fathers, οἱ πατέρες, are addressed in this passage. This is in contrast to the use of γονεύς “parents” in Ephesians 6:1. This change to οἱ πατέρες may indicate a shift in subject, perhaps to stress the father’s role as head of the family. Or it may just be a variation in vocabulary as οἱ πατέρες may still be properly understood as “parents” referring to both the father and the mother.¹² Regardless of Paul’s intent, the principles which follow are certainly God-pleasing principles for both Christian mothers and fathers as they raise their children.

Paul gives both a negative and positive exhortation to Christian parents. First comes the negative: “do not exasperate your children.” The verb, μὴ παροργίζετε, is in the form of a present prohibitory imperative giving it not the sense of stopping what is already being done but rather to “make it a practice not to do it.”¹³ Paul is encouraging parents not to deal with their children in such a way that they will become angered, discouraged, or crushed. This will come into huge play as we deal with the issue of pornography. Because such a large stigma of shame is attached to sins of a sexual nature and especially to such a private sin as the viewing of pornography it is imperative that parents handle each situation in a loving way that will leave the door open for further discussion of the topic.

Following the negative exhortation, Paul continues with a two-part positive exhortation: “bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” Paul shows us here two very important elements of raising children: godly training and instruction. In English, the two nouns,

¹² Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 787.

¹³ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 796.

training and instruction, may seem to be expressing the same idea. It is likely though, that a slightly different nuance was intended for each.¹⁴

The first of the two, παιδεία, is translated either as training or discipline in most modern translations. The basic sense is “the act of providing guidance for responsible living, upbringing, training, [and] instruction.”¹⁵ It could be taken in one of two ways. On the one hand, it could refer to a broad range of training and instruction. We find it used in this sense in Acts 22:3 and Titus 2:11-12.¹⁶

In other passages, παιδεία takes a much more pointed nuance (2 Co 6:9; Heb 12:5, 7, 8, 11).¹⁷ In these verses we can see the more corrective, rebuking side of the noun. Notice, however, that even when used with the nuance of discipline or rebuke the intent of παιδεία is always to “produce a harvest of righteousness” (Heb 12:11). In this context and particularly with the juxtaposition of the following noun, νοουθεσία, it is probably better understood in this second sense.¹⁷

Νουθεσία is derived from the Greek words νοῦς (mind) and τίθημι (to place) with the sense of influencing someone’s mind¹⁸ and has a basic definition of “counsel about avoidance or cessation of an improper course of conduct.”¹⁹ Norman Dewitt suggests that it signifies the gentlest possible form of instruction characterized by timely suggestions.²⁰

As we consider this passage in connection with parental treatment of pornography we can see there are three distinct principles found in Ephesians 4:6. First, everything should be done in a loving manner that will not lead to the exasperation of the child. This will benefit both the parent and the child. Second, it is necessary to preemptively attack the issue of pornography by informing the child of the dangers it presents and by preparing and equipping them to avoid its

¹⁴ Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 446.

¹⁵ BDAG, 749.

¹⁶ These passages are available in Appendix A.

¹⁷ O’Brien, 446.

¹⁸ Hoehner, 796.

¹⁹ BDAG, 689.

²⁰ Hoehner, 798.

temptations and addiction. Finally, it may also be necessary to provide guidance through discipline and loving correction if should the child ever fall into the trap of pornography.

I. The Dangers of Pornography

Before parents can begin helping their children understand the dangers of pornography, it is necessary that they first gain a better understanding themselves. The first order of business in protecting kids from pornography is to acknowledge that it is out there and be aware of the dangers that it presents.

It would be beneficial to provide a definition of pornography: pornography or pornographic material is any visual content containing descriptions or depictions of either sexual organs or sexual activity with the intended purpose of stimulating and arousing sexual feelings. In his book *Pornography: A Christian Critique* John Court defines pornography as nihilistic.²¹ Nihilism, the rejection of all religious and moral principles, is the end result of pornography. That is the might of pornography. It is one of Satan's most powerful tools, because through it he has the power to slowly but surely attack and poison so many different aspects of our lives.

Pornography is Anti-God

First and foremost, pornography is a sin against God. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke these words regarding adultery: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt 5:27-28). If pornography is defined as that which is intended to arouse sexual thoughts and feelings (lust) then it is in its very essence a sin against the Sixth Commandment. This includes not only the viewing of pornography, but also any participation in its creation, promotion, or distribution.

The power of God's gospel is freedom. Through His gospel God has freed us from sin. Concerning this Paul writes,

When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Ro 6:20-23)

²¹ John H. Court, *Pornography: A Christian Critique*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 81.

Jesus testified to this when He said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn 8:31-32) and, “if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (Jn 8:36).

The gospel also gives us freedom from sin’s condemnation: “through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death” (Ro 8:2); freedom from the fear of death: “for to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Php 1: 21); and freedom to come before God with confidence: “we have [a high priest] who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Heb 4:15-16).

On the flip side, the power of pornography is bondage. Through it Satan seeks to entrap the soul, enslaving it once again to the sin from which Christ has freed us. Those who find themselves caught in the habitual sin of viewing pornography will find it incredibly difficult to stop. In time they will begin to doubt their faith, their confidence before God will diminish, and they will begin once again to fear the punishment of sin and the death it brings. Pornography is evil and through it Satan attempts to obscure and conceal all that Christ has done.

Pornography is Anti-self

Not only is viewing pornography a sin against the sixth commandment. It also damages the viewer’s body, limiting the brain’s ability to function in a normal capacity. In recent years neuroscientists have proven that pornography is addictive. As might be expected, when such findings endanger a multi-billion dollar worldwide industry, these studies have received considerable scrutiny and attack yet the evidence and facts remain undeniable. Viewing pornography has much the same effect on the body as hard drugs such as cocaine and heroin. The viewing of pornography releases a potent combination of chemicals into the brain including dopamine, oxytocin, vasopressin, norepinephrine, and serotonin.²² The release is triggered in the brain’s limbic system and then spreads to the remainder of the brain through neuro networks.

The brain’s limbic system functions subconsciously, it cannot be willfully controlled. This is the way God created us so that survival appetites for oxygen, water, food, sleep, etc. are

²² Gordon S. Bruin, *The Language of Recovery: Understanding and Treating Addiction*, (Altonah, UT: Akdia Inc., 2010), Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 1, Location 230.

not something we have to consciously control. The limbic system also controls the body's appetite for sex. The conscious part of our brain, the prefrontal cortex, is able to "put the brakes" on the impulses generated by the limbic system. We can for example decide not to eat, hold our breath, or refrain from sexual activity. However, when the limbic system is left unrestrained, its impulses grow stronger and our decision making capabilities weaken.²³

What this means is that the longer pornography viewing is allowed to go unchecked, the stronger the desire to view more will become and our physical ability to deny those desires will weaken. What makes pornography addiction even more powerful is that the release of the chemicals which set off this chain reaction from the limbic system can be triggered so easily, either by simply looking at a picture or even recalling a picture that has already been seen!

Fortunately, the effects pornography has on the brain are not irreversible. There is also evidence that such damage can be healed and the capacity to restrain the unwanted behavior regained.

Pornography is Anti-sex

To say that pornography is anti-sex might seem at first to be paradoxical. After all, one might ask, what is pornography if not sex? The truth of the matter is that pornography is against everything that sex represents. God gave sex as a gift to be enjoyed within the bounds of His institution of marriage: "Haven't you read," [Jesus] replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Mt 19:4-6). The author to the Hebrews writes: "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure" (Heb 13:4).

Does pornography seek to keep the marriage bed pure? Does it keep God's gift of sex within the bounds of marriage where He intended it? No, on the contrary it perverts the minds of those who view it distorting their view of the wonderful gift we have from God. It reprograms the mind and sexual drive with the thoughts that sex is purely recreational and nothing more, that

²³ Ibid., Chapter 1, Location 353.

bodies viewed in pornography are more attractive than bodies viewed in real life, and that sex is the number one purpose of any relationship or person.²⁴

Sex is a beautiful gift which God has given to humanity in which a man or woman can give of themselves to their spouse in a loving and intimate way. Pornography destroys this turning sex into a self-serving act rather than a self-giving action.²⁵ The case for masturbation and the question of whether or not it is inherently sinful is a topic that has long been debated. Let it be sufficient here to say that any masturbation that is accompanied or brought on by the viewing of pornography and intended for one's own sexual gratification is a sinful perversion of God's gift of sex.

Pornography is Anti-relationship

Users of pornography will suffer detriment in almost every of human relationship. Relations with spouses, family, friends, and even employers can be damaged and even destroyed by pornography.

Pornography produces the false perception that sex and sexual pleasure are entirely divorced from the concept of marriage.²⁶ It requires a disconnection from “‘real’ life and ‘real’ people.”²⁷ Yet such connections are the fundamental basis of relationships! Pornography also encourages promiscuity and relations with multiple people through the inception of the idea that sexual pleasure requires lots of practice with lots of partners.

Pornography is Anti-woman

Among the most evident and detrimental dangers of pornography are the devaluation and objectification of women. Pornography sends a clear message: women exist for the satisfaction of sexual urges and desires. This not only impacts boys and men, who will begin to objectify women themselves if exposed to enough pornography, but also girls and women who will be tempted to change the way they act and present themselves in an attempt to appear more attractive.

²⁴ Manning, 44.

²⁵ BJ. Stockman, “7 Negative Effects of Porn,” *Resurgence*, last modified November 19, 2011, accessed October 19, 2014, <http://theresurgence.com/2011/11/19/7-negative-effects-of-porn>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Manning, 49.

Pornography changes the way boys look at girls. As stated above, the physical features of the women seen in pornography idealize what is beautiful and pleasing to look at. In her article, *The Porn Myth*, Naomi Wolf writes, “For most of human history, erotic images have been reflections of, or celebrations of, or substitutes for, real naked women. For the first time in human history, the images’ power and allure have supplanted that of real naked women. Today, real naked women are just bad porn.”²⁸ Statements like that may make the reader cringe but that is the danger pornography poses to those who fall into its trap.

Because of the addictive nature of pornography, more and more stimulus is needed to meet the same level of fulfillment. As a result pornography has grown increasingly more violent and graphic over the years. This increase in violence is almost entirely directed toward the women involved in pornography.

Pornography is Anti-human

One of the problems with such increases in violence and vulgarity is that those who view pornography will become accustomed to it and after a time even expect it. Over time the conscience of someone who looks at pornography will grow weaker and weaker until offensive and immoral acts that would originally have produced feelings of disgust, shame, and guilt become almost second nature.

II. Instruction – Warning and Protecting Kids against the Dangers of Pornography

It is clear beyond a shadow of a doubt that pornography is a dangerous thing. For parents, considering how to prepare their children to face those dangers can be a terrifying thought. But as scary as it may seem, it’s something that needs to happen. So where does one start? In the passage we looked at above from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians we saw two basic elements of parenting. The first was training and correction, the second, instruction and admonition. As we approach the question “How, when, and what should parents tell their kids about pornography?” it is probably best if we start with that second element, instruction and admonition.

In many circles today “admonition” is used almost synonymously with correction or rebuke. The concept of “admonishing a child,” for example, would be perceived by most to

²⁸ Wolf, Naomi. “The Porn Myth.” *New York News & Politics*, last modified October 20, 2003. Accessed October 19, 2014. http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/trends/n_9437/.

mean scolding for something wrong that he or she has done. The original sense of the word, however, was to warn against a particular behavior. This is the sense in which the writer will make use of it in this paper, specifically in view of how parents warning their children about the dangers of pornography.

Remember that the Greek word νοῦθεσία is made up of the word for “mind” and the verb “set” or “place.” So as parents instruct children about pornography, the goal is not simply to fill their heads with facts but rather to help them create a mindset. Parents have the wonderful opportunity and responsibility to shape the character of their children. Part of that, although often overlooked, is helping develop the child’s sexual character.²⁹ The mindset parents want to nurture in their children is one that views sex in its proper light as a wonderful gift of God and that recognizes pornography as an evil and destructive perversion of that gift.

The goal of developing a child’s sexual character is to bring them to a biblical understanding of God’s gift of sexuality. Sex is not something that we should be ashamed of. It is a beautiful thing that God has designed for husbands and wives to be enjoyed within the bonds of marriage. It is a physical and intimate act through which they can express their love to one another. By helping our children to see the big picture about the sanctity of sex, we are better prepared to confront the problem of pornography when and if it occurs in our children’s lives.

As a young person’s sexual character develops they will begin to understand the role God has in mind for them when they get married. In his article, “When Children View Pornography” Rob Jackson reminds us that those roles have been illustrated for us in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians just a few verses before the section we looked at earlier. “We hope our sons will see themselves as a type of Christ as they relate to their wives, and that our daughters will see themselves as a type of the church as they relate to their husbands.”³⁰

By leading their children in family Bible studies, having open and honest discussions regarding sexuality, and providing a Christian model and example of what marriage and

²⁹ Stan Jones and Brenna Jones. *How and When to Tell Your Kids about Sex: A Lifelong Approach to Shaping Your Child’s Sexual Character* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2007), 38.

³⁰Rob Jackson, “When Children View Pornography,” *Life Challenges*, last modified 2004, accessed September 2, 2014, <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/lifechallenges/love-and-sex/pornography/how-to-confront-children-using-pornography>.

sexuality are intended to be parents will be able to achieve these goals and their children will be incredibly blessed as a result.

Early and Often

Sex education is a process, not an event. The “birds and the bees” talk, although something parents today may have experienced in their own childhood, is a thing of the past.³¹ One of the most important things for parents to realize when it comes to pornography education is that the earlier they start, the better. That doesn’t mean that parents should sit down their three-year-old and explain everything that they know about sex and pornography. What it means is that from as early as the changing table, parents can begin to nurture their child’s sexual character.

The reality is that kids will see pornography. Ninety-three percent of boys and sixty-two percent of girls are exposed to pornography before they turn eighteen.³² Even more appalling, the average age of a child’s first exposure to pornography is estimated today to be as early as eight years old.³³ Pornography, moreover, is not the only thing children are exposed to. Through their network of friends at school and, once again, through the vast amount of information readily available on the Web, kids will be able to find answers to just about any question they can think of regarding sex.

Parents cannot stop their kids from hearing about sex at school. What they can ensure is that they hear about it at home first. The old adage, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression,” is certainly true when it comes to sex education for children. The first impression that they get is going to be the most powerful and the most memorable. That being said, parents will want to make sure that it is a good one; the best way to ensure that that happens is to do it yourself.

While it is best to start sex education as early as possible, it is never too late. Any education that kids get from their parents will be a blessing to them in the long run, even if they

³¹ Manning, 153.

³² Luke Gilkerson, *Parenting the Internet Generation: 7 Potential Threats and 7 Habits for Internet Safety* (Owosso, MI: Covenant Eyes, 2012), 6.

³³ Jackson, “When Children View Pornography.”

have already heard or seen some things at school. The important thing is simply to get started and then plan on making sex education a continual part of the child's development.³⁴

Sex-Ed for Toddlers

As stated above, protecting kids from the dangers of pornography and educating them about sex should really start at an early age, even as early as two years old. This raises warning flags in many parents' minds and leads to certain questions: "Should I really be giving my toddler sexual education? Isn't that going to scar him or leave her traumatized for the rest of her life? Couldn't exposure at that early of an age really just lead to more curiosity and bigger problems down the road?"

Those are valid questions and if handled incorrectly an early start on sex education could definitely result in problems such as those listed. It would not be wise to sit a two-year-old down and explain to them how sexual intercourse works or what an addiction to pornography can do to their lives. There are, however, a number of things it would be wise to them.

First and foremost, infants and toddlers need to learn about love. "The foundation of all sex education is enabling your child to give and receive love."³⁵ Parents can teach their children that they love them deeply and that they are also deeply loved by their Father in heaven. Loving children may seem like a pretty basic part of parenting and not necessarily a part of sexual education or protection against pornography, but it definitely is.

Sex and love go hand in hand. There are few ways in which human love can be expressed more deeply than when a husband and wife join together in sexual union. God-pleasing sexual relationships are based on love. Pornography, on the other hand, divorces love from sex. As a child learns how to receive and give love they will also learn the virtues of respect, honesty, trust, and kindness. Learning from the start that love involves all of those emotions and that every good relationship, including healthy sexual relationships, are built on love will help children recognize that pornography does not portray any of them and therefore is not a God-pleasing portrayal of sex.³⁶

³⁴ Kristen A. Jenson, "Start Porn-Proofing at Age Two," *Tips and Tools to Protect Young Minds*, last modified April 25, 2012, accessed October 12, 2014, <http://pornproofkids.com/2012/04/25/start-pornoculation-at-age-two/>.

³⁵ Jones, 59.

³⁶ Jenson, "Start Porn-Proofing at Age Two."

As parents teach their little children that they have a Father in heaven who loves them, they will also begin to teach them that He made them in a wonderful way. One huge step towards making a child's continued sexual education easier is to start off by teaching them the anatomically correct names for their sexual body parts.³⁷ Parents have no problem teaching their kids that they have a nose, a mouth, and two eyes or that they have arms and legs and fingers and toes. Parents should also feel comfortable teaching their sons that they have a penis and a scrotum and teaching their daughters that they have a vulva which consists of her labia and her vagina.³⁸

This is a very important step in sex education for both the child and the parent. The next section addresses the importance of parents creating relationship with their son or daughter in which they will feel comfortable asking questions about sex or letting their parents know if they have been exposed to pornography. Identification of body parts is where that comfortable relationship starts. If children think that their parents aren't even comfortable saying the words "penis" or "vagina" they can hardly be expected to ask any serious questions they might have about sex later on.³⁹

Likewise, if parents are not comfortable saying words like "penis" or "vagina" then they should expect that it will become increasingly difficult to talk about more in depth topics or to approach the subject of pornography. Just because it seems awkward or embarrassing doesn't mean it isn't important.

Along with teaching young children the names for their body parts, parents also need to stress that the body is a gift from God. Children can learn from their parents that their body is good and wonderful and that it is just how God created it to be. They can also learn that certain parts of their bodies are private and that they should never be touched or looked at by anyone except to wash them. Parents can then teach that, like any gift from God, we want to take care of our bodies and treat them with respect. Explaining that the reason we eat healthy food, get the right amount of sleep, and exercise is to take care of the wonderful bodies God has given us will help children to develop healthy habits for respecting their bodies and taking care of them. That

³⁷ Jones, 69.

³⁸ Jenson, "Start Porn-Proofing at Age Two."

³⁹ Ibid.

mindset of ownership and responsibility for their own body will help them see the warning signs that addiction and pornography present and recognize pornography as something that does not respect the human body.

Parents can also stress the importance of a Christian family to their children. To do this parents may benefit from taking advantage of “teachable moments.”⁴⁰ Just as bath time may provide a great opportunity for teaching the names of the different body parts, events such as weddings, anniversaries, or even divorces of family or friends can provide opportunities to talk children about marriage and families. Other opportunities would include interactions with single-parent homes or same-sex partnerships.

Moments like these provide parents with a context in which they can teach their kids about God’s will for marriage and family building. Children can begin to appreciate that at some point in their life they too will have the desire to start a family of their own. In a Christian marriage, like God has designed, they can enjoy a loving relationship with someone that they can then spend the rest of their lives with. At the same time, they can also begin to appreciate that some arrangements don’t fit into God’s plan for marriage and are not pleasing to Him.

Finally, parents of young children have an opportunity and responsibility to teach their children about the goodness of God’s law and the boundlessness of His gospel. Rules that are rules just for the sake of being rules are bound to be broken. Rules that are there to protect and benefit those who follow them are much more likely to be followed. In God’s law, every rule is there for our benefit. This is something that children may have a difficult time understanding without the help of their parents. Parents need to teach the value of following God’s law. “We do this by trusting God ourselves, by teaching God’s rules, and by explaining, defending, and praising those rules.”⁴¹

Children must also learn that when God’s good law is broken, there are consequences. Even after a child has confessed their sin and received forgiveness from their parents, consequences may still need to follow. Even when a parent must discipline a child it is important to point out that Christian discipline, just like God’s discipline is something done out of love. This lesson that sin has consequences is invaluable for children to learn and will be key

⁴⁰ Jones, 62, 73.

⁴¹ Ibid., 62.

in their success to resist the temptations of pornography. The limitless grace of God's forgiveness will be a comfort to them in times when they do fall into sin and repent.

Create a Comfortable Relationship

Starting sex education with kids when they are toddlers is a great because they are going to listen to everything mom and dad have to say and if they have any questions there is a relatively small pool of people available to ask. As children grow older though, it can become increasingly more uncomfortable to ask parents about "awkward" topics, e.g., drugs, sex, and pornography. Parents will want to do everything in their power to eliminate those feelings of awkwardness and to maintain their status as "askable" parents.

An askable parent is "one who presents an open and safe channel of communication for their child."⁴² The element of safety is not that big of an issue, most parents will find that they can definitely provide much safer answers than the internet or the average kid on the school playground. Keeping the channel of communication open is the hard part.

Most parents lose that open channel because they themselves are afraid or embarrassed about something.⁴³ It is really quite natural to find private things embarrassing, especially considering that past generations have had little to no communication between parents and children about such things.

If a parent never had a certain conversation with their mother or father, odds are they won't feel as comfortable having it with their son or daughter. If parents do not feel entirely comfortable talking about something that is okay. The important thing is to do it anyway. Acknowledging to the child from the start that the topic is slightly awkward will help put both parent and child at ease.

Parents may also be afraid that they won't know what to say or that they're simply behind the times, or they might be apprehensive about revealing too much or too little information to suit their child's needs. The solution then, is to prepare ahead of time. If parents can anticipate the kinds of questions their children will be asking then it becomes possible to read up on the subjects ahead of time in order to educate oneself on what the child will need to know. This will

⁴² Anna Hain, "Becoming an 'Askable' Parent," *Family Resources Newsletter*, vol. 2, n. 14, last modified June 17, 2014, accessed October 12, 2014, <http://www.family-resources.net/page40143.aspx>.

⁴³ Ibid.

also give both mother and father an opportunity to discuss the topics and come to an agreement on what values they wish to communicate to their kids.

Answers to some of the questions children will ask may be available in reliable encyclopedias; others may require a little deeper reading. The series, *God's Design for Sex*, is an excellent resource for this type of research. Not only does it provide timely, biblical information, but it also comes in a format that is designed for easy presentation to children and each of the four books targets a different age group.

Once parents have the information they need, it is time to start looking for teachable moments. Parents should take advantage of opportunities to initiate conversations with their kids. Once a child realizes that his or her parents are a reliable source of information and that they are willing to talk about such things, they'll start coming to them on their own to ask questions.

If a child asks a parent something that they don't know the answer to, it is best to be honest with them. Communicating that the parent needs to do a little more research on a certain topic and then getting back to the child as soon as possible will show the child that their questions are valued and important to the parent.⁴⁴ If a child asks about something embarrassing, parents can acknowledge that it's important for them to ask any question even if it's about something that's awkward to discuss. If a question concerns the privacy of either the parent or their spouse then it may be best not to answer it. That would also present an opportunity to discuss why some things are private and others are acceptable to talk about.

Concerning whether a child is ready to hear certain information or how much on a certain topic they should be hearing, the basic rule of thumb is that if they are asking the question whether they are ready or not, they need an answer. Remember that it is vital for them to get safe and reliable information. If they are curious about something, that likely means they have heard at least a little about it from a friend or somewhere else. Asking them what they do know can be a good way to gauge how much more information it will take to fill their curiosity.

One of the greatest blessings that comes with an open communication between parents and their children is that it gives the parents occasion to provide reasons and values along with the information. Parents should make a habit of explaining the biblical principles behind their

⁴⁴ Jones, 76.

answers when applicable. Don't just tell a child what to do in a situation, explain why that is the right thing to do. The goal in maintaining a comfortable relationship between parents and children is so that they can learn the lessons and values that will equip them to handle situations when they are faced with them at a time when their parents are not available for advice.⁴⁵

Talking about Pornography

Eventually, each child will need to hear about pornography. This is a prime example of conversation that the parents will need to initiate. The big question is when that conversation is appropriate. Parents should take into consideration that the average age for a child's first exposure to pornography is eight years old and that this is a conversation that they will want to start before that first exposure. If eight is the average, then many children are being exposed even before then, so parents should probably plan on having the conversation when their child is somewhere from five to seven years old.

So much for the innocence of childhood, but remember, you never get a second chance to make a first impression. Parents are not destroying their child's innocence by warning them about the dangers of pornography, rather, they are protecting it. It will be far better for children if they hear about pornography from their mom and dad and learn what to do about it than if they find out about it on the playground or at school and have to tackle it on their own.

If parents think they could use some help talking to their five or six-year-old about pornography an excellent resource is Kristen Jenson's book, *Good Pictures Bad Pictures*. *Good Pictures Bad Pictures* was designed with the specific intent of a parent sitting down and reading the book through with an early elementary aged child. Jenson divides the discussion into two main conversations. First, she explains the effect pornographic pictures can have on the child's brain. Then she lays out an easy to follow plan for what the child can do when they do encounter pornography. Those suggestions are an excellent start, but parents would do well to weave a third strand into the conversation, providing their kids with the biblical reasons why pornography is wrong and reminding them of the real purpose of God's gift of sex.

1. Identify Pornography

The first base to cover is to let the child know that not all pictures in this world are good pictures. Some pictures, called pornography, are bad. They are pictures that show people who

⁴⁵ Hain, "Becoming an 'Askable' Parent"

don't have the private parts of their bodies covered. Parents will want to remind their children that God made those parts of our bodies private for a reason. He wants them to be shared only with the person that we will eventually marry. God does not want us to show our private parts to other people or to look at other people's private parts. That's why we call them private!

Parents should warn their kids that even though they know that they shouldn't look at pictures like that, they need to be very careful because pornography tricks their brain into releasing chemicals that will make them feel good even though what they're doing is wrong.⁴⁶ Parents can also share with their children that most kids don't go looking for pictures like that on their own, sometimes they come across them on accident or one of their friends might show them some and it is extremely important that they let their parents know about any time they are exposed to pornography.

Parents will not want to go into too much detail about all the dangers of pornography listed above. They should explain that pornography lies about what are normal and acceptable ways to treat other people.⁴⁷ Pornography tries to convince us that it's alright to hurt people and to disrespect them but we know that God wants us to do just the opposite.

2. Explain Addiction

Pornography also hurts us through something called addiction. An addiction is when chemicals in the brain cause someone to keep wanting to do something over and over again. Addictions can be so strong that even though the person wants to stop doing that thing they can't seem to stop no matter how hard they try.

Understanding how an addiction works might seem a little advanced for a six-year-old, but Jenson does an excellent job of describing it in concepts they will understand. She suggests that parents explain to their child that their brain is made up of two different parts, the thinking brain and the feeling brain.⁴⁸

Jenson continues, explaining that the feeling brain is a very important part of the brain. It's the part that makes us sweat on a hot day so we don't overheat. It makes us shiver on a cold

⁴⁶ Kristen A. Jenson and Gail Poyner, *Good Pictures Bad Pictures: Porn-Proofing Today's Young Kids*, (Richland, WA: Glen Cove Press, 2014), 3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

day to help keep us warm and it even makes us feel hungry so we remember to keep eating. The problem with the feeling brain is that it doesn't know the difference between what is right and what is wrong.⁴⁹ When we're hungry, for example, the feeling brain just tells us that we need to eat. It doesn't know whether we should eat bread, or a rock, or even poison. That's where the thinking brain comes in.

The thinking brain is the part of the brain that makes decisions. Some of those decisions are easy, like whether to eat a piece of bread or a rock. Our thinking brain can learn from mistakes too. If we ever did try to eat a rock, we would find out that it hurts our teeth and it doesn't taste good so the next time our feeling brain tells us we're hungry, our thinking brain tells us not to eat a rock. Every time our feeling brain tells us to do something and our thinking brain decides not to do it our thinking brain gets a little stronger.

Parents can also explain that part of what our feeling brain does is create feelings that make people want to be together and see each other again and again. That's a part of what happens when people fall in love. But the feeling brain can't necessarily tell between real people and pictures. So even looking at pictures can make our feeling brain want to see those pictures again and again. Once that starts happening it can be very hard to make it stop. So the best way to avoid it is not to look at those pictures at all.

3. Make a Plan

When a child views pornography it only takes three-tenths of a second before the brain starts chemically reacting to the image it is processing.⁵⁰ Because of this, it is important for kids to be prepared and to know how they will react to pornography before they even encounter it. Parents can develop a plan with their kids and practice it just like they would practice what to do when faced with other dangers like a fire or a predator.

Step One: Close your eyes. Pornography affects our brain like a drug, the longer the image is seen the greater the dose. The sooner you can close your eyes and if necessary, plug your ears, the more clearly you will be able to think and react.⁵¹ You may need to take additional steps to stop the flow of pornography. You might have to turn off the device the

⁴⁹ Ibid., 11-13.

⁵⁰ Manning, 82.

⁵¹ Ibid., 82.

pornography appeared on, or change to a different channel. If it isn't something you can control you may have to leave the room. Whatever it takes, do your best to get away from the pornography and to keep your eyes covered or turned away until there is no chance of seeing more.

Step Two: Identify the pornography. Just as soon as you see pornography and close your eyes, name it. Say the words, "That's pornography."⁵² Saying these words out loud every time we are exposed to pornography will help condition our thinking brain, and empower it to make the right decisions. Getting our family and friends on board with naming pornography with us will help make this step easier.

Step Three: Break the spell. Remember what God has told us about our bodies and about sex and how pornography is lying about that and the good things God has given us. Then we can make a conscious decision not to look at pictures like that again which will help strengthen our thinking brain and make it even easier the next time.

Step Four: Tell an adult. One of the biggest powers of pornography is secrecy. We destroy that power when we tell someone every time we see it. Children should be encouraged to tell a trusted adult like a parent or a teacher any time they are exposed to pornography. It might not be a very comfortable thing to tell somebody you saw a pornographic image but it can help release the image from your mind before it becomes a bigger problem that would be even harder to talk about. "Many pornography problems never even get started when people follow the simple rule of telling someone about what they have seen shortly after seeing it."⁵³

Another blessing that comes when children tell their parent what they saw is that parents can revisit step three with their child, reinforcing why those images are dangerous and what lies they are trying to sell. The parent can then help their child walk through the final steps of the plan.

Step Five: Along with your parent identify the circumstances which led to the exposure and determine if there is anything that can be done to avoid it in the future. This might mean not visiting certain websites or not watching certain TV channels. It could mean being particularly careful around certain friends and avoiding situations where we are alone with them.

⁵² Jenson, *Good Pictures Bad Pictures*, 35.

⁵³ Manning, 85.

Step Six: Move on to something better. Say a prayer with your parents asking God for His continued help in avoiding pornography and its traps. Then find something wholesome and fun to do that will take your mind off of what you saw and wrestle the thought of the picture out of your brain.⁵⁴ It will help to have some ideas ahead of time for what you can do when you find yourself in that situation.

4. Sort the Good from the Bad

Finally, the most important thing parents can do as they talk to their kids about pornography is to help them sort what is right from what is wrong. God has written His law on our hearts and given us a conscience that helps alert us when something is sinful. As we've seen above, He has even given us an amazing brain that has the power to make the decision to do what is right based on what our conscience tells us and what we know is true from His Word.

We can help our children strengthen that decision making capability by reviewing the principles God has given us. Remember that positive messages are always stronger than negative messages.⁵⁵ It will help to show children that whenever God says “no” to something it is because He is saying “yes” to something even better.⁵⁶

When Jesus gave His life for us on the cross, He did it to set us free from the slavery of sin. Paul talks about that in his letter to Galatia: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Gal 5:1). Because of the addictive power it has on our brains, pornography has the ability to make us slaves. This can make it harder to say no to other kinds of sin in our lives too. When God says no to pornography it is because He wants us to be able to live in the freedom that Jesus won for us on the cross. He wants us to live, not in the shame of a life of slavery, but in the joy and peace of forgiveness.

In his letter to the Thessalonians Paul gives us another view of what God wants for us: “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate

⁵⁴ Ibid., 86.

⁵⁵ Jones, 122.

⁵⁶ Joshua Harris, *Sex Is Not the Problem (Lust Is): Sexual Purity in a Lust-Saturated World*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2003), 106.

lust like the pagans, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister” (1 Th 4:3-6). Pornography takes away our ability to control our bodies and drives us to look for things that are less and less holy and honorable and increasingly immoral in order to get the thrill it wants. When God says no to pornography it is because He wants us to be able to live sanctified lives that honor Him.

God also wants husbands and wives to be able to enjoy sex in their marriage. He wants marriage to be honored and the marriage bed to be kept pure (Heb 13:4). Pornography attaches feelings of guilt and shame to sexual feelings. Those feelings can hang around a long time even after someone has stopped looking at pornography and that can damage the relationship that person has with their husband or wife. When God says no to pornography it’s because He is saying yes to a healthy sexual relationship with a spouse that is filled with all the joy, fulfillment, and union it is intended to have.

Teaching children these principles will help them to understand that everything God has given them is good, that His plan for them is good, and that pornography seeks only to destroy that plan and tarnish what is good. Understanding God’s will helps inoculate them against pornography and enables them to make God-pleasing decisions when confronted with it.

Taking the Offensive

Although talking to children is a very important part of protecting them against pornography, it isn’t the only thing parents can do to protect them. Parents can also go on the offensive to remove as many possible threats as possible, reducing the chances that their children will have to take action themselves.

Think back to the triple-A engine of pornography that was introduced before. Pornography is like a three legged stool supported equally by three parts: availability, anonymity, and affordability. Parents have little if any control over the third leg: affordability. Consequently, that is the hardest leg to remove. Fortunately, it isn’t necessary to remove all three. Just like a three legged stool all that needs to happen is for one leg to be removed and the whole stool will topple.

While the amount of pornography available in the world continues to increase on a daily basis, there are some measures parents can take to limit its availability to their children. Parents can set media standards in the home. By limiting movies watched and games played to certain rating levels, parents can remove a significant portion of media which contains sexually explicit

material. The letter R in movie ratings stands for restricted, it stands to reason that we restrict children from watching them.

Music is another area that is replete with sexual innuendos and even explicit sexual content. Pornography does not always appear in only visual form. The music children listen to can also have a powerful effect and fuel ideals and curiosities which can be acted on later. Parents should be prudent in monitoring playlists and song selections and encourage integrity in deciding which songs are beneficial.

Teen magazines and young adult books, many of which are read by children well before their teenage years, can also be a danger zone. In short, any form of media can and will contain sexually explicit content. Parents should do their best to ensure that the media which is available in their home is free of such content.

Of course the most common form of media through which pornography is available is the internet. There are a wide variety of internet filters available that can restrict access to websites containing pornography. Filters can be incredibly helpful in ensuring young children do not accidentally access something as they use the Web. Older children, however, will find it relatively easy to work around most filters.⁵⁷

When it comes to the internet, availability is going to be difficult to combat. The easiest leg to break online is anonymity.⁵⁸ One way to remove the anonymity of the internet is through strategic computer placement. Restrict the use of computers to public rooms. Don't allow laptops to be taken into private areas of the house.⁵⁹ Have mobile devices turned in before turning in for the night.

Another possibility is accountability software or activity logs, these keep track of all the activity that takes place on a computer and allow parents to examine what their children are doing. Among the best accountability software available is Covenant Eyes which provides filtering and accountability reports for computers and mobile devices. Many children, and even some parents, protest that this is an invasion of privacy. Remember again that positive messages

⁵⁷ Manning, 156-157.

⁵⁸ Black, 35.

⁵⁹ Jones, 213.

are better than negative. Stress the importance of safe internet use and remind them that the purpose of tracking internet use is to protect them, not to hurt them.

Every one of the above measures will be a blessing to a child, but they hold true for adults as well. Far better than simply imposing regulations, parents can lead by example keeping careful watch over their own media exposure, following family policy on public computer usage, and staying accountable to each other for internet use. Children who see their parents taking the same precautions will be more likely to respect the rules and less likely to try to work around them.

III. Correction – What to Do When Kids Look at Pornography

As proactive as parents may be in teaching their child about the dangers of pornography and the goodness of God's will for their bodies and their sexuality the day may come when they discover that their child has been looking at pornography. Depending on how the situation is handled, it could either become a traumatic experience for both parents and child or it could lead to a wonderful process of healing and growth. Obviously, the latter option is preferred. So how should parents react if they discover their child has been viewing pornography and what steps need to be taken?

Don't be Hasty

Take a deep breath. Parents who discover that their children have been looking at pornography can be assaulted by a myriad of different emotions. The temptation to immediately act on those emotions may be strong but probably would not be healthy. The ultimate goal of the conversations that must follow will not be to make the child feel guilty about what they have done but rather to show the child that what he or she has done is wrong, that there is forgiveness for what they have done, and that God has a plan for them which does not include pornography.

Acting out on impulses may make it difficult for parents to keep their minds focused. To help prevent this it is best to take some time to collect one's thoughts, do a little homework, and find as much as possible what the situation entails. It may be wise to wait as much as two days to allow for emotions to cool down and proper information to be gathered.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Gilkerson, *When Your Child Is Looking at Porn*, 20.

As they prepare to confront their child, both parents will want to talk to each other in order to identify what they plan to do and how they plan to go about it. Maintaining common ground with each other will assist in keeping the conversations with the child controlled and productive. Parents may also wish to seek advice from a counselor or a friend who has gone through a similar situation before talking to the child.

Gathering information will likely begin with a thorough inspection of the browser histories on the computers and devices the child has access to. If an accountability software has already been put in place it would be wise to check the logs in order to determine what kinds of activity have been taking place. Knowing what kind of situation they are facing will help parents determine what course of action to take and will help them more competently lead the discussion with their child.

As they make their inspection, parents may find no evidence at all of past viewing of pornography. It may be that their child accidentally clicked on a link, opened a spam email, or simply visited the wrong website. If this is the case, a conversation with the child would still be prudent as it would allow them to remind their child that they should always let a parent know when they are exposed to pornography. They could also take the opportunity to go through the steps outlined above in the plan for how to react to pornography.

Lack of evidence, however, does not necessarily mean it was a one-time accident. It is possible that the child has been taking steps to conceal their online activity. Histories can be modified or deleted and online activity concealed through concealed browsing. For these reasons, even if parents assume their child is more or less innocent a conversation could reveal that pornography has been an issue for some time. In either case, whether it was an accident or not, the conversations which follow can and should be a blessing for both the child and the parents.

Love the Child

When parents confront a child about pornography they do it as a part of their role as that child's spiritual leaders. It is important to remember that the issue at hand is not pornography. It is the spiritual welfare of the child. In his handbook for youth counseling, Marv Penner suggests

that parents use the acronym L.O.V.E. to help direct them as they help their child.⁶¹ Each letter represents an essential skill that will assist parents in leading the child to repentance for the use of pornography and to a proper understanding and treatment of God's gift of sex. Using L.O.V.E. as the framework for their counseling will also help parents remember what their core mission is: to lovingly lead their child to repentance for what they have done, and to reassure them with the love and forgiveness of their Father in heaven and their earthly parents as well.

The first skill, *listening*, is without a doubt the most important. Especially as the age of the child increases, if parents intend to dominate the conversation, or even do so accidentally, they will shut the child down and any further communication on the subject will be made almost entirely impossible. The next skill, involves what parents are able to *offer* their child.⁶² This is not limited to forgiveness but will also include support and a plan to help the child in the future. The final two skills involve *validating* what the child is going through and *eliminating* any dangers the child is facing.⁶³

1. Listen

The parents will need to initiate the conversation and get it flowing. The information gathered ahead of time will assist in doing this. One or both parents can sit down and tell the child what they have discovered or observed and then open the floor to child to see if there is anything they would like to say.

The response the child gives may vary from situation to situation but the one constant is that it is imperative that the parents patiently listen to whatever the child has to say. That doesn't mean the parents simply hear the words coming out of their son or daughter's mouth, but that they completely shift their priorities so that the thoughts, experiences, and emotions of their child come before whatever points they may want to express.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Marv Penner, *Help! My Kids Are Hurting: A Survival Guide to Working with Students in Pain*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 45.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 46.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

As a parents listen to their child it is also important that they maintain a spirit of empathy.⁶⁵ There are a number of different ways parents can show a child that they care about what they are saying without even saying anything in response. Body language is crucial. The conversation should take place in an open atmosphere. Talking over a desk or table will automatically place the child in a compromising position.

If a parent wants the child to be open with them then they need to communicate that they too are open. Lack of eye contact, crossed arms, angry looks, etc. are all things to avoid as they will not encourage the child to continue talking. Affirmation by nodding or leaning forward to listen as the child speaks will show that what they have to say is important and that their worth and input are valued.⁶⁶

On the other hand, what a parent does say while listening can also have a tremendous impact. Repeating key phrases that the child has stated, praising him or her for traits such as honesty and forwardness, and affirming that what they are saying is not easy or comfortable to talk about will all communicate that the parents truly care about the child and what they have to say. In addition to affirmation, parents can also help steer the direction of the talk by asking for more information about certain points or by checking to see if their perceptions of what the child is saying are accurate.

Another word that could fit the first slot of Penner's framework would be learning. As parents listen to their children the prime objective is learn about their child. What the child says, what he or she doesn't say, and how they choose to say what they do say will all help the parents to better understand the underlying motivations, temptations, fears, lusts and other feelings that their child is dealing with.⁶⁷

There will undoubtedly be periods of silence as the child tries to gather his or her own thoughts, patience during those periods is crucial in encouraging the child to continue speaking⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *Josh McDowell's Handbook on Counseling Youth: A Comprehensive Guide for Equipping Youth Workers, Pastors, Teachers, Parents*, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1996), 275.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Gilkerson, *When Your Child Is Looking at Porn*, 25.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

and will present yet another opportunity for the parents to observe the child and tune in to their feelings.

As they listen, the main items parents will want to determine are how the struggle with pornography began, how far the problem has progressed, and what factors or reasons led it to progress to that point.⁶⁹ Listening to the child will help the parents learn whether the child was viewing pornography out of curiosity or as a calculated means for physical gratification. It will also clarify what level of dependency or addiction the child may already have been subjected to which will be helpful in determining what kind of reaction would be appropriate.

2. Offer

After listening to everything their child has to say, the parents will finally have their chance to respond. Children can be reminded that if they are simply curious about sexual things they can come directly to their parents and ask whatever they want to know rather than turning to the internet for answers. If the child has yet to reach puberty, confronting their experimentation with pornography might be a crucial teachable moment at which point the differences between men and women can be discussed if that has not already happened. If the child is using pornography to gain information parents can offer them a safer alternative for that information.

If the child is already going through puberty that will change the parents' approach, especially if they suspect that the child is using pornography for gratification and not just to satiate curiosity. One important step in that child's recovery process will be to offer some perspective to the situation. The child may be feeling guilty about the wrong things and may be disgusted in themselves for even having the desire to look at pornography. Parents can help by affirming that sexual urges and desires are a natural part of being a person.⁷⁰ God has created us as sexual creatures. That is true of children, teenagers, and adults. Sexual desires are a blessing that God has given us to prepare us for marriage and the changes that our bodies go through are there to enable us to someday have children with our spouse.⁷¹

⁶⁹ McDowell, 275.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Gilkerson, *When Your Child Is Looking at Porn*, 33.

One useful illustration is to compare sexual drive to a fire.⁷² When fire is used in the right circumstances, like at a bonfire or in a fireplace in a home, it is a wonderful thing that blesses those who use it. But when fire is used under the wrong circumstances, like when a house catches fire, it can be very destructive. Sexual drive is similar to fire, the urges themselves are not a sin, and in fact, they can be a wonderful blessing when they are properly applied. When they are acted on wrongly though, particularly outside the confines of marriage, they can be harmful.

It may still be necessary to offer some insight into God's law, by walking through the portions of Scripture that show pornography is unnatural and that looking at pornography is sinful. More than likely, however, the law will already have accomplished its purpose. The guilt and shame of what they are doing is what keeps most children from confessing that they are looking at pornography in the first place. Talking through their experiences and struggles with it will probably result in feelings of hopelessness, despair, and disgust.

While the child may be feeling a certain degree of guilt and shame for their sin that is not necessarily tantamount to repentance. Parents will want to lovingly guide the child to truly repent for what they have done so that they can then offer them the forgiveness and hope that is theirs through Jesus. As consuming and daunting as pornography can seem, especially if the child has developed an addiction to it, parents will want to stress the totality of God's forgiveness. There is no sin so great that God cannot forgive it.

Coupled with forgiveness of sins, Jesus has also given us a new life, empowering us to combat evil and to do what is pleasing in our Father's sight by the power of the Holy Spirit. Parents can offer their own love, support, and encouragement to their child as he or she seeks to live a sanctified, pornography-free life, reminding them that when God says "no" to pornography it is because He is saying "yes" to something much better.

3. Validate

The validation step really goes hand in hand with the first two steps. As parents listen to their child and offer forgiveness, hope, and support they will be validating the worth of their child. The child will see that he or she is important both to their parents and to God. They will

⁷² Ibid.

also grow in appreciation of their strengths and weaknesses and in an understanding of what they can do differently in the future.

4. Eliminate

Once a child is convinced of his or her forgiveness and has resolved to change their life and act differently in the future, parents can help guide them in eliminating the dangers of pornography and in discovering how to better address and counter their urges.⁷³

Chief amongst a child's defenses against pornography will be their relationship and fellowship with God. God tells us that when we walk by the Spirit, we will not gratify the desires of the flesh (Gal 5:16). Helping a child develop a regular habit of devoting time to reading the Bible will greatly assist them in combatting temptations to sinfully act on their sexual urges. Another useful tool would be to equip them with a list of Bible passages to be memorized that they can meditate on or recite out loud when tempted to look at pornography.⁷⁴ Such a list is provided in Appendix B.

This would also be an important time to review the steps of the family's plan for dealing with pornography and to reassure the child that they can always come to their parents for help and support. Parents will want to increase accountability with the child. Establishing a plan that facilitates weekly meetings between parent and child will provide support for the child and opportunity for the parents to assist their daughter or son in their battle against pornography. If the family is not already using an accountability software this would be as good a time as any to implement the use of such a program. Reviewing the contents of accountability reports with the child will help to identify triggers and increase the child's safety as they use the internet.

If the initial conversation with the child or future accountability check-ins reveal that the child is struggling with an addiction to pornography parents should seek additional help. Pastors and other spiritual leaders may be able to offer a certain amount of advice but they are not trained in addiction counseling. If a child is addicted to pornography, they need professional care. Most parents would have no qualms sending their son or daughter to a specialist if they discovered they were addicted to cocaine or heroin. As seen above, pornography addiction is just as damaging and powerful as addictions to hard drugs.

⁷³ McDowell, 275.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 276.

Parents need not feel ashamed if they decide to enlist aid in helping their child. A psychologist or psychiatrist with training in addictions will be able to provide support and advice to parents and direct assistance to the child.⁷⁵ Utilizing such resources does not indicate failure on the part of the parents. Addiction powerfully impacts the child's brain in ways that parents are not equipped to help with.

It is important when searching for a mental health professional to do some research ahead of time. This is where the family's pastor may be of assistance. The pastor may have dealt with similar issues in the past and may be able to quickly refer parents to a specialist in the area. If not, he can assist in finding a professional who will address both the child's physical and spiritual needs.

⁷⁵ Manning, 164.

CONCLUSION

This paper is intended to serve as a brief overview of the practices parents will want to consider as they raise god-fearing children in an age when pornography is such a dominant threat. It is not proposed as an exhaustive guide to parenting or even to sexual education, rather its purpose is to accentuate the need for proper education on the subject for both parents and children.

Pornography is a problem for parents. For years, pornography education has been allowed to slip through the cracks. As a result there are many today who struggle with addictions to pornography. This cannot be allowed to continue. This is an issue that parents must face. It is a big threat, but not so great that parents must throw in the towel or give up protecting their children from it.

With a proper knowledge of the threats that pornography presents and a strategic plan for parenting that involves a continual sex and pornography education parents will be able to instill their children with a godly understanding of their sexual character, protect their children from the dangers of pornography, and inoculate them against the lies that pornography would have them believe. A right understanding of pornography will also assist parents in ministering to their children if they do find themselves struggling with pornography.

It is my prayer that this paper will inspire those who read it to take up an active role in defending children against pornography whether it be through their own parenting, through the shepherding of their congregation, or through whatever means God has given them. I pray with confidence that God will be with you and bless your efforts so that through them His children might grow stronger and their lives made simpler.

In nomine Jesu,

Paul M. Krueger

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

New Testament Usage of Παιδεία

- Ac 22:3 I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained (πεπαιδευμένος) in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today.
- Tit 2:11-12 For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us (παιδεύουσα) to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.
- 2 Co 6:9 known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten (παιδευόμενοι), and yet not killed
- Heb 7:5-11 ⁵And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline (παιδείας), and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, ⁶because the Lord disciplines (παιδεύει) the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”
- ⁷Endure hardship as discipline (παιδείαν); God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? ⁸If you are not disciplined (παιδείας)—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all... ¹¹No discipline (παιδεία) seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

Appendix B

Memory Passages to Assist with Overcoming the Temptations of Pornography

Job 31:1 I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a young woman.

Psalm 51:10 Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

Psalm 119:9-11 How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word. ¹⁰I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. ¹¹I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.

Romans 12:1-2 Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

1 Corinthians 10:13 No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

Philippians 4:8 Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

Philippians 4:13 I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

Colossians 3:1-3 Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.