

Interview with Familyandmedia.org, January 2017

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Familyandmedia: According to a recent report from the American Association of Pediatricians, *The Impact of Pornography on Children*, pornography consumption by young Americans is on the rise and is a direct cause of various psychological and physical dysfunctions. Can it affect male/human fertility?

Dr. Lickona: It can. The psychiatrist Norman Doidge, in his 2007 bestseller, *The Brain That Changes Itself*, was one of the first to report that persistent pornography use was linked to male sexual problems such as such as erectile dysfunction and loss of attraction to real partners. The *Journal of the American Medical Association Psychiatry* subsequently reported that even moderate pornography use by males was accompanied by reduced grey matter in the brain and decreased sexual responsiveness with real women, even though Internet pornography continued to be sexually arousing for them.

Here is how neuroscientists explained this: “Brain neurons that fire together, wire together.” Every time a person is sexually excited by pornographic images and has an orgasm by masturbating, a flood of dopamine—the reward neurotransmitter—consolidates the brain connections that were firing during that sexual experience. What the brain finds sexually arousing keeps changing as the pornography user experiences new scripts and images.

In this way, pornography hijacks the brain’s reward system. Just as with drugs, you build up a tolerance so you need more porn, and more deviant forms of porn, for the same effects. Withdrawal symptoms can occur when you try to walk away. Last April, the connection between porn and sexual dysfunction became a cover story in *Time* magazine: “Porn: Why Young Men Who Grew Up on It Are Becoming Advocates for Turning It Off.”

A few years have passed since Terry Crews, famous for his aftershave commercials, publicly admitted to having a pornography addiction and his struggle to free himself from it. If it’s true that the consumption of pornography is due to a dependence similar to that of those suffering cocaine, alcohol and amphetamines addictions, what can be done to help sufferers?

Fortunately, because of the brain's plasticity, the neural rewiring caused by pornography is reversible. Some persons are able to achieve this on their own by quitting porn "cold turkey," but many more find they need help from a counselor, therapist, or support group.

Through the work of Dr. Patrick Carnes in the secular community and Dr. Mark Laaser in the Christian community, more attention has been drawn to various forms of sexual addiction, including pornography addiction. Recovery programs such as Sexaholics Anonymous and Sex Addicts Anonymous, based on the 12 steps originally used by Alcoholics Anonymous, have helped many people.

More recently, Dr. Kevin Majeres, a Harvard Medical School psychiatrist, has created a website, www.overcomingcravings.com, that provides virtue-based, self-help modules that explain the nature of addictions, including pornography addiction, and how to overcome them.

The Catholic psychotherapist Dr. Peter Kleponis, in his recent book *Integrity Starts Here!*, lays out a 7-point pornography recovery program that he says he has used successfully with hundreds of patients. He explains that emotional factors such as loneliness, insecurity, stress, anger, a lack of fulfillment in life, and family-of-origin wounds like divorce can contribute to using or becoming addicted to pornography. His 7-point program includes self-knowledge and commitment; purifying your life; support and accountability; counseling; a spiritual plan, including daily prayer; continuing education about healthy relationships and stress management; and doing "virtue exercises" every day that build up the character strengths that protect someone from slipping back. He stresses that striving to live virtuously is a lifelong pursuit.

Besides causing sexual dysfunction in some users, what other harmful effects of pornography consumption has research brought to light?

In 2012, the journal *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity* published a comprehensive review of pornography studies in many different countries that examined the effects of Internet pornography on teenagers. A number of findings were consistent across cultures:

- The more frequently teens viewed sexually explicit Internet material, the more they thought about sex, the stronger their interest in sex, and the more they became distracted by their thoughts about sex.
- The more teens consumed pornography, the more likely they were to approve of casual sex and the earlier they began having sex.
- The more they watched porn, the more likely some teens were to engage in the high-risk sexual behaviors that porn depicts, such as anal sex, sex with multiple partners, and sex while using drugs.
- When teens viewed pornography that depicted violence, they were more likely to become aggressive in their own sexual behavior.
- The more teens used porn, the more likely they were to become depressed and engage in delinquent behavior.

- Girls tended to report feeling physically inferior to the women they saw in pornographic material.
- Boys tended to worry that they might not be able to perform as the men in these media did.

Are there other differences between males and females?

Many studies have found that males are much more likely to consume pornography, use it for sexual excitement and masturbation, and view it alone and in same-sex groups. One estimate is that 87% of persons addicted to pornography are males.

However, girls are increasingly accessing hard-core pornography. A U.S. Netvalue Report on Minors found that by the turn of the century, youth under 17 were spending 65% more time on adult pornography Internet sites than they did on game sites. Four of the ten who had visited a pornographic site were girls.

In the American Association of Pediatricians report, pornography consumption by young people had, among its effects, the acceptance of infidelity within relationships and the perception of marriage as obsolete. In what way and to what extent can pornography affect and alter our attitudes toward marriage and the desire to have children?

The pornography study you're referring to was done in the 1980s before Internet pornography. It had one group of randomly assigned college students and other young adults from the community view pornographic material for 6 weeks. Among various negative effects, including greater tolerance for rape, those subjects showed a dramatic reduction in how they rated the desirability of marriage and having children, compared to ratings by a control group that had viewed non-sexual material. This experiment, we should note, was ethically problematic because it exposed subjects in the porn-viewing group to something that was harmful.

In explaining why marriage and children became less desirable to those who had viewed pornography, the authors of this study pointed out that pornography depicts sexual gratification as impersonal, self-centered, and relationship-free rather than part of a committed love relationship that carries responsibilities. By contrast, these researchers said, marriage and parenting are two of the biggest commitments and responsibilities we can take on as human beings. Pornography's depiction of depersonalized, "free sex" appears to have had the effect, on the young adults in this study, of weakening the values of love, responsibility, and sacrifice that marriage and raising children require.

In what other ways does pornography give a distorted picture of human sexuality?

Besides divorcing sex from love, pornography presents a very warped, dehumanized picture of sexual relations. It doesn't show the behaviors that are part of healthy, caring sexual relationships such as intimate conversation, kissing, cuddling, and being responsive to each other's needs. In pornography, deviant and abusive sex is the norm.

In a competitive market, pornographers vie with each other to produce ever more extreme footage. In one study of popular porn videos, the number of sexual partners in a scene ranged from 1 to 19; the average was three. Scenes in these videos commonly featured gang rape, brutal and repeated anal sex, and other degrading actions such as men ejaculating into a woman's face. Nine out of 10 scenes showed a woman being verbally humiliated, hit, beaten, or otherwise harmed. Almost always, the victim seemed not to mind or looked happy about it.

Actors who have quit the porn industry say that with editing and off-screen coercion, pornographers can make it look as if what's happening onscreen is being enjoyed—but the reality is that the actors are constantly threatened and verbally abused by their agents and directors to get them to do things they don't want to do. Websites such as FighttheNewDrug.org and pornkillslove.com include such testimonies by former porn actors. Books that reveal the sordidness of the porn industry include *Pornland* by Gail Dines and Pamela Paul's *Pornified: How Pornography is Transforming Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families*.

How much of this kind of information should we share with our children when we talk to them about pornography?

It depends on their age. With younger children, we should protect their innocence by sparing them the graphic details. Most teens can handle and should know the truth about the pornography industry. As parents, we ourselves should certainly be aware of how toxic, perverse, and immoral pornography is. A sense of revulsion and moral indignation should inspire us to do everything we can to protect our children from this cultural poison.

Is prevention possible? What can families do?

There are books for parents that are helpful such as *Good Pictures/Bad Pictures: Porn-Proofing Today's Young Kids* by Kristen A. Jensen and Gail Poyner and *Every Man's Battle, Every Young Man's Battle, and Preparing Your Son for Every Man's Battle* by Stephen Arterburn and Fred Stoeker.

Parents often are at a loss for the “words to say” about sexual matters. In talking with kids about pornography, we should begin in a positive way by emphasizing that sex is a beautiful gift—indeed, from a faith perspective, a gift from God. It's meant to express and deepen the faithful love between a husband and wife and to bring new life into the world. Pornography turns this beautiful gift into something unloving, dirty, and destructive, something truly awful—the very opposite of what it's meant to be.

In my own work with parents and teachers, I've offered various reasons they can use to explain to kids why pornography is wrong and harmful and something they should never deliberately let into their hearts, minds, and souls. The reasons from this list that you choose to give or emphasize will depend on the age and personality of your child and your own moral and religious convictions.

1. Pornography treats people as objects to be used and abused for the sexual pleasure of viewers and the profit of the pornographers. That's wrong because every person has human dignity and should never be disrespected or exploited.
2. Sex is meant to express and deepen love between people. Porn separates sex from love. It gives a false picture of human sexuality—the opposite of what sex is really like in relationships that are loving.
3. The mind stores everything. Once you let pornographic images in, you may not be able to get rid of them even if you want to.
4. Pornography changes the brain, like a drug. It can quickly become addictive and take over your life. Because it changes what the brain finds sexually attractive, it can reduce your ability to have normal sexual relationships with real people.
5. For boys, pornography is usually accompanied by masturbation, another habit that's hard to break. Both habits will reduce your self-control and self-respect.
6. Carried into marriage, both of those habits can cause problems between husbands and wives. A woman whose husband uses pornography often feels like the victim of an affair. Masturbation—having sex with yourself—weakens the sexual relationship between spouses.
7. From a faith perspective, pornography goes against God's plan for how we are meant to use his gift of sex and violates the sexual purity God expects of us.

Unfortunately, children's exposure to Internet pornography is happening at younger and younger ages. Experts estimate that in the U.S. and UK, the *average* age for boys' first exposure is now 11. This means that some form of parental teaching about pornography has become necessary, especially with boys, even before the middle school years in an effort to prevent involvement and to establish a moral framework for discussing pornography should involvement occur.

If we find that our children have already been exposed to pornography—accidentally or intentionally—we need to listen calmly to how that happened and explain lovingly but very clearly why pornography is seriously wrong and harmful and how to avoid it in the future. If we have faith, we should also pray over them for their future protection and whatever emotional or spiritual healing may be needed. Children exposed to pornography at young ages may react with anxiety, disgust, shock, embarrassment, anger, fear, sadness, or a combination of these emotions.

Children who have deliberately accessed pornography may react with shame and guilt when parents find out. Those are normal moral responses when we've done something we know or sense is wrong. Our task as parents is to help a child to move beyond those emotions and make a specific, positive plan for how to avoid this behavior in the future, including what to say and do, for example, when a friend shows you pornography.

With middle schoolers and up, I highly recommend sitting down with them and checking out the Fight the New Drug and Porn Kills Love websites. Both were created by young adults who have launched a worldwide movement that uses science to educate people about the dangers of pornography. Both websites include short, state-of-the-art videos and concise "Get

the Facts” presentations of the many ways that “porn harms the brain, the heart, and the world.”

The recent book by the German sociologist Gabriele Kubly, *The Global Sexual Revolution*, argues that the sexual revolution seeks to overthrow sexual morality. How has parents’ challenge of dealing with pornography been affected by the sexually permissive environment created by the sexual revolution?

It’s made it much harder. The sexual revolution normalized pornography, sexualized the media and marketplace, and promoted recreational sex.

Talking to our kids about the dangers posed by porn will be more effective if it is grounded in a larger, ongoing conversation about the sexual world we now live in and how sexual morality protects us from being corrupted and hurt by it. Our children need to understand that morality isn’t a negative thing that takes the fun out of life. On the contrary, strong moral values help us build a good character, have self-respect, form truly loving relationships, and pursue authentic happiness.

As parents, we need to talk to our kids about what we see as unhealthy sexual attitudes and behaviors, including the sexual messages of the media and the hook-up culture that now prevails on college campuses and in many high schools. This conversation should clearly convey our beliefs and values about these matters and help our children develop a well-formed sexual conscience and habits of chaste living that will enable them to resist the sexual temptations and pressures of today’s hypersexualized culture. We deprive our children of something they very much need if we don’t give them countercultural ways of thinking about sexual matters.

As part of this, we need to give our kids solid reasons to save all sexual intimacy for marriage—reasons that appeal to their intelligence. We can say something like this: “Sexual intimacy is most meaningful, most fulfilling, when it’s part of something bigger—a continuing, loving, committed relationship. When you’re married, your sexual intimacy expresses your total commitment to each other. From this perspective, the ultimate intimacy belongs within the ultimate commitment; we join our bodies when and because we join our lives. And if that commitment exists, a child conceived by your sexual love will have a mother and a father to provide the love and security that every child deserves.”

What values and policies regarding media in the home will help parents reduce the risk of their children becoming involved with pornography?

First of all, there should be the kind of clear and specific teaching about the reasons why pornography is wrong that I’ve suggested. Second, there are safeguards, such as Net Nanny, that parents can install—and tell kids they are installing—that block Internet pornography. But these steps will be more effective if parents also exercise wise authority and vigilance regarding *all* use of media in the family and clearly explain their reasons for doing so. This conversation about the role of media in family life should communicate a big idea:

“The use of the media in our family is a privilege, not a right. That privilege has to be exercised with the approval and permission of parents—in a way that is consistent with our family values. So, for any particular TV show, movie, magazine, music CD, video game, Internet site, or social media, here’s the question: *Is it consistent with what we value and believe as a family?*”

Specific guidelines about media use will vary from family to family. In formulating your family’s guidelines, it’s wise to write them out, in a posted “Media Contract” that everyone signs. Here are some guidelines many families have found helpful:

1. The use of any media in our home must support our family values.
2. No TV before school, before homework is done, or during meals. Always ask permission to turn on the TV, and watch *only* approved programs.
3. Certain nights are “quiet nights”; the TV stays off so we can focus on family activities and doing others things. We’ll choose these nights together as a family.
4. All video games must be previewed by a parent, and limited to agreed-upon times.
5. No mobile devices at meals or after an agreed-upon time of night.
6. Pornographic web sites are blocked by an Internet screen (Note: Digitally savvy kids know how to get around most of these controls, so talking with them about why pornography is wrong is essential for developing the most important control—their conscience).
7. *Internet rules:* No use of the Internet without parental approval. You must have parental permission to download anything.
8. *Movies:* No R-rated movies and no PG-13 or PG movies without parental permission. Parents will check out the content and rating of current films on www.screenit.com and www.kidsinmind.com.

To help kids understand the reasons for your guidelines, you can say something like this: “We want you to be able to watch good TV programs and movies and to use other media. But there’s a lot of bad stuff that you shouldn’t be letting into your mind, heart, and soul. It can affect you in ways you may not even be aware of. Trust us about this. Parents who care about their kids care enough to set limits on these things, just as we have rules in other areas. It’s because we love you.”

Plenty of research shows that when our children believe our exercise of authority is based on a loving concern for their welfare, they are much more willing to accept our rules and restrictions.