

## **Pornography & Sexual Abuse: Some Warnings & Tips for Parents**

I do not want to scare anyone; my goal is simply to raise awareness about an issue that is serious and growing - sexual abuse and pornography.

We all wish childhood could be a time of innocence, fun, and happiness - but it simply doesn't always happen that way. Pornography and sexual abuse are a part of life, and responsible parents need to educate and prepare themselves and their children. So as much as I know this is a difficult topic, I have found that it is far better to warn and inform parents than to only deal with these issues after the fact. And to understand the issue, we need to understand what its effects are.

Among my clients are a large number of adults, many of whom are dealing with sexual issues whose roots go deeply into their childhoods. Several of them are women who were sexually abused as children that are now trying to cope with the traumatic and long-term impacts of their abuse, and many are men who are addicted to pornography, an addiction that drastically affects their personal, family, work, and of course love lives. Because their struggles are rooted in their childhood, they remind me constantly of the need for vigilance while children are young, impressionable, and vulnerable. This is why I wish to share with any parent who is willing to listen some important advice "from the trenches" to help them protect their children from the real sexual dangers that are out there.

*Please note that this advice is for general, informational purposes only. I strongly urge you to speak with a professional directly if you have any questions or concerns about this topic.*

### **FAMILY & CLOSE FRIENDS**

As unpleasant as this reality is, the plain truth is that study after study and statistics as far back as we have been keeping them have conclusively demonstrated that children are far more likely to be abused and taken advantage of by family members and close family friends, rather than strangers, teachers, Scout leaders, and so on. The high-profile stories that end up in the press usually involve those types of individuals, but I would say that at least 90% of the abuse victims I have worked with were abused by a parent, sibling, other relative or very close family friend. It is a tragic reality, but one that we simply cannot ignore. So to prevent abuse within a family or with close family friends, I suggest that all parents:

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- Talk openly and honestly with kids about sex and sexuality, including what abuse is and what to do if it happens. Many parents send the unintended message to their kids “We don’t talk about that stuff in our family” and are then surprised when their kids are getting all of their information from uninformed peers or worse. It is often embarrassing and uncomfortable to talk about these topics with children, but if you start off young and keep at it regularly, they will come to see it as a normal part of their family life. If not, they will seek information most likely from unsafe sources and will not be prepared to come to you if there is a problem.
- Never allow young children to be in private, secluded areas for extended time periods - regardless of age. When children are playing in a room together, keep the doors open. Never let children lock the door if they have someone in the room with them. Avoid having the kids all sleep together away from any adults. And you are just asking for trouble if you leave children alone at home with supervision from someone you don’t trust 110%.
- Be very, very cautious when entrusting children - especially teens - with the unsupervised care of younger children. Many children are naturally curious about sexuality, and relatively mild exploration between siblings or peers (“I’ll show you mine if you show me yours” type of stuff) can quickly escalate to sex acts. Simply put, children and teens are not prepared to handle the very strong feelings and impulses that make up the sex drive, and become easily overwhelmed by the desire to explore their impulses with even a tiny amount of stimulation - even with family members. As such, kids need to be supervised and kept safe so they can learn to control and anticipate their sexual impulses, and this doesn’t happen overnight.
- Be very, very careful about slumber parties or overnights of any kind. Sleepovers are generally considered a “normal” part of growing up, but they are a prime time for abuse and other sexual acting out to occur. The number of abuse cases I have seen that were the direct result of some sort of overnight party or sleepover has been one of the biggest surprises of my career. This goes for both the children involved and the parents of the child hosting the party.

## **PORNOGRAPHY & THE INTERNET**

We’ve all heard about the dangers of the internet, but many parents I have worked with are not as proactive and careful as they probably should be. So few of them know just what a dangerous place the internet can be. To help parents address this issue, I suggest that they:

- Speak to their children specifically and concretely about what is and is not appropriate in their home regarding internet usage. Set clear boundaries and stick to them. Clear means saying things like “In this family we do not look at pictures, videos, cartoons, or anything else that shows people without clothing

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on” or “In this family we do not chat or email with anyone who talks about your or their private parts” or “If you ever accidentally come across something with naked people, turn off the monitor and come get mommy or daddy. You will not be in trouble, and we will be very, very proud of you for helping us keep those things out of our house.”

- Avoid letting their children use or “surf” the internet unattended. I know this is not always convenient, but we cannot forget that it takes literally seconds - just a few keystrokes or mouse clicks - to get to highly explicit sexual material online. And most parents are shocked by how easy it is to get to sexually explicit sites unintentionally. Whenever possible, use the internet with them or closely supervise them.
- Use parental control tools and other products to the fullest. There are a number of products out there to help you when you cannot be there to keep an eye on your kid’s online activities. Keystroke logs, filters, and so forth are perfectly acceptable. Do not be fooled by the argument that children have some sort of “right” to privacy from their parents. I do not want you to become overbearing or obnoxious, and I urge you to monitor with respect and love. However, the bottom line is that privacy is a privilege, not a right (you are raising children, not running a democracy, after all) so do not hesitate to exercise your authority to investigate and monitor your child’s use of the internet with the latest products that you might find. There are a number of great products out there to help you keep your kids safe. Find ones you feel comfortable with and use them.\*
- Never trivialize the harmful effects suggestive materials can have. I can’t tell you how many times I have heard parents talk about their child looking up underwear or bathing suit pictures online as though it was just a matter of “boys will be boys.” I do not wish to be overdramatic, but for certain kids the difference between those types of exposure and hardcore porn is often like the difference between beer and whiskey - sure, one of them is much stronger than the other, but it’s ultimately just a matter of degree. They are still largely the same thing and have the same basic effect. The issue is not necessarily how much skin or which body parts the child sees; the issue is that the child who becomes desensitized to sexual images can begin to see sexuality and relationships in terms that are not healthy. Women become objects, not people; sex becomes uncoupled from having an emotional connection; relationships begin to mean “my main job is to sexually satisfy my boyfriend or girlfriend”; kids begin to think that they are entitled to sexual satisfaction without any emotional or social expectations; they see women as loose, easy, and primarily meant for men’s sexual gratification; and so on. It has been enlightening to me to find that all of the pornography addicts and sexual predators I have worked with started out with seemingly “light” material, such as pictures of women in

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swimsuits, before they moved on to more explicit materials and behavior. It really is a very, very slippery slope.

- Keep the computer in a public place like the kitchen or living room. No child “needs” a computer with internet access in their room. This is one of the absolute most risky moves a parent can make. I cannot think of any reason to ever deviate from this rule.
- Know at least as much as their kids do about how their computer works. If you do not “know the ropes” then your children will astound you with their knowledge of the intricate inner workings of your software and hardware. Take a class, read a book - whatever it takes, get yourself up to speed.
- Never, ever allow their child to meet in person someone they met online without you. Period, no exceptions.

While I could never list every possible warning or tip, these are some of the more important ones. Please note that in the end there is no foolproof method for keeping children away from pornography and abuse. All children are at risk, no matter how vigilant we are. However, you can greatly improve the likelihood that your children will avoid or be protected from pornography and sexual abuse by taking these vital steps.

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