Adolescents in a pornified culture

By undermining marriage and family life, by assailing them on the internet, pornography is doing serious harm to young people.

"Pornography is a visual representation of sexuality which distorts an individual's concept of the nature of conjugal relations. This, in turn, alters both sexual attitudes and behavior. It is a major threat to marriage, to family, to children and to individual happiness. In undermining marriage it is one of the factors in undermining social stability."

So begins a major new report on pornography by Patrick Fagan, Senior Fellow and Director of the Centre for Research on Marriage and Religion at the Family Research Council in Washington.

"Social scientists, clinical psychologists, and biologists have begun to clarify some of the social and psychological effects, and neurologists are beginning to delineate the biological mechanisms through which pornography produces its powerful negative effects," says Dr Fagan, whose 30-page report, The Effects of Pornography on Individuals, Marriage, Family and Community, is a synthesis of these recent findings.

MercatorNet presents here some excerpts on adolescents and pornography from the report.

One of the biggest tasks of adolescent members of all societies is to come to grips with their burgeoning sexuality. Some have always tested the limits of sexual expression even when strong social controls were in place. In well-ordered societies, such testing triggers immediate social sanctions from parents, mentors, and community.

But contemporary culture is alarmingly sexualized, and the traditional sexual taboos of a well-functioning society have broken down. Nearly two-thirds of United States high-school students have had sexual intercourse by grade twelve. Of these sexually active high-schoolers, 70 percent of females and 55 percent of males report that they wish they had waited instead.

These numbers have massive implications for the future of the American family, for of women who have had three sexual partners other than their eventual husband, only 39 percent will be in a stable marriage by their mid-thirties. In 2007, 20 percent of U.S. girls in grade 12 already have had sexual intercourse with four or more partners.

A substantial factor in this shift has been the growth of digital media and the Internet. Two recent reports, one by the American Psychological Association on hyper-sexualized girls, and the other by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy on the pornographic content of phone texting among teenagers, make clear that the digital revolution is being used by younger and younger children to dismantle the barriers that channel sexuality into family life.
The role of the Internet

Though most U.S. parents (78 percent) are worried about their adolescents accessing Internet pornography, not all teenagers readily take to this sexualized culture. Most start out being ill at ease with any display of pornography: they tend to be upset or embarrassed, with reactions ranging from fear to shame to anger to fascination. In one survey, about a quarter were “very” upset by this exposure, but they tend not to report it.

Adolescents often come across pornography accidentally on the Internet. One study found that 70 percent of youth aged 15 to 17 accidentally came across pornography online. A study of 1,501 youth aged ten to seventeen examined unwanted exposure incidents more thoroughly: in 26 percent of the cases, respondents reported that when they tried to exit an unwanted site, they were actually brought to an additional sex site. The same study showed that out of the total number of unwanted exposure incidents, 44 percent of the time the youth did not disclose the episode to anyone else.

These initial reactions of disgust, however, rapidly dissipate so that older adolescents tend to use sexually explicit Internet material more often than younger adolescents and are twice as likely to report intentional pornography use as are younger adolescents. Repeated exposure to pornography eventually wipes out any feelings of shame and disgust and gives way, instead, to unadulterated enjoyment.

A 2005 survey showed that respondents who reported unintentional exposure to pornography were over 2.5 times as likely to then report intentional exposure as those who did not report any unintentional exposure. It seems the unintentional exposure has its effect of bringing them back for more, which of course is one of the fears of parents.

Risk factors for use of pornography

Several factors predict an adolescent’s use of pornography. Teenagers who watch pornography more frequently tend to be high sensation seekers, less satisfied with their lives, have a fast Internet connection, and have friends who are younger. Adolescents are at greater risk for intentionally seeking out sexual material when they have high levels of computer use. The more time spent on the computer, the more likely these adolescents will search for sexually explicit content. Not surprisingly, given all that has already been reported, viewers who masturbate while viewing sexually explicit material assess the material more favorably than those who do not masturbate.

There is a difference between boys’ and girls’ reasons for seeking pornographic sites, differences that parallel the different patterns of adult male and female use of pornography. Boys tend to seek pornography initially because they are curious or want sexual arousal, while girls tend first to go to non-pornographic but sexually oriented sites for sexual health or relationship-related information.

Also, the impacts are different for boys and girls: males report more positive memories of sexually explicit material than females, and report “more positive attitudes toward uncommitted sexual exploration” as their use of pornography increases. In one study, adolescents who watched the highest level of sexual content on television doubled the likelihood they would initiate intercourse.

Impact on adolescent development and behavior

Pornography viewing among teenagers disorients them during that developmental phase when they have to learn how to handle their sexuality and when they are most vulnerable to uncertainty about their sexual beliefs and moral values. A study of 2,343 adolescents found that sexually explicit Internet material significantly increased their uncertainties about sexuality. The study also showed
that increased exposure to sexually explicit Internet material increased favorable attitudes toward sexual exploration with others outside of marriage and decreased marital commitment to the other spouse.

Other studies have shown links between pornography and low levels of sexual self-esteem, as well as feelings of loneliness, including major depression.

Viewing pornography can engender feelings of shame: In a study of high school students, the majority of those who had viewed pornography felt some degree of shame for viewing it. However, 36 percent of males and 26 percent of females said they were never ashamed of viewing pornography, giving some idea of the level of desensitization already reached in society.

High adolescent consumption of pornography also affects behavior. Male pornography use is linked to significantly increased sexual intercourse with non-romantic friends, and is likely a correlate of the so-called “hook-up” culture.

Exposure to pornographic sexual content can be a significant factor in teenage pregnancy. A three-year longitudinal study of teenagers found that frequent exposure to televised sexual content was related to a substantially greater likelihood of teenage pregnancy within the succeeding three years. This same study also found that the likelihood of teenage pregnancy was two times greater when the quantity of that sexual content exposure, within the viewing episodes, was high rather than low.

The protective role of parental involvement

Although U.S. adolescents indicate their preferred source of sexual information is their parents, more than half of them report they have learned about intercourse, pregnancy, and birth control from television, and half of teenage women report they first learned about intercourse from magazines.

A study of 1,300 eight- to thirteen-year-old girls found that, among those who engaged in “cybersex,” 95 percent of the parents were completely unaware of their children’s involvement. Compared to adolescents who do not search for pornography online, adolescents who search for pornography online are about three times as likely to have parents who do not monitor their behavior at all (or very little). Compared to those who do not seek out pornography, those who seek Internet pornography are three times as likely to give a poor rating of their attachment to their parent.

Clearly there is a lot that parents can do, but it takes a good family life, lots of communication with the adolescent, and a relationship that permits such communication about such an anxiety-provoking topic.

The key to militating against these damaging patterns and to protecting against the effects of pornography is to foster relationships of affection and attachment in the family. The first and most important relationship is between the father and the mother. The second is engaged parents who love their children. In today’s technological society, this means limiting, monitoring, and directing their children’s Internet use. This, in turn, provides an invaluable shield against Internet pornography, and allows room for a healthy sexuality to unfold in a natural and socially supported way.

In our over-sexualized culture, with a longer pre-marriage period, children need the capacity for abstinence if their sexuality is to be channeled into stable marriage, procreation, and healthy family life for their children. Strong families remain the best defense against the negative effects of pornography, especially when aided by regular religious worship with all the proven benefits it brings.
Finally, the fundamental role of government (including the courts) is to protect innocent citizens, most especially children and adolescents, and to protect the sound functioning of the basic institutions of family, church, school, marketplace, and government. They are all interdependent. Pornography, clearly, undermines both marriage and the family, and has a host of ill effects. It is time for government to reassess its laissez-faire attitude towards the proliferation of pornography, especially on the Internet.

Our present and future families need protection from this insidious enemy of love, affection, and of family and social stability.

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