

Your Teen's Porn Brain
Is robbing your teen of brain power?

Popular search engines logged more than ten billion searches last June. Two and a half billion of those searches were for pornography. With the invention of the Internet and devices to log onto it, including that smart phone your teen may own, anyone, at any time, can watch porn. There are approximately 420 million adult web pages online to excite viewers, some of it free to a child of any age.

Many thirteen to sixteen year olds spend almost two hours a week viewing pornography, claims a 2009 CyberSentinel poll. Mothers have reported finding their children as young as eight watching. With more tweens and teens announcing that they watch porn, why aren't more parents talking about it? Because whether we are pro-porn or anti-porn, the conversation is usually emotionally charged. We do not have as much neural connectivity to our brain's more rational prefrontal region when that happens. However, our challenge with the topic robs us of the opportunity to help our teens deal with the impact porn has on their lives, and ultimately, on their brains.

Teen pregnancy rates are climbing. So are the number of teen girls committing violent crimes, acts that were once committed mainly by males. Teen dating violence is on the rise as is teen suicides. Could porn be adding to our teens' woes? Yes, according to Wendy Maltz, a sex therapist and notable researcher. She believes porn is creating a national health problem that harms our emotional and sexual relationships.

Research has yet to prove conclusively that viewing of pornography leads to sexism, misogyny, and the other problems listed above. However, a 2008 study linked the listening to lyrics of rap and hip-hop to sexism. It is not much of a stretch to think that watching women degraded, as opposed to simply hearing about it, would have the same effect. The brain reacts to viewing images as intensely as it does to reality.

More than seventy percent of porn users claim their porn viewing is a secret, according to an MSNBC study. Porn appears to bathe our brains in neurochemicals that lead to shame. Perhaps in part due to our innate sense of humanity. In Michael Tomasello's book, *Why We Cooperate*, he claims babies are born to be social and to help others. Could it be that watching women used for the pleasure of men, and often roughly or degradingly used at that, triggers our innate desire to help the woman? Yet, watching porn for our own titillation, are we not using her as well? Our brain circuits are attempting to deal with two opposite needs: Our erotic need, and our more humanitarian need. That is confusing enough for an adult. A teen's brain may not be mature enough to understand all the nuances of porn's impact.

By now most of us know that teen brains are less mature than adult brains. Teens use their limbic system more often for making decisions. That is the area of the brain used for feeding, fleeing, fighting and sexual reproduction. Growth and connectivity to the prefrontals takes decades. Without a more mature brain to help teens sort out the intense emotional arousal of porn, watching it could leave a teen feeling that porn is a true representation of what sex, relationships, and intimacy should look like in real life.

A teen who replicates porn-style relationships in their own life could suffer from lack of intimacy and the needed feel-good neurochemicals that go hand in hand with such a relationship. Teens need connections with others who have organized brains in order for their brains to grow properly. A brain "on porn: is not an organized brain." It is a highly aroused brain, not a "thinking clearly" brain.

Can we make an argument that porn is leading to neurological poverty in our teens and adding to their woes? While the researchers ponder the question, parents may want to ponder these ideas:

Be open to the fact that pornography may be harming your teen. Whether or not they watch it, forty-five percent of teens surveyed said their friends do.

Be willing to listen to your teen about how they feel about porn. That means you have to ask calm questions. The majority of the boys interviewed about how the media affects their relationship with girls claimed porn had a negative effect on our culture. How does your teen feel? Ask.

Find ways to think about, and talk about pornography with less emotional charge. Your teenager will instinctively know how to push your buttons and get you worked up so that conversations about the topic will become fruitless.

Examine the rationalization that porn stars know what they are doing, and get paid so there is no harm done. That rationale does not disclose the fact that studies reveal many workers in the sex industry were abused as children. Abuse reduces neurogenesis (the growth of new neurons) and synaptogenesis (the integrated connectivity of neurons) so it stands to reason that the neural networks for growing up to be teachers, doctors, engineers, etc. did not get a chance to form. Add that victims often reenact their abuse, and it does not take much to understand why some porn stars trade sex for money.

Compassionately study your own use of pornography. In order to help our teens, we often have to help ourselves first. If you feel you have a problem with porn, please seek help.

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