

A P A R E N T ' S
T O
G U I D E

Talking to Boys about Porn

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It's Not a Question of If, but *When* Our Sons Will See Porn

“Pornography exposure among college males is now almost universal.”

—[Pornography and Public Health: Research Summary](#) by the National Center on Sexual Exploitation

It's not really news that men struggle with lust. It's also not news that the internet has made sexually explicit material available to anyone within a single click. But many parents are unaware of just how pervasive porn use has become, particularly among men, or of how young boys are when they first see it. Whereas boys used to have to make an effort to see a dirty picture, the internet has now made it difficult to avoid seeing graphic sexual images, even when trying to avoid it.

In this guide, we want to honestly look at how porn is impacting men and those around them. But we also want to point you toward the very real hope that Christ offers to anyone who has ever sinned, not least of all boys and men struggling with porn addictions.

— What is culture telling men?

Western culture is becoming increasingly hypersexualized. Anti-porn advocate [Gail Dines observes](#), “I want you to think what it means to be male and grow up in a culture where, before you can even speak, females are offering themselves to you: Come get me, come get me” [warning: the linked video contains strong language and disturbing content]. Anyone who has paid any attention to advertising knows exactly what she is talking about. Men in American culture are constantly bombarded with sexualized images of women.

While culture is communicating many mixed messages about what it means to be a man, one of the major ones is that in order to be truly successful, men should be getting an abundance of sexual attention from beautiful women. If a man is able to brag to his peers about how often he is “getting laid,” he has status in their eyes. This idea goes much deeper than appealing to a man's sex drive. It is an underlying message about identity and purpose. A man has power and value in the eyes of others if he has this attention from females, especially if he's so “strong” that he doesn't let that attention affect him emotionally.

— What does porn tell men?

Porn portrays an overblown fantasy in which the above ideal is fulfilled. It depicts men as strong, dominating, and detached. In porn, men are physically and sexually exaggerated (as are women, who only matter for their physical features). Women in porn are submissive and do whatever the men want. According to porn's narrative, women enjoy being aggressively, sexually dominated, and they enjoy being objectified and used. [They have an endless appetite](#) for sex and never need or want to say “no.” And, if they do say “no,” it really means “yes.”

— What is the current state of male exposure to porn?

In 2001 (i.e. *seventeen* years ago) [the Kaiser Family Foundation found](#) that 70% of adolescents aged 15–17 had seen porn online accidentally. Finding a young man who has never seen porn is now far more difficult than finding one who has. [One college survey](#) found that 93% of males had viewed porn while they were growing up. Other research found that nearly half of college-aged males were first exposed to porn before they were age 13. Evidence suggests that the younger a boy is when he is first exposed to porn, the more likely he is to consume it later on, as well as let it inform his sexual behavior.

Many put the average age of [male exposure to porn](#) at 11- to 12-years-old, and possibly as young as 8-years-old. Remember that this is an **average**, so whatever middle number you go with, there are boys who encounter porn at even younger ages.

— Does male porn use have any widespread effects?

People who approve of porn use often justify it by saying that viewing porn is private and causes no harm to others. But just because we say that doesn't make it true. Porn has a real and serious impact not only on those who view it, but also on those who don't. Consider the comment below from [Pornhub's 2017 Year in Review](#) [*warning: this content is on the Pornhub domain and is disturbing and NSFW*].

To give context: There is a type of porn known as “hentai,” which is a sexually explicit genre of [anime](#). In the comments below the article, some Pornhub users were questioning why anime porn was so popular in 2017. One user responded as follows:

Prettier women. There are a lot of beautiful pornstars, yes, but those won't cross the limit of them being human. Hentai women are drawn and animated which is why they're much prettier (and cleaner) than real women, and they naturally have more sex appeal.

This statement is devastating. It reveals the deep isolation and slavery this person (presumably a man) is in. So long as he has bought into porn's lies, he can never have a meaningful relationship with a real woman and will not even want to have one. It's harmful enough for women to believe they can't be valuable unless they look like porn stars. Now even the porn stars are excluded from being considered beautiful, not because they're plain, but because they're too human and flawed.

Or consider what happened to a couple of female friends of ours recently. On separate occasions, they each experienced catcalling that went far beyond the casual whistle—they mentioned explicit, specific, and degrading things they wanted to do to the women (though we won't make you read it). The two instances happened in different parts of the country, but both women were in public and in broad daylight. (And if men are willing to say these types of things in public, you can imagine the extent of what many men are willing to say on the internet from behind their screens. . .)

We can't prove that the men who behaved this way routinely look at porn. But we

doubt it's a coincidence that this sort of behavior is occurring at a time when male porn use is almost ubiquitous. While not every man who views porn will behave this way, these actions are consistent with porn's portrayal of sexual behavior and how porn desensitizes its users to their fellow human beings.

We could go on. [Gail Dines describes](#) meeting modern young women who are trying to date and are encountering men who think they should be able to treat their girlfriends the way women are treated in porn. These men think women expect and even enjoy being dominated or treated violently during sexual activity. This is shocking, but it really should not be that surprising when the vast majority of men in the U.S. are letting porn shape their vision for sexuality and relationships.

—— Why do guys look at porn?

1. Accident and Curiosity

Many boys who develop porn addictions were not seeking porn out. It's common to hear that a boy accidentally encountered it somehow and then continued viewing it after his curiosity was piqued.

Clearly the appeal of porn is the arousal it causes. Those who create porn design it to overstimulate the viewers. As we said earlier, male and female body parts are exaggerated, as are the scenarios depicted. Porn is intended to be consumed as quickly as possible for as long as possible, with novelty being part of the attraction.

2. It's Addictive

A major reason why guys watch porn is that it's addictive, and they've started a habit that's highly difficult to break. The circumstances surrounding and shaping that habit are significant. The [National Center on Sexual Exploitation \(NCSE\) reports](#):

Researchers...extrapolated that, when compared to those addicted to gambling or drugs, problematic pornography users experience more powerful and faster conditioning to anything associated with their use (computer, being alone, pop-ups, etc.).

The power of porn to cause an addictive habit is such that men might continue watching it, not because they *want* to so much as it's just what they do at that time of day. It becomes an incredibly compelling, harmful habit.

3. Coping with Trauma

The reasons why men view pornography often go deeper than sexual stimulation and brain chemistry. It's common for men to turn to porn to cope with pain or trauma in their lives. As we noted, our culture presents a certain picture of masculinity, and one aspect of that picture is that a successful man is strong, powerful, and surrounds himself with beautiful women. If a guy feels like he has failed in some area of his life, say academically or by being rejected by a girl, porn offers a quick escape with zero emotional commitment where he can live out the fantasy of succeeding. Porn is a way of coping with trauma (even the trauma caused by first seeing porn), loneliness, or depression. In the same way that someone might turn to drinking, video games, or being a workaholic to escape painful experiences, porn provides an escape from the pain of life. Porn might also be a way for a guy to feel like he's getting "revenge" for not gaining attention from women in real life.

4. Emotional Support

Guys can be especially susceptible to turning to porn if they don't know how to process their emotions well. Another common message our culture gives men is that being angry or happy is normal, but that other emotions are only for "weak" men. So men either don't know how to process their emotions in a healthy way or they feel shame for trying to do so. But they still need some way of dealing with what they're going through, and whether or not they realize it, they turn to porn as a way of dealing with their feelings.

5. Other Factors

Other factors that can influence why guys look at porn include but are not limited to:

- Enjoying the challenge of looking for it even more than the porn itself;
- Wanting to be like peers;
- Boredom;
- To educate themselves about sex; and
- It's "edgy" or cool.

———— How does porn impact men who view it?

It Affects Them Physically

Porn, which seems safe because it doesn't involve sex with another person, actually harms men physically. Multiple studies have linked porn use to a [decrease in sexual satisfaction](#) and to erectile dysfunction (ED). It's notable that compulsive masturbation has also been connected to sexual dysfunction.

Porn use impacts the brain's prefrontal lobes, which govern a person's willpower. When dopamine ([which regulates pleasure and reward](#) in the brain) continually floods the brain as the result of compulsive porn use, the dopamine actually "reshapes" the prefrontal lobes and [causes the neural cells there to decrease](#). So when someone feels a helpless "need" to use porn and loses motivation in other areas of life, there are actually neurological reasons why. Because the human brain doesn't finish developing until the mid-20s, porn (or anything with addictive properties) is [particularly harmful to teenagers](#). Young people are anywhere from two to four times more sensitive to dopamine than adults are. This means that a porn addiction can take a much more powerful hold over adolescents than it can over adults.

See Covenant Eyes' resource [The Porn Circuit: Understand Your Brain and Break Porn Habits in 90 Days](#) for a breakdown of the neurochemistry of how someone's brain gets addicted to porn.

It Affects Them Psychologically

There's a lot of data focusing on how porn objectifies women. But while men have the power over women in porn's narrative (keep in mind we're generalizing and not including every subgenre of porn), [men are also being objectified](#). In adult content, men are valued mainly for the size of their genitalia and how long their erections last. So it shouldn't be surprising that porn has been linked to poor male body image.

Porn also increases [male violence and aggression](#). There is a strong connection between pornography use and loneliness, as well as increased depression and poorer working

memory in men. In young people, porn leads to a weaker emotional bond with the user's caregivers. Finally, people are more likely to question their sexual values if they use porn, meaning they are more likely to be promiscuous or to question their sexual orientations.

It Increases Sexual Victimization and Destroys Relationships

Data shows that porn affects a man's personal relationships, as well as how he relates to society at large. The younger a boy is when he's first exposed to porn, the more likely he is to [want power over women](#). Because porn teaches men that women enjoy sexual violence, it's logical that porn use [increases male delinquency and criminal activity](#). Fraternity men who viewed porn were found to have a greater chance of committing rape if they thought no one would catch them. On the flip side, youth who view porn have been found to be more vulnerable to being victims of sexual abuse.

In addition, pornography causes anxiety in romantic relationships. It hurts marriages and increases the likelihood of divorce. Porn users have a greater willingness to try out risky sexual behavior and have a greater likelihood of having affairs. Men who use porn actually experience less real sex with their partners. They are less likely to use condoms and are at a higher risk of STIs.

— What can I do to help my son(s) not fall prey to porn?

Invest in Your Marriage and Your Family

Our sons will learn how men and women relate to each other based on our marriages, so we need to assess what our marriages (or dating relationships if not currently married) are modeling to them. Remember, porn is teaching men to be aggressive and to dominate women. A guy could draw many erroneous conclusions from this message: He might learn to be aggressive toward women, but he also might conclude that any kind of male leadership hurts women. As a result, he might overcompensate by being passive toward them. Let the love and respect that you demonstrate in your marriage present a more beautiful alternative than the narrative porn is offering.

Boys desperately need examples of healthy masculinity. Dads, what example are your sons seeing of what it means to be a good husband and father? Are you leading your wife and children spiritually? Are you pursuing relationships with them? Are you both modeling and teaching your sons what it means to be a man? They might not show it to you, but your sons are watching you, and they care about whether you spend time with them.

In an interview, Christian speaker and author [John Eldredge says](#) that the key question all boys are asking is, "Do I have what it takes?" He says that parents need to provide opportunities for boys to answer this question with a resounding, "Yes!" Dads especially need to make this a priority by creating challenges for their sons that are stretching, but attainable. Maybe it's building something. Maybe it's running a 5K. Find out what your son's passions are and cultivate them. Guys need a mission, so have adventures with your sons. Sons also need to hear their dads say, "I'm proud of you," and they need to hear it often.

As we noted earlier, boys need to learn how to process emotions in healthy ways. This education starts with their fathers and other male role models demonstrating how to process their own emotions well. One dad we talked to said, “Dads, it’s okay to be angry, but when you’re angry, don’t yell or walk out of the room. Talk through emotions, and practice having a larger emotional vocabulary than happy or mad. Talk regularly about how you feel.” Ask your sons not just about what happened to them that day, but about how they felt about what happened to them.

Moms, you have an invaluable role as the first and most important woman in a boy’s life. It’s through relating to you and learning from you that your sons will determine how to treat the other women they meet. Mothers tend to be very perceptive about what their children are going through. You can be an incredible source of advice, wisdom, and encouragement for your sons as they grow up. You can also encourage and cheer your sons on as they live out their masculinity in healthy ways.

What is the culture of your family like? Do your sons know that if they fail, they can come to you? Or do they expect that you will shame them for their failures? It’s crucial that you build relationships with your sons based on love and trust, or they will never feel safe sharing their struggles with you.

Be Vulnerable about Your Own Failures

We want our kids to love God and have a relationship with Him. We want them to experience true life and joy. The most effective way we can lead them toward true life is by living out our faith, including our struggles and failures, in front of them. It’s a more powerful lesson for our kids to [see God’s faithfulness in our failures](#) than for them never to see us fail. Our children *will* be wounded as they grow up; that is simply one of life’s painful realities. John Eldredge emphasizes that we must go after our children’s wounds, saying, “One of the most effective ways you can help them navigate their wounds is to talk about yours.” If we don’t, these wounds can subvert every other good parenting tactic we try.

Dads, you in particular might feel a temptation to conceal your weaknesses so that your sons will respect you. If you do, your sons will know you are being dishonest. If they do think for now that you are infallible, they will be extremely disillusioned when they find out that you have your weaknesses and failures, just like every other human being. Because you were not open with them about your brokenness, they might conclude that Christianity is ineffective at helping people deal with their problems. It might seem counterintuitive, but your sons will actually respect you more if you are honest about your weaknesses. By opening up at appropriate times about your own sins, especially the sexual ones, you pave the way for your sons to open up about theirs.

Not “the Talk,” But Many Talks

Get used to the idea of having recurring conversations with your sons about porn. Culture is having a non-stop conversation with them about it, so we need to as well. It’s important that fathers are the ones who lead the conversation on porn (when possible), even if the mothers are present and even if the mom was the one who caught the son looking at porn. These discussions need to take place within the context of a trusting relationship that you’ve been building with them, as well as in the context of prayer. Again, if you have no foundation of trust with your kids, they have no reason [to be vulnerable with you](#).

In our “Parent’s Guide to Understanding the Porn Threat,” we listed quite a few questions you could raise with your kids about porn. We also discuss how to have those conversations in age-appropriate ways. Here are some ideas for questions you could ask your teenage sons specifically.

Discussion Questions

- What do you think it means to be a man?
- What are some of culture’s messages about what it means to be a man?
- What do your male and female friends think it means to be a man?
- What guidance does the Bible provide about being a man?
- What does porn say about what it means to be a man? What is porn’s vision for a man’s purpose and identity?
- What is porn teaching people about women?
- Do you know the research that shows how porn affects men?
- All persuasive lies have some truth in them. What are the truths about men and women that porn is twisting?
- How does porn’s vision compare with God’s vision for His children, and for men specifically?
- Do you believe that God is calling you to a better story than porn’s story?
- How do you think people should handle their sexual urges if they can’t act on them by having sex or by viewing pornography? Does the Bible give us any guidance on this?

— My son is addicted to porn. What do I do?

Protect Young Minds has an excellent resource called the “SMART Plan Guide for Parents,” which gives advice for how to react if you discover your kids are looking at porn. You can download it [here](#).

1. Be Calm and Make Sure He Knows You Love Him

It’s essential that your reaction is one of grace and love instead of condemnation. You will be grieved, but watch out that your grief doesn’t increase the shame your son already feels. We talked to one guy whose mom started crying uncontrollably when she found out he’d been viewing porn. This reaction is completely understandable, but it seriously increased the shame he already felt. He suggests it might be a good idea for the parents to take some time to cool off if needed before having a conversation with their sons about their discovery. One expert even recommends that parents [practice their responses ahead of time](#).

If you react badly, it’s not as though you’ve caused irreparable damage. You can apologize. Whatever happens, your son needs to know it’s safe to talk to you about his sexual struggles. In the same way that our Heavenly Father loves and receives us exactly as we are, love your kids where they are and help them move toward where they ought to be.

2. Seek Accountability in Community

We often think that the opposite of addiction is sobriety, but [the opposite of addiction is actually connection](#) and community. Your son needs accountability within a community. This community must be **trustworthy**, and it must be founded on **honesty**.

It should be a safe place where people don't shame each other for their failures, but they also need to be willing to lovingly call each other out. If your church doesn't have a resource that could help your son, consider looking into a 12-step program in your area. It's also not a bad idea to seek out professional counseling. Some online resources we recommend, both for accountability and for gaining information, are:

- [Pure Desire Ministries](#)—focuses on overcoming sexual addiction, offers support groups, has extensive resources on the site.
- [Celebrate Recovery](#)—Christ-centered 12-step program for people struggling with addiction.
- [RTribe](#)—an app for those who struggle with pain or addiction; provides accountability in community, as well as other resources.
- [Fortify](#)—web-based platform; provides online community for overcoming porn addiction.
- [Covenant Eyes](#)—online porn filter; accountability focus, extensive online articles.

3. Get Serious

You and your sons need to approach recovery recognizing that you will have to seriously deal with the issue over an extended period of time. This means setting boundaries that might seem extreme. When Jesus talked about lust in Matthew 5, He said if our right hand offends us, then we ought to cut it off. This was not a statement meant to be taken literally, but rather to express the seriousness with which we need to take our sin. This could very well mean totally cutting out certain friendships. We know some recovering drug addicts who have recognized that if they are truly not going to use anymore, they need to remove certain friendships out of their lives. There is no question in their minds that if they do not, they will go back to using and dealing drugs.

4. Identify Triggers, Set up Boundaries

Sit down with your son and identify the patterns and circumstances surrounding his porn use. What are his triggers? Is it boredom? Is it watching a certain TV show? Maybe he needs to surrender his devices at certain times of the day or all night. Set consequences, not just for viewing porn again, but for breaking the boundaries you set. For example, say one of the boundaries is no phone in his room at night, and the consequence is he loses his phone for a week. If he brings his phone into his room at night, even if he doesn't look at porn, he still gets the consequence of losing the phone for a week. The idea is that he experiences the consequences before even getting to the point of viewing porn again.

Some people might question the strategy behind setting such consequences, seeing them as ignoring the grace God offers us. But the purpose of these measures is to retrain addicts and rewire their brains to associate porn with a negative feeling. In the heat of the moment, your son is not likely to consider the long-term consequences of using porn. He is, however, more likely to want to avoid an immediate consequence like losing his phone. Over time, this repercussion helps build up his brain's willpower so he can better resist temptation. We all need accountability and self-discipline for our various struggles, and training ourselves to be obedient to Christ does not negate the abundant grace He gives us when we fail.

5. Get Educated, Educate, and Serve

Help your son get educated about porn's consequences and, if possible, teach others about them. There's no better way to learn something than by teaching someone else

about it. Find ways to serve victims of sexual exploitation. It will be harder for your son to participate in a sin if he is constantly helping the people that the sin is harming. As you educate your sons about the negative impact of porn and how it hurts women, show them how they truly are the heroes and protectors of women when they reject using porn.

6. Don't Assume You're Out of the Woods

Sometimes God miraculously heals people, but addiction is a cycle, and you should expect that it will take time to break it. If your son is or becomes a recovered porn addict, **it is crucial you do not assume that the struggle is gone for good.** Guys especially might think that once they've been successful for a little while, then they're free and clear. But it takes 90 days for the brain to rewire, and they need ongoing accountability not to slide back into their old routines. What's more, living in recovery from addiction is a lifelong process. You should **never** assume your son's struggle is gone for good. We know of two addicts who were each clean for about 20 years before they relapsed. It is essential that your son practices wise habits, no matter long he has been living a porn-free life.

7. Be Consistent in Your Family Habits

Evaluate the media you consume as a family, and commit to not watching anything that sexualizes or objectifies people. This might be your family's equivalent of cutting off your right hand. Be consistent in all areas of your life.

8. Utilize Older Siblings!

Older siblings are a powerful but easy-to-overlook resource. Younger siblings look up to their older brothers or sisters. If you have more than one son, make sure the oldest is aware of the influence he has over his younger brother(s). The oldest brother has this influence whether he abuses it or uses it for good. If he is willing, he can help his younger siblings not get caught up in porn.

9. Don't Forget That It's a Heart Issue

Overcoming addiction needs to start with behavior modification. But remember that the root issue is one of the heart. If your son does not have a change of heart in what he loves and how he sees himself, no amount of effort to help him change his behavior will be effective in the long run.

10. You Can't Help Your Son If You Need Help Yourself

Finally, we want to recognize that many parents and/or their spouses are struggling with porn addictions. If you or your spouse is using porn, you will not be able to give your son the help he needs. Follow the advice we've provided here insofar as it applies to you, especially the recommendations to get counselling and join a local recovery program.

Conclusion

Pornography destroys people's lives, but Jesus has eternally conquered sin, death, and shame. This is not a light or flippant statement, but one whose truth impacts every dark, hidden inch of our lives.

We can't give you all the advice you might possibly need on how to talk to your sons

about porn. But take heart that God's grace, love, and power to save go as deep as our deepest brokenness. Never give up on your relationships with your sons, no matter what happens. Pursue them with your love just as God pursues us with His.

Additional Resources

- [Pornography Conversation Kit](#), Axis (watch with teens to get them thinking and talking about porn in a new way)
- [“Sex, Tech & Porn: A Shocking Look At What Teenagers Are Dealing With Today,”](#) Fight the New Drug (FTND)
- [“Faith Leaders: When We Blame Lust, We Intensify Sexual Sin,”](#) Covenant Eyes
- [Proven Men](#) [website]
- [Heart to Heart Counseling Center](#), Colorado Springs
- [“How the Porn Industry Hijacks Natural Sexual Curiosity and Hooks Teens,”](#) FTND
- [“6 Ways to Raise a Sex Addict,”](#) Covenant Eyes
- [“Personal Pornography Viewing and Sexual Satisfaction: A Quadratic Analysis,”](#) Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy
- [“18 Shocking Stats About The Porn Industry And Its Underage Consumers,”](#) FTND
- [“3 Real Guys Reveal How Giving Up Porn Changed Their Lives,”](#) FTND
- [“‘HOPE’ Through a Men’s Accountability Group,”](#) Shared Hope International
- [X3watch](#) [website]
- [“Your Kids Need Your Husband to Be Their Father,”](#) Authentic Intimacy
- [“How Do We Help Students Resist Our Pornified Culture? Part 1,”](#) Sean McDowell
- [“How Do We Help Students Resist our Pornified Culture? Part 2,”](#) Sean McDowell
- [“Avoiding Sexual Junk Food,”](#) Authentic Intimacy (paywall)
- [“Why We Don’t Experience Victory,”](#) Authentic Intimacy
- [“Why We Must Be Surprised by the Healer,”](#) Authentic Intimacy
- [Every Young Man’s Battle](#), Stephen Arterburn and Fred Stoeker with Mike Yorkey (Note: parents, we recommend you review this book before giving it your sons. It might be best for older teens and could be triggering to young men who struggle with porn addiction.)

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