

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

# Understanding the Porn Threat

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**Pornography is a social toxin that  
*destroys relationships,*  
*steals innocence,*  
*erodes compassion,*  
*breeds violence,*  
and *kills love.***

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

# If We Don't Disciple Our Kids about Sexuality, Porn Will Do It for Us

There are few cultural issues more pressing than the problem of pornography. Though extremely damaging to us, porn appeals to powerful urges that God created as good. Sexually explicit material has always been a cultural pitfall, but the internet and smartphones have provided unprecedented access to it.

Meanwhile, the nature of porn and our cultural attitudes toward it have shifted significantly over the past several decades. Material that used to be understood as pornographic is now almost quaint. And while it's refreshing that [various popular celebrities](#) are speaking out about the destructive nature of porn, society as a whole has widely accepted pornography as normal and/or healthy.

This Guide focuses on the general problem of porn in our culture. It should be read first of these 3 guides on porn, followed by the one specifically aimed at women, then the one aimed at men. Know from the outset that you might find some of the information in these guides disturbing. We have done our best to include only what we think you need to know to be aware of extent of the problem of porn so that you can more effectively protect your children and yourself.

## — What's porn like these days?

Despite the countless forms it takes, Merriam Webster provides a simple but accurate [definition of pornography](#): “The depiction of erotic behavior (as in pictures or writing) intended to cause sexual excitement.” If we sift through our culture looking for imagery or content that is designed to make people think about sex, then it's fairly obvious that our culture is becoming increasingly “pornified.” That is, qualities and behaviors that have been typically associated with porn are becoming more and more acceptable in mainstream culture.

The [National Center on Sexual Exploitation](#) (NCSE) observes:

*The pornification of culture (i.e. softcore, hypersexualized imagery) is widespread and evident everywhere, from the grocery store checkout lane to advertising, popular entertainment, unsolicited email, and beyond. It's becoming increasingly difficult—if not impossible—to live a porn-free life.*

While our above definition of porn seems fairly straightforward, today's teens and young adults likely have a blurry definition of what exactly it is. For example, people have traditionally referred to porn as being either “softcore” or “hardcore,” and to some extent this terminology still holds. But in the documentary [Over 18](#), anti-porn activist and sociology professor Gail Dines observes that this distinction is becoming less and less relevant.

Softcore porn typically refers to partial or full nudity and “suggestive” situations, whereas hardcore porn refers to graphic depictions of sex, including intercourse. But now, what people would have understood as being softcore porn has simply become part of our culture. Modern pornography is hardcore by definition. So whereas older generations likely perceive *Playboy*, *Hustler*, and *Penthouse* as being pornographic, newer generations of porn users might not even think of these magazines as being

pornographic at all. The **mainstream** pornography that people encounter now includes depictions of things like aggressive anal sex or scenes where three men simultaneously penetrate a woman orally, anally, and vaginally before ejaculating on her face.

If today's teens and young adults perceive softcore porn as being normal, they are likely consuming pornographic content in their media without recognizing it as such. And the rest of us might not be aware of how the norms of porn are influencing our culture. For example, in the summer of 2017, fashion magazine *Teen Vogue* ran an article instructing readers on [how to have anal sex](#). And while it's common for male musical artists to objectify women in their songs, even female artists objectify themselves and other women. We've gone from a time when networks wouldn't air a TV show showing couples sleeping in the same bed to a time when the most popular series contain graphic nudity (e.g. HBO's highly popular *Game of Thrones* or the newer Netflix show *Altered Carbon*).

## — What do teens and young adults think about porn?

A few years ago, Josh McDowell partnered with Barna Group to do a study called [The Porn Phenomenon](#). They discovered a key generational difference in how people see porn use, namely that younger people for the most part view it as normal:

*Teens and young adults are living in an environment where porn is more acceptable—and more ubiquitous than ever before. As access to pornography has increased, the stigma toward it has seemingly decreased. There is just a general assumption that people are using porn—especially among teens and young adults. And this assumption is not a negative one. When it comes to watching pornography, teens and young adults aren't getting accountability from their friends—they are getting peer pressure.*

Barna found that **young people are much more likely to see failing to recycle as more morally reprehensible than using porn**. As far as Christians go, on average only 16% of Christians are actively trying to stop using porn, compared to 9% of non-Christians.

The industry's revenue and online traffic tell us a lot about how much people are viewing porn. It's a global industry, which, according to [data reported in 2015](#), nets around \$97 billion per year worldwide. An estimated \$12 billion of this money comes from the United States. Keep in mind that these estimates are a few years old and are only of traceable porn, so they are probably conservative. When it comes to the internet, [30% of the information online](#) is pornographic content. Put another way, **porn sites get more traffic than that of Netflix, Amazon, and Twitter combined**.

## — Where do people find porn?

The days of kids seeking out and sneaking in smutty magazines are long gone. Instead, pornography is out to find them. Online porn is obviously a huge concern for parents, but let's not forget about the other ways kids can encounter it.

Around a third of people online encounter porn [through pop-ups and ads](#). Some encounter it through [receiving and opening a link](#) that they were not aware went to a

pornographic site. Certain video games [contain pornographic content](#) (and even “safe” video games might show explicit ads). A child could accidentally pull up porn when doing a Google search for something else.

One woman we talked to saw a graphic image on Twitter simply because a pornographic account followed her and had that image in the profile. She blocked and reported the account, but she had already seen the image simply from that user following her. In a separate instance, searching “#california” on Instagram brought up images with nudity. Snapchat is another problematic social media platform because their Stories feature often promotes sexual content (e.g. cleavage “battles” between celebrities).

And yes, kids can still encounter porn offline, such as through cable TV or magazines. If your kids’ friends have access to porn somehow, your children might be exposed through them. [Protect Young Minds outlines](#) several situations in which porn might find kids unaware, as well as measures parents can take to protect their children in those situations. A few notable scenarios are:

- Grandparents’ house
- Sleepovers
- The school bus
- While babysitting

We think it’s worth noting the most common avenues through which people are currently seeking out porn. Pornhub (possibly the largest porn site on the internet) has an exhaustive list of statistics about its users in its [2017 Year in Review](#) [*warning: Pornhub stats are not inappropriate, but they are on the Pornhub domain and are still very disturbing*]. They found that the main devices people use to access its site are smartphones and tablets.

Computers (desktop and laptop) now comprise less than 25% of all of Pornhub’s traffic. The most popular browser for viewing porn on Pornhub is Google Chrome. Pornhub also notes how much traffic it got through gaming consoles such as the ones made by Nintendo, Xbox, and Playstation. **Please note** that if you’ve gotten internet filtering software for your computers and smartphones, but have neglected your gaming consoles, these are potential inlets for porn.

## ———— **When do people encounter porn?**

People disagree slightly about the average age of exposure to pornography. The creators of *Over 18* cite it as age 12, noting that this means that for every 15-year-old who is exposed, a 9-year-old is exposed as well. Others put the [average age at 11](#), while some say it is [as young as 8](#). Whether or not eight-years-old is the actual average age, eight-year-olds are most certainly at risk of finding porn.

Almost all men and a majority of women are at least exposed to porn by the time they are adults. [One study done in 2008](#) of 560 college students found that 62% of girls and 93% of boys encountered porn by the time they were 18 (and that was 10 years ago!). Protect Young Minds says that 10% of visitors to porn sites [are younger than 10 years old](#). [Covenant Eyes reports](#) that 64% of men and 15% of women who are self-identified

Christians look at porn at least once a month. **Sadly, it's rarer for [people in Generation Z](#) (i.e. [those born around or after the turn of the century](#)) not to have seen porn than it is for them to have seen it.**

## ———— **How does porn affect users?**

Sadly but not surprisingly, porn does an incredible amount of damage to its users and to those around them. [Researchers have linked porn](#) to increased depression, antisocial behavior, and promiscuity. It even causes [changes in the brain](#), following the same patterns as other addictive substances. Porn has also been linked to sexual dysfunction and decreased sexual satisfaction.

Research has shown that porn makes people more aggressive, narcissistic, and misogynistic. [People who consume porn](#) are less likely to marry and less likely to seek out sexual consent from their partners. They are more prone to be unfaithful to their partners and more likely to commit sexual crimes. We go into greater detail on the impact of porn on men and women in the related guides in this bundle.

## ———— **What's the relationship between porn and sex trafficking?**

It would not be unusual for a young person today to be outraged at human trafficking, while at the same time seeing porn use as perfectly acceptable. But the truth is that porn and sex trafficking are inextricably linked.

Some people argue that porn allows them to have sexual release without involving another person, making porn a “safer” alternative to acting out sexually with someone in real life. **But the research shows the opposite.** People who use porn are actually more prone to purchase prostitutes. According to the NCSE:

*An analysis of 101 sex buyers, compared to 100 men who did not buy sex, found that sex buyers masturbate to pornography more often than non-sex buyers, masturbate to more types of pornography, and reported that their sexual preferences changed so that they sought more sadomasochistic and anal sex. Other research also demonstrates an association between purchase of commercial sex acts and pornography use.*

In fact, porn users are [four times more likely](#) to patronize prostitutes. Prostitutes themselves report that their clients are requesting them to enact the scenes their clients have seen when watching explicit content. There is also a direct connection between porn use and [violence against prostitutes](#).

Additionally, the NCSE states that, “Pornography may meet the legal definition of trafficking to the extent that the pornographer recruits, entices, or obtains the people depicted in pornography for the purpose of photographing commercial sex acts.”

[When we interviewed](#) Christen Cappatt of the [Asservo Project](#), she cited data that 70% of underage victims of sex trafficking have said that porn was made of them while they were in slavery. She notes that there is no way of knowing whether a porn actor or actress is participating voluntarily or was forced or pressured into those actions. [Rescue](#)

[Freedom reports](#) an instance where a major porn star was in fact a victim of human trafficking, and the people creating the film were not aware of it.

## ———— **How do people rationalize using porn?**

### **It's Private, So It's Not Hurting Anyone**

One of the most common justifications by far for porn use being ok is that because it's private, it's not hurting anyone. We disagree with the underlying assumption in that statement, which is that actions are right or wrong based on whether we believe they will hurt people. But when people make this argument, it's usually because they don't perceive any harm taking place. We might not be able to see the damage our actions are causing, but real harm could still be occurring.

For example, we could indulge in lust in our hearts and say it's fine because we're not acting on our desires by having an affair. But whether we recognize it or not, that sin still impacts every part of our lives, such as our ability to worship God and be in healthy relationships with those closest to us. **Moral values are not determined by what we think hurts people, but are rooted in who God is:** just, merciful, and loving. We must base our morality on God's character, not on our subjective perception of what is hurting us and those around us. ***Porn is objectively wrong because it violates God's character and the rules He gave to protect our flourishing.***

And as we've already noted, porn does hurt its users. It makes them depressed, aggressive, and less empathetic toward women, and it has been linked to sexual dysfunction in both men and women. And as we [have pointed out elsewhere](#), porn is not merely an outlet for sexual desire, but an inlet as well. It increases people's sexual appetites and becomes less satisfying over time.

### **The Actors Are Participating Voluntarily**

This reason is irrelevant. Even if male and female porn stars are participating in porn voluntarily, to watch them is still to take part in their degradation and to treat them as less than human. But again, porn users have no way of knowing whether or not the people—the actresses in particular—are participating voluntarily. A woman in a video might be willingly employed as a porn star, or she might be a victim of human trafficking.

Even if porn actresses are not being trafficked, it's more than possible they are being pressured into doing something they feel uncomfortable with but are tolerating anyway. If you can, we recommend watching the [Over 18 documentary](#) we referenced earlier. It provides a glimpse into the effects of the industry on two female porn stars who were very popular at one time and who joined the industry willingly.

### **Porn Is Educating Me About Sex**

Many people turn to porn to fill in gaps in their sexual education. But porn shows an exaggerated, unrealistic depiction of sex, something that people in the adult film industry admit themselves in their interviews for Over 18. In addition, porn only shows us the physical aspect of sex and ignores the emotional, mental, and spiritual impact it has on those involved (which, in turn, simply highlights the need for Christian parents to be more open and willing to teach kids about healthy, God-honoring sex

starting at young ages. See our upcoming “[Parent’s Guide to the Sex Talk](#)” for more on that.)

### **It’s Free, So I’m Not Supporting the Porn Industry**

It’s easy to see how someone would think this statement is true, but it most definitely is not. When people watch porn, whether it’s free or paid, they are supporting the industry by fueling the demand for porn. If people browse a free pornographic website, [they are increasing its traffic and popularity](#)—and therefore its profits. So even people who don’t pay for porn online are supporting the industry in a real way.

## ———— **Can’t I just block all porn using strong filters?**

If a computer has no internet filters, all someone has to do to watch porn is type “porn” (or “naked” or “boobs” or similar terms) into any search engine. It’s a free-for-all. So yes, filters do close the floodgates and make it harder to access, especially for younger kids to stumble upon something they can’t even understand. **BUT no filter is an adequate substitute for parents talking often and openly about pornography and its lies.**

Certain internet filters are more effective than others at blocking porn. Look for filters that can handle HTTPS sites, are browser independent, and will not be fooled by anonymous proxies. If you have internet-aware devices that you can’t install filtering software on, such as gaming consoles or iPods, we recommend [OpenDNS Home](#), which has a solid free version that filters all devices connected to your network. We also like [Covenant Eyes](#) because of its focus on personal accountability specifically when it comes to porn. (See our “[Parent’s Guide to Internet Filtering & Monitoring](#)” for help figuring out what’s best for your family.) But again, no matter what filters we opt for, **we cannot rely solely on parental controls to protect our kids from porn.**

If our children want to watch porn, they will find ways to get around our filters (check out “[10 Easy Ways Kids Can Beat Internet Filters](#)” for more on this). Even if they don’t have any interest in porn, it’s possible that porn might slip through the cracks, simply as a fluke or the result of human error. A child could accidentally encounter a pornographic magazine at a friend’s house or by being sent images through chat on a kid-friendly video game or on a chat platform like Discord. We simply don’t know where they might encounter it. So internet filters, while helpful, are not sufficient in and of themselves to combat this issue.

## ———— **How do kids hide porn?**

Some people hide pornography on their computers by having misleading file names or by [encrypting their files](#). They might conceal viewing porn online by looking for it in a private browsing mode. They might save it on their devices by using an app [designed to hide pictures](#).

Another option for concealing online activity is [using a virtual private network](#) (VPN) or an anonymous browser, such as [TOR](#). Keep in mind that if your internet filter only filters your WiFi network, your kids could potentially bypass those restrictions by

getting on your neighbor's network, public WiFi, or by using cellular data. Again, see our parent guide on internet filters for more information.

## — How can I tell if my kids are looking at porn?

Protect Young Minds says there are several [signs you can look for](#) in your children's behavior to indicate that they might be viewing porn:

- **Clearing their browser histories.** Clearing the history doesn't mean in and of itself that your kids have been looking at porn, but this behavior is suspicious enough that it's worth looking into it.
- **Spending a lot of time online at night.** Pornhub found that in 2017 the most common time its users viewed porn was between 10pm and 12am, and the most trafficked day of the week was Sunday. Even if your kids aren't looking at porn, being on their devices right before going to bed is a bad habit.
- **Spending a lot of time in the bathroom on their devices.** Really, if you see your kids shutting themselves off anywhere with their devices for periods of time, that's a warning sign.
- **Changing their screens when you come around.** Again, why would they need to do this unless they are trying to hide something?
- **Acting more moody, irritable, depressed, or aggressive.** Watch out for noticeable changes in behavior or if your kids are no longer interested in activities they used to love. Also be aware that porn can be a major factor in causing child-on-child sexual abuse.

## — What else can I do to protect my kids from porn?

We can't say this enough: The most important step you can take as you raise your kids is to pray for them. We know of a mom who prayed that if her son were viewing porn, then God would let her find out about it, which is exactly what happened.

Pursue relationships with your kids. Get to know them, and build trust with them. Make sure they know how much you love them. If you invest in them, you earn the right to talk with them about personal issues like porn use. [Psychologist Dr. Patricia M. Greenfield says](#), "A warm and communicative parent-child relationship is the most important factor [in reducing porn use among children]."

We need to have conversations with our kids about sex and about porn **early and often**. **We cannot afford to think we're going to have "the talk" with them one time when they're about 10 years old.** Many kids are encountering porn before age 10.

The common argument against preparing kids for encountering porn is that raising the subject with them will make them curious and want to seek it out. It is possible that raising the issue of porn could make our kids curious about it. But we can forestall this possibility by being wise about how we have these conversations.

In their "SMART Guide for Parents," [Protect Young Minds says](#) that the following

strategies will help prevent children from seeking out information about porn on their own:

- Make sure they know you are completely open to any follow-up questions they might have.
- Make sure they know the internet is a dangerous place to go looking for answers about porn.
- Regularly follow up with them on this topic.
- Have frequent family discussions on media safety.

**The risk of our kids encountering porn is so great that if we remain silent about it, we surrender our opportunity to shape our kids' perspectives on sexuality.** Instead, we allow the culture to do so. See Protect Young Minds' "[5 Reasons You Should Initiate Your Kid's Curiosity about Porn \(Before Someone Else Does!\)](#)" for more.

So how do we prepare our children for encountering porn when they are too young to even understand what sex is? First, [this article](#) from Seattle Christian Counseling describes the typical sexual curiosity and behavior of children at different age levels so that we can formulate appropriate strategies based on their ages.

Next, we must consider what we would do to protect our children from sexual predators. If they are old enough to talk and to understand what their private parts are, we can have a basic conversation with them about how no one should be touching them there. If someone does or asks to, we have to make sure our children know to tell us immediately and not be afraid that we'll be angry with them. However, the best way to protect them from physical predators is our presence and our knowledge of where they are when they are not in our presence.

It's quite possible to have similar conversations with younger children about the internet without being too explicit. If they ever see someone's private parts online, they need a strategy. Make sure they know to tell you and not be afraid or ashamed. If they ever view something that scares or disturbs them, they can tell you about it. No strategy is fail-safe, but at least you can open the door to talking about pornography with your young children without being graphic. What's more, you can do so at an age when they're more open to talking to you than they will be in their teenage years.

Nevertheless, as early as possible, we have to talk to our children about what healthy expressions of sexuality look like and educate them on the potential that porn has to harm people. **We need to start these conversations on some level as early as 6- to 8-years-old, if not sooner.** One tool you might look into for starting these discussions with your kids is the book [Good Pictures, Bad Pictures, Jr.](#) by Kristen A. Jenson, which is a resource for talking to 3- to 6-year-olds about porn in an age-appropriate way. Also, check out [this resource from the Australian government](#) about how to talk to children under eight about porn.

When having these conversations—especially as our kids get older—it's crucial that **we** are willing to be vulnerable and sincere. If we haven't established trust with our kids and we then broach the topic of porn with them after they're already teenagers, it's extremely unlikely that they will be open with us. If they are viewing porn at that point, they will probably just lie to us about it.

It's easy to be tempted to hide our own failings so that we don't lose credibility with

our kids. But being dishonest or inauthentic is what will actually cause us to lose credibility with our kids. None of us is immune to sexual temptation because none of us is immune to our fallen nature. Share about your weaknesses if they're old enough. Your willingness to be open can be extremely powerful in helping them to listen to you. Your stories of overcoming temptation can also be a great encouragement to them. Communicate how much you love them and that you don't want them to be hurt.

When Queen Esther had a request to make of the Persian king that would affect all of the Jewish people, she and the Jews fasted and prayed for three days before she approached him. Take these conversations with your kids seriously enough that you prepare with prayer and even fasting, if you feel so led.

Here are some **questions to consider raising with older kids**:

- How would you define porn? Do you think the average person is ok with consuming media that could be defined as pornographic?
- Do you think that porn is harmful? Do you think it's acceptable in any situation?
- Many people think porn is ok because it's a way of getting sexual release without involving another person. What do you think about that?
- Do you have any friends who use porn? Have you noticed that porn is affecting them in any way?
- Have you ever seen porn online? If so, where? How did you react to it?
- Do you feel like you can talk to us about this issue? Why or why not? How can we help you feel comfortable with approaching us?
- Why is porn so appealing to people? What good part of God's creation is porn twisting and corrupting?
- Do you believe that God's vision for sexuality is really more beautiful and desirable than porn's?
- Can people struggle with lust without looking at porn? What does it look like to struggle with lust? How do you know if you've crossed the line from sexual attraction into lust?
- People often masturbate while viewing porn. Is masturbation wrong? Why or why not? Support your answer from a biblical framework.
- What can you do to protect yourself from giving into lust or looking at porn? (Parents, this is likely a conversation best had between fathers/sons and mother/daughters if possible, but we recommend you are open about what you do to protect yourself from your own struggles with lust.)
- Is it possible to overcome lustful desires/a porn addiction? How?

Conversation is huge, but there is more we can do to protect our kids from porn. It's essential that we model healthy marriage for our kids whenever possible. Apart from culture, the main place they will get their vision for male-female relationships is from the example we set for them.

Set healthy boundaries in your family, especially when it comes to technology. Participate in a community that provides accountability with vulnerability and trust. Educate your children on the impact of porn on those who view it and on those who don't. Serve the victims of the porn and sex trafficking industries. And above all, don't give up.

## Conclusion

We could say much more on this sobering topic. Yet despite all of the discouraging news out there about porn, Barna's editor-in-chief Roxanne Stone [points us toward hope](#): "The porn phenomenon is not a time for apocalyptic and hysterical rhetoric, but an opportunity to advance the life-giving messages of the gospel." The best tactic for overcoming the power of porn is offering the much better and more fulfilling vision for sex, sexuality, relationships, and flourishing that is found only through Christ. We have to give our children something better to strive for and work toward (real love, good sex, abundant life, healthy relationships, God's glory), not just tell them what to avoid (porn, lust, trafficking, exploitation, unfulfilling sex).

We are all sexually broken on some level, and God's grace is sufficient for all of our brokenness, no matter how deep it goes. If you are addressing this issue with your children, you are already miles ahead of many parents out there. Rely on the Father for your strength, and don't give up.

## Additional Resources

["Keep Kids Safe! How Pornography will Target Your Kids in 2017,"](#) Protect Young Minds  
["The Terrible Cost Of Porn,"](#) *The American Conservative*  
[Hope for the Sold](#) [website]  
[Gail Dines](#) [website]  
[Porn Fact Sheets](#), Set Free Summit  
["Growing Up in a Pornified Culture"](#) (*strong language*), TEDx Talk by Gail Dines  
["How to hide VR porn on your Gear VR,"](#) VRHeads  
[Fight the New Drug](#) [website]  
[Covenant Eyes Blog](#)  
[RTribe](#) [website]  
[Fortify](#) [website]  
[Pure Desire Ministries](#)  
["Talking to teens about pornography,"](#) Australian Government  
["Resource Hub: Parents,"](#) Novus Project  
[Go for Greatness Facebook Page](#)  
[The Protection Project: Journal of Human Rights and Civil Society, Issue 5](#)  
["Does the Porn Industry Use 'Tobacco Industry Tactics' to Hide the Dark Truth?"](#) FTND  
[The Porn Phenomenon: New Research of Global Importance](#), Set Free Summit  
["The Great Tech Panic: the Inevitability of Porn,"](#) *Wired*  
["The effects of pornography on children and young people,"](#) the Australian Government  
["Parent Resource: Internet Safety,"](#) Shared Hope  
["How Pimps Recruit: Harmony's Story,"](#) Hope for the Sold  
["When Your Kids Look at Porn,"](#) Authentic Intimacy  
["Masturbation: Is It Wrong?"](#) Authentic Intimacy  
["A Challenge from the Song of Solomon,"](#) Authentic Intimacy  
["The Importance of Sexual Discipleship™"](#) Authentic Intimacy