



Talking to Kids About Porn and Human Sexuality

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A growing concern today involves the role of pornography as the next generation's instructor in human sexuality. For many young people, pornography has become the only guide to sexuality they have ever known. For Catholic parents, this raises the critical challenge of how best to approach these matters with their children, given that kids as young as 8 or 9 may already be acquiring information and viewpoints about human sexual behaviors from internet pornography. I would like to present six practical suggestions for parents, culled from parental testimonies and insights, from other experts in the field, and from ex-users of pornography.

First, *steer away from "The Talk" towards a more integrated approach.* Having "The Talk" relies on the misguided notion that parents have educational content or factual knowledge that they are duty-bound to try to deposit into their children's brains. This approach is not only awkward and paternalistic, but can convey a sense that sexual education is a one-time, get-it-over-with ordeal. Kids require ongoing guidance and support from their parents — an expressed willingness to enter into these important discussions that stress the beauty of sexuality in marriage and what it is really for,

rather than just telling them what not to do or scaring them away from sexually transmitted diseases.

Second, *be attentive to opportune moments to share wisdom and stories.* Because we live in a highly pornified culture, opportunities for parents to share and discuss important value assessments regarding human sexuality with their children arise often. Driving by a billboard with a risqué picture or seeing something on TV might, for example, serve as an opportunity to note how it's against the love of women to use them as sex objects. Passing through a part of town where prostitutes are plying their trade might spark a discussion about how many women involved in prostitution are victims of human trafficking and the vast majority wish they could break free of it, etc.

Third, *avoid internet access in the bedroom.* Sometimes parents will say, "The kids have access at school and everywhere else, so I let them have unrestricted access at home — they've got to learn how to handle it anyway." But the home setting needs to differ from the outside world, serving as an

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oasis and a protected environment for children. If someone offered to install a pipe into your child's bedroom that could be turned on to pump in raw sewage, you would not agree to it. Yet many parents fail to restrict what is entering their children's bedrooms through the internet and TV.

Fourth, be wary of internet access on cell phones. "Due diligence" with cell phones for children might mean looking for handsets that function strictly as phones without internet access, or maybe the kids should be given a phone only at those times when they are dropped off at events like piano practice, soccer, etc. As children grow older and show signs of maturing, restrictions and limitations can be scaled back.

Fifth, monitor internet usage. Check browser history, and make use of monitoring software, even though a particular child may be an angel. Keep the family computer in a shared space like the living room with the screen visible so family members can be aware of each other's online activities. Laptops and tablets can pose an inadvertent temptation in this respect as teens sit cuddled up on the

couch with screens not visible to others. In family life, we are called to serve as our brother's keeper. Set limits on "screen time" for children, and maintain password/access control over devices. Have the neighbor's kids deposit their electronic devices on the kitchen table during visits to diminish the temptation to slip away to a private part of the house and surf the net, perhaps with younger siblings in tow. Such practices may also serve to indirectly evangelize other families in the neighborhood regarding the serious threats from internet porn.

Sixth, set appropriate rules regarding relationships, and be involved in the kids' dating practices. Too often parents are tempted to take a "hands-off" approach to this area of their children's lives. When I was growing up, we knew (and eventually appreciated) my father's rule that we couldn't date until we were 18. Setting appropriate rules for kids serves as a sign of a parent's love and concern for them. Whenever parents determine that dating should begin, it offers further opportunities and occasions to discuss problems and scenarios that can help teens set moral boundaries.

Talking to kids and helping them to become good stewards of the gift of human sexuality bestowed by God is hard work. In a culture that forcefully communicates a pornified counter-gospel, though, it is certainly one of the most important and enduring gifts a parent can seek to provide for the happiness and well-being of their children.

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