



THE GUIDELINE

A Parent's Guide to Addressing
Pornography With Children



After over hundreds of school assemblies around the country and receiving thousands of emails from teens around the world, Fight the New Drug has developed

The Guideline—A Parent's Guide to Addressing Pornography With Children

If you currently have teenagers, are about to have teenagers, plan on having teenagers someday, or just want to help, reading this guide will provide you with powerful tools and insights for dealing with pornography in today's world.

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4

HOW TO PREVENT

5 TIPS ON PREVENTION

8

STARTING THE CONVERSATION

TALKING ABOUT IT

12

HOW TO RESPOND

IF YOUR CHILD HAS A PROBLEM

18

FAQ

UNDERSTANDING
THE EFFECTS



HOW TO PREVENT

“Pornography, by its very nature, is an equal opportunity toxin. It damages the viewer, the performer, and the spouses and the children of the viewers and the performers. It is toxic mis-education about sex and relationships. It is more toxic the more you consume, the “harder” the variety you consume and the younger and more vulnerable the consumer. The damage is both in the area of beliefs and behaviors.”

DR. MARY ANNE LAYDEN

Director of the Sexual Trauma and Psychopathology
Program at the University of Pennsylvania

The issue of teenagers suffering from an addiction to pornography is far larger than most of us realize. Today’s technological advancements have made pornography more accessible, affordable, and anonymous than ever before. And over the last few years our organization has received thousands of emails from desperate teenagers struggling to overcome their addiction to pornography.

Most people don’t realize that viewing pornography impacts the brain in ways nearly identical to those of hard drugs (see “What is the science behind addiction?” in the FAQ section of this packet). Education is the best form of protection. Here are five tips designed to give you the tools you need to help you fortify your child’s defense against pornography.



1. BE PREPARED

Prevention begins with knowing what you're up against and having accurate information. Research facts regarding the harmful effects of pornography using the FAQ section of this guide to prepare yourself for a conversation with your child. Incorporating the science behind the dangers of pornography will help to support your family values in this discussion.

2. PAY ATTENTION

As gatekeepers, you should be aware of what enters into your home. Observe your children's habits to identify the potential for pornography exposure. Nearly 80% of unwanted exposure to pornography takes place within the safety of your home. Here are some questions to consider to increase your awareness:

- What games and gaming devices do your children own?
- Do your children have access to the Internet on those devices?
- What magazines are accessible to your children?
- How are your children using their cell phones?
- What kinds of text messages are your children sending/receiving?

3. HELP PROTECT

Once you have evaluated how pornography can potentially enter your home, it's time to act. Installing an Internet filtration system on all Internet enabled devices is a key step in protecting your family from accidental exposure. Do your research and find what system is best for your family's needs. Also, use the parental control options to password protect unwanted material on cable, Netflix, Hulu and other online streaming services.

**PORNOGRAPHY
IMPACTS THE
BRAIN WITH
EFFECTS NEARLY
IDENTICAL TO
THOSE OF HARD
DRUGS.**

4. SET A STANDARD

Setting a standard for technology and media consumption in the home will help decrease exposure to inappropriate material. Together with your family, develop a plan for your household. This plan should include guidelines regarding consumption limits, acceptable time for use, and the location in your home for Internet enabled devices. The details of what your family's plan looks like is up to you and your family to decide. Whatever standards are set, we recommend that they pertain to all members of the family and not just the children. By doing so, you will help protect adults in the home and send a message to your children that Internet safety is important no matter the age. Some questions to consider when setting a standard in your home are:

Q: What limitations should be set on the amount of time your child spends on Internet enabled devices?

A: There is a higher chance of pornography exposure when hours are spent surfing the Internet out of boredom. As a general rule of thumb, the Internet should be used with a purpose. This may require regulating the amount of time your child spends on any Internet enabled devices.

Q: At what time of day is using an Internet enabled device acceptable?

A: Research has shown that aimless online searching increases late at night. It may be necessary to confine Internet usage to a specific time period, such as 10am—10pm. However, another approach is to only allow your children to be online when an adult is at home and awake.

Q: Where are the computers located?

A: When the computers are located in a private area—such as a bedroom—the opportunity to view pornography anonymously increases significantly. By keeping computers in shared family areas, like the living room or kitchen, images on the computer screen become more obvious. This reduces the likelihood of pornography use going undetected.

Q: Where in the home are mobile Internet enabled devices being used?

A: Children can be exposed to pornography via any device that offers Internet access, this includes cell phones, laptops, tablets, iPods, and handheld gaming devices. It may be necessary to set a time period for mobile usage. You can also review your child's browsing history, text history, and data usage. Check with your mobile provider to find out how to do this remotely. Remember, Internet filtration systems can be installed on mobile devices as well. Make sure to be open and transparent about filtration softwares and all other activities. Transparency should be an expectation from both parents and children.

Take the time to discuss these questions with your entire family. Involving your children in developing your family's media plan can greatly improve buy-in. Children are more likely to follow standards that they helped to create.

5. BE AN EXAMPLE

Setting a standard has a limit to its effectiveness without a model of healthy behavior. Realize the example you set is the most critical aspect to the success of your preventative actions. Identify factors that may oppose your message by asking the following questions:

- Do I watch movies with pornographic language or imagery?
- Do I listen to sexually explicit music?
- Do I listen to music that is derogatory to a specific gender?
- Do I read books or magazines that have sexual language or imagery?
- Do I use sexual language casually?
- Do I use sexually demeaning language?
- Do I respect the opposite gender and demonstrate this through my words and actions?

Children do what we do, not what we say. Be aware of this and try to model healthy communication and media consumption. ■

**START THE
CONVERSATION**

As a parent it can be difficult, at times, to tap into your child's world and have a heartfelt conversation on topics that really matter. Here is our suggestion on how to talk about pornography.

Too often we hear parents say,

“NOT MY KID!”

“MY KID DOESN'T HAVE ACCESS TO THAT KIND OF STUFF. AND EVEN IF THEY DID, THEY WOULD NEVER LOOK AT IT.”

That may be true. We hope it is. However, statistically speaking, it's unlikely. More than 90 percent of all teenagers ages 12 to 17 have been exposed to hardcore pornography, and once they've been exposed, many keep coming back. It's no longer a question of if your child will be exposed to pornographic material online, but when.

WHY YOU NEED TO START THE CONVERSATION

Pornography addiction affects boys and girls, young and old, religious and nonreligious, straight-A students and high school dropouts. Because of cultural trends and technological advancements—namely the Internet—most children are being exposed to pornography by age 9. You need to be aware that the pornography industry is targeting your child through online games, advertisements, email spam campaigns, pop-ups, merchandise, and so much more. They do this for the same reason the tobacco industry targeted teens years ago. If they can get a child hooked young, they potentially have a lifelong client.

Unfortunately, if you don't educate your kids about what healthy sexuality looks like, the porn industry will. And you probably won't like what they teach them.

THE CURIOSITY MYTH

A common myth surrounding “the porn talk” is that if parents discuss the issue openly, their children will become overly curious and start seeking it out. If handled incorrectly, that can be true. However, by following this guide you will find that children are more likely to bring questions to you rather than looking for answers elsewhere. If teenagers feel like their family has a culture of openness, trust, and transparency, they are more willing to be open with their parents.

THE DAYS OF AWKWARDLY GLOSSING OVER THE ‘BIRDS AND THE BEES’ TALK JUST ONCE ARE OVER.

WHEN SHOULD I START THE CONVERSATION

The short answer: earlier than you think. If you have young children and are wondering at what age it is appropriate to start the conversation about the dangers of pornography, understand that it varies depending on specific cultural circumstances, societal influences, media exposure, and individual curiosities. However, children are being exposed to pornography at an increasingly younger age. You may need to start talking about it sooner than you had originally planned. If your child is older, the time may be now.

HOW DO I BRING THIS UP?

The days when parents could quickly gloss over the birds and the bees are over. Today, children are repeatedly exposed to increasingly explicit sexual content, requiring parents to have open and direct conversations about the differences between healthy sexuality and its hollow counterfeits. There may be some awkwardness at the beginning, but as you make it a regular discussion, it will get easier. Here are some ideas to keep in mind as you prepare to have these conversations:

PREPARE YOURSELF

As we mentioned in the “5 Tips for Prevention” section of this guide, it is important to make yourself aware of the science behind pornography addiction so that you are prepared to help educate your child and answer questions. You can find several articles on this subject on our website (www.fightthenewdrug.org) and helpful information in the “Frequently Asked Questions” section of this guide.

TAKE TIME TO TALK

When you plan to have an important conversation, set time aside so you won't feel rushed or interrupted. This could be during one-on-one time with your child, a car ride, or a private conversation before they go to bed.

FIND THE RIGHT PLACE

Have the conversation in a location that is comfortable and private. This gives your child the freedom to ask questions and express themselves openly.

MAKE IT A ONE-ON-ONE

Have a separate conversation with each individual child. This allows you to cater the discussion to each child's particular situation and use language that matches their level of understanding. For example, when speaking to a 7-year-old, you may not feel comfortable bringing up pornography specifically. In that situation you may want to discuss related topics that can act as building blocks for future conversations, such as private areas, no touch zones, or why it is not appropriate to take off your clothes in front of others.

“

I DON'T REMEMBER MY PARENTS TALKING TO ME ABOUT IT UNTIL IT HAD BECOME A PROBLEM. I WAS 10 OR 11. I WISH I HAD UNDERSTOOD THE ISSUE SOONER.

WHAT SHOULD I SAY?

Rather than give you a word for word script, we're going to focus on giving you appropriate guidelines and tools that will be adaptable for your particular situation.

LAYER THE DISCUSSION

Covering every aspect of this subject in one conversation is not realistic or effective. Your first conversation with your child is the start of an ongoing dialogue. Over time, continue to increase their knowledge regarding the harmful effects of pornography by having candid, age-appropriate conversations.

SUPPORT YOUR FAMILY VALUES WITH SCIENCE

Combine your family values with the power of scientific evidence. Including concrete evidence of pornography's harmful effects will help your child fully understand the consequences of viewing pornography. Think about how we educate our kids on the harmful effects of hard drugs. We talk about our individual family values while also discussing drugs' harmful physical effects, such as rotted teeth, lung cancer, and sometimes death.

In the **"Frequently Asked Questions"** section of this packet you will find factual information on the topics listed below that will help you address your children with the necessary language.

- What Is The Science Behind Addiction?
- How Is Addiction Harmful?
- How Can Pornography Be An Addiction?
- How Can Pornography Hurt Me As An Individual?
- How Does Pornography Mess Up My Relationships?
- How Does Pornography Damage Society?
- What Does A Real, Healthy Relationship Look Like?

HOW WILL MY CHILD RESPOND?

DISGUST

Your child might think you are crazy for talking to him or her about this subject. Give them the freedom to express how they feel. They may react this way because they are embarrassed or uncomfortable. Be patient with them. Most likely, they are listening to what you have to say.

DEFENSIVENESS

Your child could also react with anger or defensiveness. This could either mean that they are currently dealing with a pornography problem or that they feel accused of something they are not guilty of. If your child responds in this way, make sure that you don't react with similar emotions. Keep calm. Try to avoid coming across as judgemental. Reacting without judgement is vital to the success of these conversations. Your child will be more willing to open up later if you handle this reaction properly.

SILENCE

Some children may not have anything to say. They may not know how to react, or they may feel awkward. That's okay. They may need some time to think about what you have said. Don't worry; it's still important to start the dialogue on the subject. It not only gives them vital information, but also opens the lines of communication about healthy sexuality. Starting the conversation gives them permission to come to you when they have questions or concerns.

HONESTY

Some children are already caught up in pornography. They may be experiencing shame, guilt, or confusion as a result of their actions. If your child is struggling with pornography use and is able to open up to you about it, be sure to offer support and love rather than disappointment or punishment. In the next section of this guide, **"How to Respond If Your Child Has a Problem,"** we discuss some strategies for how to act in these situations. ■

HOW TO RESPOND

“IF YOU TALK TO YOUR CHILDREN...

you can help them to keep their lives together. If you talk to them skillfully, you can help them to build future dreams.”

JIM ROHN

Life brings new challenges everyday, some of them may alter our sense of reality. One of those life-altering moments could be when you discover that your child has been viewing pornography, or in the extreme case, has an addiction to it.

Rarely will your child bring this to your attention without you discovering it first. In most cases, you are going to uncover the truth about your child's pornography habits when you look at their browsing history or catch them in the act. These events can catch parents off guard and lead to very negative responses. A knee-jerk,

emotional reaction rather than a thought-out response will likely cause more damage in an already sensitive situation.

We want to help you be as prepared as possible so that you respond in a productive way that starts the healing process. Again, because every individual and family is different, there is no perfect script that can be written. However, by keeping the following tips in mind, you can communicate effectively and have a positive impact on your child's understanding of healthy sexuality.

4 TECHNIQUES FOR A HEALTHY RESPONSE

BREATHE

Initially, you may want to express anger or disappointment. While these emotions are natural reactions, they can have a devastating impact on your relationship with your child, especially regarding this topic. Taking a few deep breaths will allow yourself to gain control over your immediate emotions. A knee-jerk reaction to this issue will create secrecy where openness is essential. Think back to when you were younger. Remember that you were far from perfect. Overreacting, expressing judgment, or giving a strict punishment can add fuel to the fire of rebellion and shame. You need to understand that your child is not the problem; their issue with pornography is the problem. If you can successfully separate your child from the problem, you will start to see a clearer path toward ways to help. Removing judgment, anger, and fear from the conversation will likely result in your child feeling more comfortable coming to you for additional help or answers to sensitive questions.

LISTEN

Once you have taken a few deep breaths and gained control of your emotions, take a minute and listen to what your child is telling you. Odds are, this isn't the easiest moment of their life either. Actively listening to what your child is saying will strengthen your relationship and allow them to feel understood. This will also give you time to gather all the facts and determine how to respond. Some suggestions for active listening are:

EVERYDAY LIFE BRINGS NEW CHALLENGES.

MAINTAIN EYE CONTACT

By looking down, or away from your child, you send the message that you are uninterested or uncomfortable with what they have to say. They will think that you're not listening to their perspective, but instead, planning their punishment. Maintaining eye contact will help you focus on what your child is saying, while communicating your concern for them.

USE ENCOURAGING BODY LANGUAGE

Our body language tends to betray us when we are trying to control our feelings. This is especially true during intense situations. Closed postures such as folding your arms or shaking your head could convey anger, disappointment, and discomfort. Displaying these emotions while your child opens up to you will shut them down. Keep your posture open. This will invite more expression from your child, and give you insight into what is really going on.

ASK NON-JUDGEMENTAL QUESTIONS

You may feel curious about certain aspects of your child's pornography use. Before you begin those conversations ask yourself, "How will knowing this help my child?" When you pose questions, be sure that they aren't self-serving, passive aggressive or leading in any way. Some ideas for questions are: When did this start? Where do you most often use? What can I do to help you stop? Asking concrete questions allows you to gather necessary information without allowing your emotions to run wild.

VALIDATE

After your child has said everything they needed to about how they feel and what they have gone through, it's your turn. At this point you still might be a little shocked and you might not know what to say. That's okay. It's normal to feel somewhat overwhelmed. If they have come to you with the issue, thank them for their trust in you. And let them know that you understand that it wasn't easy to open up about this. Regardless of how you discovered the problem, tell them that you love them no matter what. If they can feel your love for them they will be far more willing to continue down this path with you. It is essential for you to be a part of the solution. An important thing to remember is that this issue has become common among teenagers today. Your child isn't the only one on the block suffering from a challenge with pornography.

**YOUR CHILD
ISN'T THE
ONLY ONE ON
THE BLOCK
SUFFERING
FROM THIS
CHALLENGE.**

HELP

Finally, recognize that they need you. They need to know that you're on their side and willing to fight this thing together. You could ask your child what they specifically plan to do to stop viewing pornography before it becomes a habit, and how you can help them make that happen. Assist them as they set detailed goals, and help them to be accountable. This is where you get to show your love through your actions.

Many of you may experience a reaction from your child that is dismissive or unwilling to recognize their pornography use as a problem. It is important for you to keep these four steps in mind and not try to sway them to your line of thinking by force. What we can tell you is to not give up. Keep educating them through an open dialogue and be there for them. When they recognize it as a problem, they will know where to go.

WHAT IF MY CHILD HAS AN ADDICTION?

Your child's commitment to recovery can only be increased by your desire to support them as they work through this. It is also okay to look for help outside of your role as a parent. Depending on your situation and your family's needs, involving a third party for counseling or assistance might be the way to go. The more we learn about this habit the more we know just how much outside help someone needs to break free.

Remember, no one plans on addiction. Don't dwell too much on the past unless it is to help you understand how to address the future. To help, Fight the New Drug has authored FORTIFY: A Step Toward Recovery, a book specifically written for teenagers facing this issue. FORTIFY provides education, resources, and tools that assists them through the recovery process. A free, online version of this program will also be available on the Fight the New Drug website in the coming year. ■

QUESTION:

**WHAT DO YOU
WISH YOUR
PARENTS KNEW
WHEN ADDRESSING
THE ISSUE OF
PORNOGRAPHY?**

“I wish they told me that it exists. That would have been helpful. My parents never even informed me of it.”

“I WISH MY PARENTS UNDERSTOOD THAT SHAMING ME ONLY LED ME TO HIDE IT.”

“I wish they knew that it’s not always controllable and that we want to change but that sometimes we’re just stuck and we don’t know who to turn to, or how to reach out.”

“I wish my parents knew how to address it and speak about it openly and without feeling shy or disgusted. Today porn *is* part of the mainstream media.”

“I wish my parents knew that it is NOT abnormal for kids to want to do this. Being too harsh about things of this nature isn’t going to help anybody.”

“I wish my parents knew that it’s not a matter of “if” but a matter of “when” and to always talk about things calmly whenever they arise. I wish they knew to start talking and teaching early. They can’t just give “the talk” when we are 13. It has to be constant and tailored to our age.”

“I wish my parents knew that the whole “good-people-sometimes-do-bad-things” concept applies to pornography. They once discovered that a friend of mine had a problem with it, and they didn’t want me talking to or associating with him anymore, even though he is a really good person and was addressing the problem!”

“I wish they had taught me some of the language associated with the pornography industry. I stumbled upon pornography because I was looking up words and phrases I heard around school. I was too shy, or just didn’t know to ask my parents first.”

“I WISH MY PARENTS WOULD ADDRESS THE ISSUE PERSONALLY AND NOT SWEEP IT UNDER THE RUG.”

“I wish they had taught me how it affects the porn performers and what leads them into porn (typically abuse and nowhere else to go). Tell me their story and give me first-hand insight to behind the scenes of what is really going on.”

FAQ

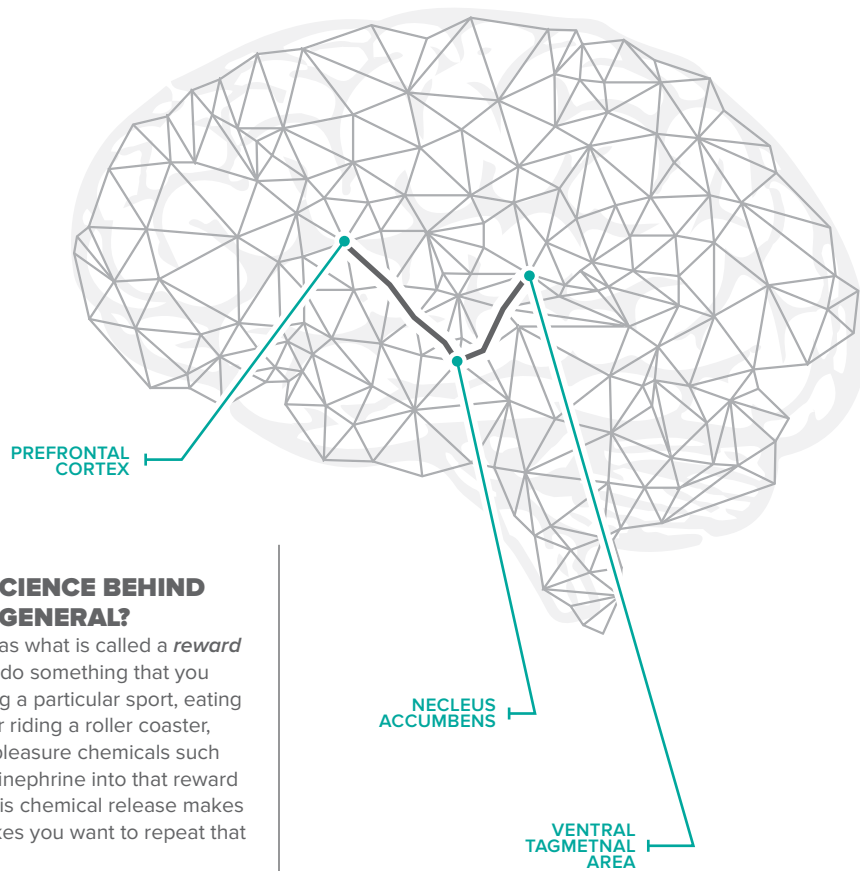
Here are some of the most common questions we get on the topic of pornography, and some answers you might find helpful as you discuss pornography and its effects with your children:

HOW IS ADDICTION HARMFUL?

The Latin root for addiction is dico, which means “to say”—as in, someone or something else has a say. Recognize that root? It takes on an even clearer meaning in the word “dictator.” In a literal sense, those who deal with addiction are no longer completely free. Their actions and choices are being mandated, controlled, and driven. Even if they want to leave the addiction, they may still feel helpless against its power over them.

And what does addiction want? It wants to be the number one priority in your life, ahead of your responsibilities, your family, and even your own health. Having an addiction robs you of control over your life. This loss of control often manifests itself through increased aggression, inability to focus, losing control over physical appetites, and a diminished ability to feel pleasure. Addiction is also often linked to clinical depression as well as feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, and loneliness.

THE REWARD PATHWAY



WHAT IS THE SCIENCE BEHIND ADDICTION IN GENERAL?

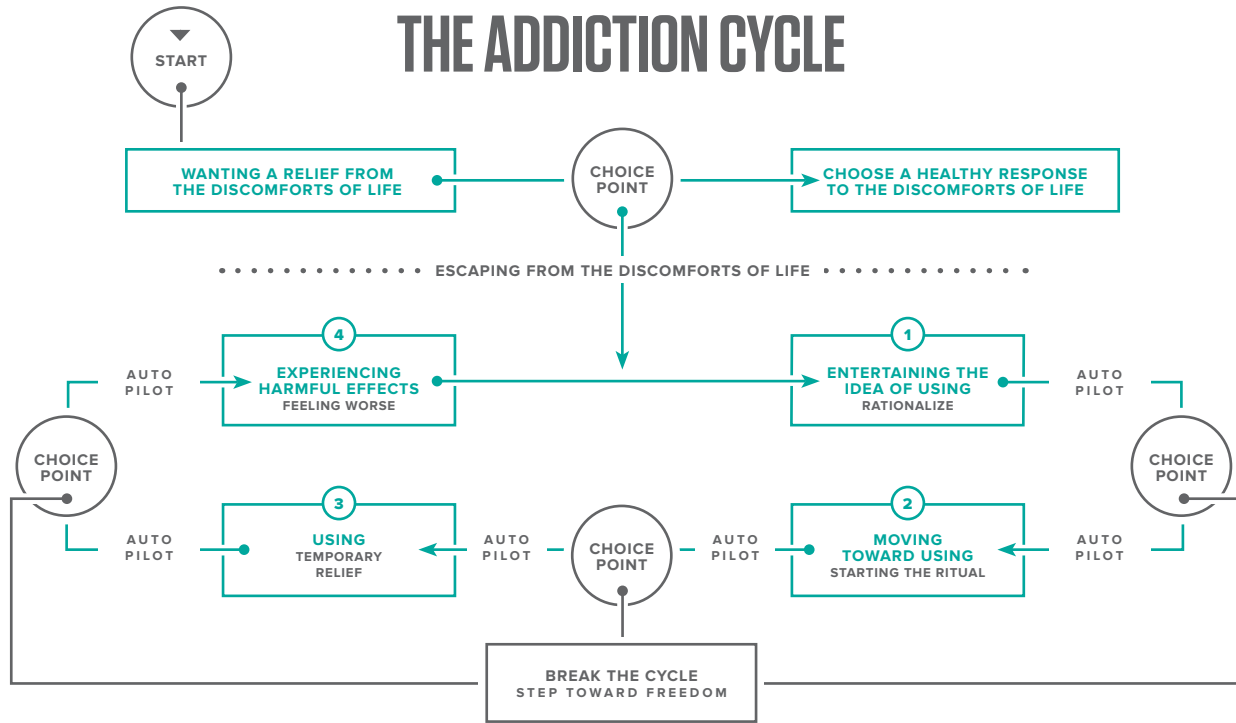
Every human brain has what is called a *reward pathway*. When you do something that you enjoy, such as playing a particular sport, eating your favorite meal, or riding a roller coaster, your brain releases pleasure chemicals such as dopamine and epinephrine into that reward pathway. Because this chemical release makes you feel good, it makes you want to repeat that behavior or activity.

Here's the trick: those same neurochemicals are also released when you're doing some not-so-cool stuff, like taking drugs. When that happens, those chemicals are released at unnaturally high levels, overloading the reward pathway and restructuring the brain itself.

At first, your brain isn't used to such a strong dose of pleasure chemicals, so you might feel sick, excited, or shocked the first time you take drugs, look at porn, or participate in other addictive activities. But over time you start to acclimate to these elevated chemical levels, and eventually your brain begins to crave more, more often, and a more hard-core version of what you've started feeding it, just to feel normal. Pretty soon, you start choosing your addiction over the things you used to love to do. By this time, your brain has built up a dependency to that overexposure of chemicals to the point where you feel that the things you used to love to do—such as reading, hanging out with friends, or playing sports—no longer cut it. They don't release enough neurochemicals into the reward pathway to satisfy your altered brain. That, my friend, is addiction.

HOW CAN PORNOGRAPHY BE AN ADDICTIVE?

When it comes to the brain, pornography's effects are nearly identical to those caused by other drugs in that porn overloads the reward pathway with pleasure chemicals, such as dopamine, serotonin, norepinephrine, and many others. The tidal wave of pleasure chemicals porn creates is much more intense than the reaction that would be produced by other, more natural, activities, such as playing sports or hanging out with friends. As with any other addiction, you start to compromise the things you really care about just for a momentary high or escape. And as your body acclimates to the elevated chemical levels porn produces, you'll need more and more of it just to feel normal.



WHAT IS THE ADDICTION CYCLE?

Often addictions occur simply because of a desire to escape or find relief from the discomforts of life. Review this diagram and try to better understand the process that one goes through when feeling the pressures of life. Notice the Choice Points (moments when one can break the cycle). Discuss with your child healthy responses to life's discomforts and what they can do to avoid slipping into the addiction cycle.

HOW CAN PORNOGRAPHY HURT ME AS AN INDIVIDUAL?

There is clear evidence that long-term pornography use sets people up for feeling more depressed and empty than those who do not use it. One big reason for this is that the reward pathway in the brain gets so worn out by constant artificial stimulation that it simply stops being able to respond to more natural kinds of pleasure. Over time, porn users slowly start to become numb or desensitized to everyday activities. Plain and simple, life can start to feel pretty dull when we're exposing ourselves to unnatural levels of artificial stimulation all of the time. Everything else can eventually feel as boring and bland as an hour-long infomercial about tube socks.

Porn users can also become desensitized to the type of pornography they use. Like hard-drug users, they eventually become bored and start seeking more hard-core forms. Users also report having lower sexual self-esteem than non-users, attitudes of sexual permissiveness, and sexual dysfunction.

Unfortunately, there are also more serious problems that breed from pornography addiction, such as having completely unrealistic expectations about sexual partners. Researchers have found that after being exposed to pornography, subjects were less satisfied with their partners' affection, physical appearance, sexual curiosity, and sexual performance (Zillmann & Bryant 1988). Basically, it can lead to you preferring a computer screen to an actual relationship.

HOW CAN PORNOGRAPHY MESS UP MY RELATIONSHIPS?

Arguably pornography's biggest consequences occurs in the contexts of marriage, relationships, and family. One of the most thorough summaries of these effects was prepared for a U.S. Congressional Subcommittee by marriage and family therapist Dr. Jill Manning in November of 2005. In it, she stated that pornography use leads to "increased marital distress, and risk of separation and divorce, decreased marital intimacy and sexual satisfaction, infidelity, increased appetite for more graphic types of pornography and sexual activity associated with abuse, illegal or unsafe practices, devaluation of monogamy, marriage and child rearing, and an increasing number of people struggling with compulsive and addictive sexual behavior."

Some have argued that pornography can facilitate connection and intimacy between loving couples. As optimistic as this theory may sound, scientific findings, as well as numerous heartbreaking personal accounts from those who have been in relationships with pornography users, suggest precisely the reverse. Pornography use decreases the viewer's satisfaction in their partner's appearance and affection, and can eventually cause them to prefer the fantasy of pornography to an actual relationship (Zillmann & Bryant, 1988). And because the excitement pornography produces makes real life seem boring, relationships in all contexts can start to dull by comparison (Weaver, 2004).

HOW DOES PORNOGRAPHY DAMAGE SOCIETY?

Pornography has become an epidemic in today's society producing increased sexual health issues and human rights violations. Research has shown that pornography can lead to sexual activity at younger ages, and increased sexual permissiveness, which contributes to higher rates of STDs, teen pregnancy, and sexual assault on children. The extreme nature of many pornographic films distorts how we view one another by turning an individual into a collection of body parts rather than a human being. This objectification is linked to increased violence against women, sex trafficking, and sex slavery. FBI statistics show that pornography is found at 80% of the scenes of violent sex crimes or in the homes of the perpetrators (Anderson, 1992).

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HEALTHY SEXUALITY AND UNHEALTHY SEXUALITY?

Imagine being lost in a blistering desert. After two days of wandering without any food or water, you come across an abandoned village on the beach of an ocean. Your attention immediately focuses on the massive body of saltwater crashing on the coast only a few hundred meters ahead. Out of the corner of your eye, you also notice a freshwater pump next to the nearest structure in the abandoned village, but all you can think about is drinking that cold ocean water. You think to yourself, "Water is water, isn't it? Whether I get it from the ocean or find it in the village doesn't really matter, right?"

Of course not. Drinking that saltwater would kill you faster than if you didn't drink any water at all. Even though freshwater and saltwater look nearly identical, their effects couldn't be more opposite. One replenishes and strengthens your body, and the other harms your body. In a similar way, sexuality is expressed in many forms—forms that can look similar from the outside. Depending on the details, however, they can have totally different effects. So what are those details that make such a difference?

Let's start with the biggest: the presence of another actual person. In a pornographic sexual experience, rather than interacting with another human being, your physiological system is being manipulated to respond to an image, with the body provoked by someone who is not really there. As this happens, your brain releases oxytocin, which is referred to as the "bonding chemical." This chemical is meant to create a sense of connection or bond between two loving individuals. In a pornographic experience, however, that chemical is being released in association with a hollow image behind a computer screen or on a magazine page. That is pretty confusing to the brain and over time your ability to bond with another real, actual person weakens.

Basically, pornography is a counterfeit—a lie. What it teaches about sex and attraction is not only false but in many cases it's also destructive. It won't bring a sense of connection, acceptance, or love. It won't vitalize or strengthen a relationship. It will slowly change the viewer's perceptions of women and men and distort their ideas of what a healthy sexual relationship should look like. ■

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