

# Your child is looking at porn.

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## Now what?

Let's be honest. Many children — especially post-pubescent boys — are interested in what we commonly call “porn.” You might not like the idea that some kids are looking at these images, but that doesn't change the fact that it's a pretty common occurrence.

This column isn't about young children or children who accidentally come across unwanted sexual material. Those are different issues. The question I want to explore is how a parent should react if they discover their growing child — typically 12 or older — is deliberately looking at sexually explicit material on the Internet.

## Nothing new or unusual

First, recognize that there's nothing new about teens looking at such material.

We didn't have the Internet when I was 14, but that didn't stop kids from getting their hands on copies of Playboy. Porn has been around for centuries and we're far from the first generation of parents who have had to deal with it.

There are a number of reasons why kids look at pornography. For some, it's to be “cool.” There are reported cases of relatively young children using porn to impress their friends, much as kids sometimes smoke to show their independence.

Sometimes it's curiosity, but in many cases — especially for males past puberty, it's for stimulation at times when no one else is around.

Interest in sex and voyeuristic behavior to satisfy sexual urges are completely normal. Whether the young person makes up images in his head, gets them from television shows, movies, magazines or images on the Internet, the process is much the same.

## Engage but don't overreact

The first answer is not to freak out. Take a deep breath and spend some time thinking about the situation before you do anything. If possible, talk it over with the child's other parent before confronting the child.

Don't overreact. How you respond to the situation can have more of an effect than the exposure itself, according to Richard Toft, a child psychologist in Palo Alto, California.

“Parents,” said Dr. Toft, “need to approach porn the same way they approach any issue about their child’s sexuality. There are laws involved, there is responsibility involved, and there is a life long impact of everything they do whether they want to admit it or not.” Dr. Toft added, “Parents are going to do best if they do not consider porn isolated from sexuality. They need to address their moral feelings about sex, and porn is part of that. It is also best addressed ahead of time not after the fact.” He added, “A parent’s reaction can have a tremendous impact, and you could make it traumatic by ranting, raving and threatening reprisals.”

### **Porn and sexuality**

Dr. Marty Klein, a marriage counselor, psychotherapist, and sex therapist, said that “many parents are blissfully ignoring their kids’ sexuality. They don’t talk about sex with their children when they’re young and when they trip over their kid’s porn at age 14, they suddenly realize their kid is a sexual being.” Finding that your kid is using porn, said Dr. Klein, “can be a teachable moment. It can be turned into a positive thing. It may be long overdue for a parent to have a few conversations about sex with their kid.” He added, “we don’t wait around for our kids to ask about taking care of their teeth. We teach them dental hygiene when they’re young. It’s the same with sex.” Dr. Klein argues that “you can’t talk about porn without talking about your kid masturbating. One of the reason parents don’t want their kids looking at porn is because they’re uncomfortable with their kid masturbating.” Klein said that there is no evidence that masturbation is harmful or dangerous unless the child is doing it so much that it’s interfering with other activities.

Dr. Daniel Broughton, a pediatrician at the Mayo Clinic who for 13 years served as chairman of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, says to be careful to distinguish the child’s behavior from the feelings that may be behind it.

“What the kid has done may be an issue, but what a kid is feeling or thinking is not the problem. You don’t say ‘You’re a bad kid for thinking this,’ even if you do feel that he has been a naughty kid for doing it.”

You don’t need a psychologist or a pediatrician to recognize how this can be an extremely embarrassing situation for you and your child. After all, you’re entering into the child’s private space. While having sex involves another person, viewing pornography often involves only the child and the screen.

Broughton cautions parents not to send their child to a psychologist or psychiatrist at the first sign of such exposure.

“You might want to seek professional advice yourself on how to deal with it, but that doesn’t mean you should seek professional care for your child,” he said.

Both Toft and Broughton feel it’s appropriate for a parent to talk with their child so the child knows how the parent feels about pornography and the child’s behavior. Again, both professionals caution parents not to make their child feel as if he is somehow abnormal or perverted.

### **Role models**

Cordelia Anderson, a prevention consultant in the field of sexual health recommends parents counter the messages their kids may see when viewing porn. “Parents may want to be the main sexuality educator for their children rather than by omission having it be pornography.” She said that parents “should think about the messages it contains about gender, equity and sex and sexuality” as well as the “role and expectation of being male or female in this culture, about respect for your partner and sex in the context of a caring respectful relationship, and what kinds of images and practices they want to shape their arousal.”

### **Putting it into context**

It’s also important to put the activity into context. An occasional peek at pornography or use of pornography for sexual stimulation, according to Toft, is not as much of a mental health concern as are cases where children are obsessed with the material. If the child is looking at pornography for hours at a time, or is collecting it, then you may have a more serious problem that requires professional help.

### **When it could be more serious**

Though it’s rare, there are cases where adults have used pornography as part of the grooming process to make the child more susceptible to sexual exploitation. It can also be a financial issue if the child uses a credit card to get access to paid sites.

Also, if any of the images are of people under 18, the child might be accessing illegal child pornography. If so, put an immediate end to it and destroy any copies that may be printed or stored on a computer or phone. Possession of child pornography is a serious crime that could lead to prosecution and being required to register as a sex

offender. This is especially important if the images are of pre-pubescent children, but even if your child is looking at images of teens and even if you think it may be “age appropriate,” it may still be illegal. Minors can be prosecuted and the law is sometimes applied even when kids receive or send sexually explicit photos to other kids (so-called “sexting.”)

### **Consequences yet restraint**

Broughton says parents need to dish out consequences for inappropriate behavior, but shouldn't lash out with severe punishment the first time. “If the parents feel that the child has done something wrong, there needs to be a penalty, but it needs to be commensurate to the issue. The first time the penalty should be relatively mild like, ‘You can't use the computer unless a parent is there for two days.’ As the offenses become more repeated, the consequences should become more severe.”

When talking with your child, consider bringing up some of the consequences of spending time on these types of sites. For one thing, the depictions on some Internet sites go far beyond pictures of naked people. There is often very graphic sex as well as a variety of divergent sexual practices that can be especially problematic for someone who has little or no sexual experience.

### **Violent vs. non-violent material**

The type of material a child is looking at can have an impact on their behavior said according to a studies. A research team led by Dr. Michele Ybarra found that “intentional exposure to violent x-rated material over time predicted an almost 6-fold increase in the odds of self-reported sexually aggressive behavior, whereas exposure to nonviolent x-rated material was not statistically significantly related.”

After reviewing empirical studies, Christopher Ferguson, Associate Professor of Psychology and Criminal Justice” at Texas A&M International University concluded, “Overall, pornography viewing effects on minors appears to be fairly minimum for most outcomes, particularly for “regular” non-violent porn. There appears to be little evidence overall that viewing non-violent pornography increases sexual aggression. Even for violent pornography the evidence is inconsistent at best.” He added that “the research also indicates what is called ‘violent porn’ is actually very rare.”

There is a lot of concern about the type of porn that's online compared to what was easily available in the past. Porn is more

explicit and it sometimes depicts acts that fantasize behavior that appears to be hurtful. Dr. Klein said that parents can help kids distinguish between fantasy and reality when it comes to sexually explicit material. Parents should explain to children that people in porn films are “actors and actresses and that they’re not really hurting each other.” He likened it to watching the 3 Stooges poke each other or kids playing with guns. “Just like some kids like to play with guns and would never hurt anyone, some adults like to play games with sex, but wouldn’t really hurt each other.”

### **Blocking and monitoring porn**

If you feel that your child needs some restraint beyond what you can accomplish through conversation or house rules, you can put a filter on whatever devices the child uses. There are programs for computers and apps for smart phones that do a reasonably good job of blocking sexually explicit material without blocking appropriate sites. These programs are not perfect and they are not for every child but they can help a child control his or her impulses. If you use such a program, it’s best to discuss it with your child so he knows why it’s there. You should also consider removing the software or lessening its restrictions as your child shows signs of self-control.

To prevent accidental exposure, consider configuring your search engine for “Safe search.” You **can do** that within Google, but as easier option is to use SafeKids.com **Child Safe Search** page that’s powered by Google. Yahoo also has a **safe search** setting as **does** Microsoft’s Bing.

Of course there are ways around filters (including using a different device — porn can be viewed on any Internet connected device including game consoles, phones, tablets and even an iPod Touch) and ultimately your child will reach an age where you have no ability to control what they do, so remember that the best filter isn’t the one that runs on a device, but the one that runs on the computer inside the child’s head.

Finally, recognize that conversations like this are part of parenting. Difficult as they are, they can ultimately be good for your children and your relationship with them.

*This article also **appears** on [Forbes.com](http://Forbes.com).*