

The Real Danger of Children Being Exposed to Pornography

By The VIRTUS Programs

Preview:

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Article:

Introduction:

A critical element of protecting children and youth from sexual abuse and exploitation involves protecting them from pornographic materials. With the continual advances in technology, including artificial intelligence, pornography is very easy to encounter—even if youth aren't directly searching for it. As safe adults, one way we can combat the dangers of pornography in our society is to recognize and help young people understand the detrimental effects of pornography and how this is linked to physical changes in brain development.

The Scope of the Problem

In one year alone, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's Cyber Tip Line received 20.5 million reports of online child sexual exploitation, with a total of 29.2 million incidents of *online* exploitation.¹ Included in these incidents was a 192% increase of reports of online enticement, where an adult was communicating with a child specifically for sexual purposes or sextortion.²

Virtually every study shows how when children are exposed to pornography, it can have very harmful effects—even when that exposure is infrequent. Research indicates that exposure often begins early. In fact, many youth encounter explicit material by age 12, and some as young as 10 or earlier.³ A recent survey found that 71% of teens reported intentionally viewing pornography within the previous week, and over half had encountered violent content depicting rape or physical harm.⁴ Because exposure occurs at the same time as other significant developments for a child of this age, this can just amplify negative outcomes in the language they use, subsequent child behavior, brain development and increased risk to unsafe behaviors and even abuse. This early and frequent exposure can distort sexual development, normalize harmful behaviors, and foster unrealistic expectations about intimacy and consent.

¹ <https://www.missingkids.org/gethelpnow/cybertipline/cybertiplinedata>

² <https://www.missingkids.org/gethelpnow/cybertipline/cybertiplinedata>

³ Madigan, S., Villani, V., Azzopardi, C., et al. (2018). The prevalence of exposure to sexually explicit media among children and adolescents: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 62(6), 634–641.

⁴ Wright, P. J., Tokunaga, R. S., & Kraus, A. (2022). Consumption of pornography and sexually aggressive behavior: A meta-analysis. *Communication Monographs*, 89(1), 1–27.

Viewing pornography also affects a youth's boundaries and can make them more likely to be sexually abused. People who sexually abuse children, whether through exploitation online or through in-person encounters, will often use pornographic material to groom the child or youth, which is part of their overall manipulation process. While showing a child pornographic images can both be harmful and abusive, abusers use pornography to test the child, to desensitize the child and further cross his or her boundaries to continue to sexually abuse them.

Changes in Brain Development

Pornography consumption during adolescence can have profound neurological and psychological effects. Pornographic material activates the brain's reward system, releasing dopamine in patterns similar to substance addiction.⁵ Over time, this can lead to desensitization, compulsive use, and impaired decision-making. One landmark brain imaging study found reduced gray matter in regions associated with motivation and self-control among frequent pornography users.⁶ For adolescents, whose brains are still developing, these changes may increase vulnerability to addictive behaviors and emotional dysregulation, potentially impacting academic performance and mental health.

Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence, or AI, is increasingly being used to produce child sexual abuse materials.⁷ People can even take an innocuous image of a child and use AI to create sexual images or videos which can then be circulated online, further exploiting children the more times it's shared. It's not only adults that have used AI tools to create child sexual abuse materials—they are also being used by children and youth. One study found that 1 in 10 children said they personally know about a peer using AI tools to generate nude images of other children.⁸

What can we do?

Given the harm associated with children and youth being exposed to, or even addicted to, pornography, proactive measures are essential. Caring adults should prioritize open communication about online content, implement digital safeguards, and educate children and youth on the realities and dangers of pornography. Education should emphasize not only Catholic moral teaching, but also consent, respect, and emotional intimacy, countering the distorted messages often portrayed in explicit media. Public health campaigns and school-based interventions can also play a critical role in reducing exposure and mitigating harm.

⁵ Love, T., Laier, C., Brand, M., Hatch, L., & Hajela, R. (2015). Neuroscience of Internet pornography addiction: A review and update. *Behavioral Sciences*, 5(3), 388–433.

⁶ Kühn, S., & Gallinat, J. (2014). Brain structure and functional connectivity associated with pornography consumption: The brain on porn. *JAMA Psychiatry*, 71(7), 827–834.

⁷ Internet Watch Foundation. <https://www.iwf.org.uk/about-us/why-we-exist/our-research/how-ai-is-being-abused-to-create-child-sexual-abuse-imagery/>

⁸ Thorn. <https://www.thorn.org/blog/ai-generated-child-sexual-abuse-the-new-digital-threat-we-must-confront-now/>

Furthermore, caring adults should:

- Talk to the children in your care about addictions and what to do if they come across sexual images or videos. Helpful talking points can be found at Common Sense Media, which is a non-profit organization with the aim of promoting media literacy and responsible consumption
<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/articles/talking-with-teens-and-preteens-about-pornography>.⁹ (*Please note this is a secular site that does not include information on morality or Catholic teachings, yet does have helpful information in which to at least begin a conversation.*)
- Discuss with children the reality of sexual exploitation, the dangers of posting or sharing sexualized images of themselves or others (including the use of AI to create sexualized materials), and what to do if someone has solicited them, or shared sexualized materials with them. More information can be found through the National Center for Missing and Exploited Kids at:
<https://www.missingkids.org/theissues/csam>.¹⁰
- If you become aware of a child or teen with an addiction to pornography, seek professional guidance. Resources can be found at:
<https://integrityrestored.com/>¹¹

Conclusion

Pornography materials clearly negatively impact children; the easy access to the pornographic materials while using technology, along with the harm of exposure, all increase the risk of adverse neurological effects, increased risk of addiction, and increased risk of addiction and sexual exploitation or abuse. Understanding the impact of pornography on children and youth and how it can impact their brain development is part of our mission to protect children and youth from sexual abuse.

⁹ We recommend reviewing this content to have a robust conversation with the youth. Since this site does not include information on morality or Catholic teachings, these talking points should also be integrated into the conversation. Common Sense Media.
<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/articles/talking-with-teens-and-preteens-about-pornography>

¹⁰ The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. <https://www.missingkids.org/theissues/csam>

¹¹ <https://integrityrestored.com/>