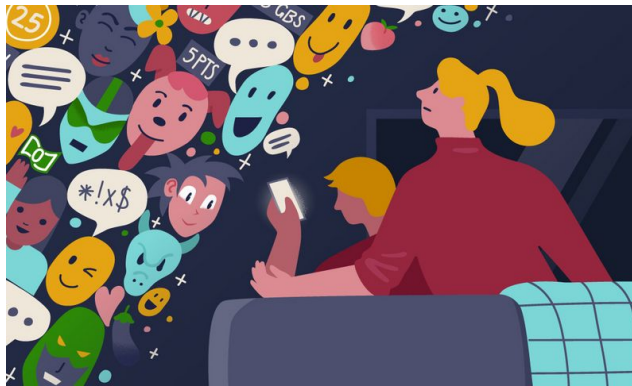


In Touch Article for June 2022



Pornography - the Silent Pandemic and the impact on kids

Over the years in my career, and especially in my work outside of the school for the last 7 years with child trauma and sexual abuse, I have been learning more about the impact of early childhood trauma and, specifically, the harmful impact of early access to pornography on same age peer to peer abuse, on harmful sexual behaviour, and on unhealthy relationships. Unfortunately, pornography is a silent, yet global issue, that needs a loud and global response.

In an effort to empower and protect kids in this digital age, increasing their knowledge around safety online has become essential for their wellbeing. More and more experts are saying that this knowledge should also include teaching kids about the risks and harm of pornography. This topic is often avoided with children and youth because it can feel uncomfortable and shaming. What has become increasingly evident, however, is that by talking openly and learning together about the harm and risks of online pornography we can help build resilience and discernment in the digital world. It is hoped that in gaining a deeper understanding and awareness of the negative impact online pornography has on children, we can be motivated to break the silence about this hidden pandemic.

Quick Facts:

- Currently, the average age of first exposure to porn is as young as 11
- There has been a 25% increase of access to porn sites (various ages) since COVID
- 100% of porn now is violent, aggressive, degrading, non-consensual, and abusive towards women, specifically, racialized women.

Why teach about the harmful effects of pornography?

- Unfortunately, we live in a hypersexualized/pornified culture - our kids are exposed to harmful sex stereotypes in the media, movies, advertising, music which has become normalized. This can influence kids to inadvertently make physical comparisons and seek to live up to the sexualized portrayal of body types/gender stereotypes/sex expectations.
- Pornography has become increasingly accessible to very young children and notably difficult to block. Accidental searches/pop ups/links can lead to the viewing of images or

videos that portray violent and degrading messages about sex and gender. Everything is just a click away and this is harmful to a child's developing brain.

- Pornography portrays a deeply problematic and violent view of sex, causing a normalization of violence in relationships for those exposed.
- Pornography impacts a child/youth's social emotional wellbeing and their understanding of healthy relationships in dramatically negative ways.
- Excessive use of porn can lead to abusive and addictive behaviours. There is increasing evidence of peer on peer abuse (acting what they are seeing), problematic sexual behaviours, and pornography addiction, due to ease of access to online pornography.
- Research has shown that the exposure to porn increases risk of: mental health challenges (depression, anxiety), increased body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, body image issues, isolation, shame, addiction, desensitization to violence in sex, sexting, creation of self produced sexual images, child sexual abuse material (CSAM), being lured by on-line predators, and changing sexual arousal templates in kids brains (Kids are not designed to have these templates created so early). **References available on school counselling website.

What can you do?

- Conversation is key: Talking to kids about on-line safety with age appropriate and open communication is the most effective, more than a restrictive approach (rules, limits, boundaries, controls) - however there is a place for this too
- Learn more: buy books to help enhance these conversations (not just a one time sex talk)
- Infuse your values and beliefs into these conversations and try to avoid shaming kids about their developing sexuality
- Digitize your parenting skills: Teach your children harms and risks and how to stay safe from viewing porn or other harmful content; consider adding filters
- Increase digital supervision: Set limits on screen time, create contracts for smartphones, boundaries for where devices are in your home, shut off internet access at night and be interested and curious to learn from kids about what they are doing on-line
- Engage in conversations with other parents; talk about it, share notes!
- Sign the petition for age verification to access porn (go to: defenddignity.ca)

It is important to take the time to acknowledge this silent crisis and move toward preventing harm and supporting our children. As Christians, we can deeply appreciate the need to be discerning about the harmful messages that are bombarding kids in their digital world. We can also appreciate that there are benefits within the online world. So acknowledging the benefits and harms, the importance of educating kids about how to safely use their smartphones and devices is just as important as taking drivers ed. before driving a car.

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References and other resource links available by visiting the school counselling website