

Talking to Youth about Pornography

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As parents and priesthood leaders speak openly with youth about intimacy, they will be able to help them understand and avoid the spiritual, emotional, and physical dangers of pornography.

Today's youth are bombarded by explicit images—most of them carnal and lustful. But because of the complexity and delicate nature of sexual issues, many parents are reluctant or embarrassed to discuss the subject with their children. Consequently, many youth are schooled by misguided friends or corrupt media and often develop inaccurate views about sexuality. Those views may lead to inappropriate behaviors.

We want to teach our youth the law of chastity and help them avoid the pain of immorality. So what can parents and priesthood leaders do? We need to discuss with our youth the sacred nature of human intimacy and help them understand and bridle the feelings associated with that intimacy.

If we teach only about misused sexuality, our youth might become insecure and uncertain. We may inadvertently convey this confusing message: "Sexual thoughts and feelings are bad, sinful, and wrong—save them for someone you love." Youth who receive only negative messages about sexuality may conclude, "Since sexual feelings or urges are bad, and I feel them very strongly, I too must be bad." This kind of thinking can result in feelings of low self-worth, unworthiness, and shame, leaving the youth feeling distant from the Spirit.

Open conversation can prevent much of this confusion. As we talk to our youth about the sacred nature of our bodies and procreation, we'll be able to help them understand and avoid the spiritual, emotional, and physical dangers of pornography.

Our Bodies: Their Sacred Nature

The media often portray an unrealistic view of how our bodies should look and what they represent. This view leads people to see the body as an object rather than an essential part of a person's soul. Accepting this view can lead to near worship of the "perfect body" and, when one doesn't match up, to self-loathing.

Rather than let the media teach our youth this destructive worldly view, we can teach them that our bodies, in all their varieties, are wonderful, God-given gifts, created to provide joy and fulfillment. In 1913 Elder James E. Talmage (1862–1933) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles stated: "We have been taught . . . to look upon these bodies of ours as gifts from God. We Latter-day Saints do not regard the body as something to be condemned, something to be abhorred. . . . We regard [the body] as the sign of our royal birthright. . . . It is particular to the theology of the Latter-day Saints that we regard the body as an essential part of the soul."¹ This understanding can help youth look upon their own bodies and the bodies of others with deep respect.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles also articulated the sacred nature of our bodies:

"We simply must understand the revealed, restored Latter-day Saint doctrine of the soul, and the high and inextricable part the body plays in that doctrine.

"One of the 'plain and precious' truths restored to this dispensation is that 'the spirit *and* the body are the soul of man' [D&C 88:15; emphasis added]. . . .

". . . Exploitation of the body (please include the word *soul* there) is, in the last analysis, an exploitation of Him who is the Light and the Life of the world."²

Our Sexuality: A Gift

In addition to being blessed with physical bodies, we are also given the sacred power of procreation. Our Heavenly Father has sanctioned the act of sexual expression in marriage and allows married couples to experience pleasure, love, and fulfillment in that expression. President Spencer W. Kimball (1895–1985) stated: "In the context of lawful marriage, the intimacy of sexual relations is right and

divinely approved. There is nothing unholy or degrading about sexuality in itself, for by that means men and women join in a process of creation and in an expression of love."³ Our sexual drives—when expressed appropriately—should therefore be seen as wonderful, sacred gifts.

President Boyd K. Packer, Acting President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, spoke to the youth of the Church on this topic. His powerful insights can help parents teach about the positive and sacred nature of these powers:

"There was provided in our bodies—and this is sacred—a power of creation, a light, so to speak, that has the power to kindle other lights. This gift was to be used only within the sacred bonds of marriage. Through the exercise of this power of creation, a mortal body may be conceived, a spirit entered into it, and a new soul born into this life.

"*This power is good.* It can create and sustain family life, and it is in family life that we find the fountains of happiness. It is given to virtually every individual who is born into mortality. It is a sacred and significant power, and I repeat, my young friends, that *this power is good.* . . .

"Much of the happiness that may come to you in life will depend on how you use this sacred power of creation."⁴

The Harmful Effects of Pornography

One of the things that can corrupt this sacred power is pornography. President Gordon B. Hinckley has said that through its use "the minds of youth become warped with false concepts. Continued exposure leads to addiction that is almost impossible to break."⁵

Many individuals, even some professional counselors, excuse or even condone viewing pornography as harmless behavior. They rationalize that it is "normal" and causes no harm when done in seclusion and privacy. This same rationale is used in excusing the accompanying practice of self-stimulation. So how do we respond when youth ask, "What is it about pornography and self-stimulation that is wrong?" The following four thoughts may be helpful in addressing this question.

It defiles souls—souls for which Jesus Christ atoned. The body is part of the soul; therefore, when we look upon the body of another person to satisfy our own lustful desires, we are disrespecting and defiling the very soul of that person as well as our own. Elder Holland warned us of the consequences of rationalizing or taking these things lightly: “In trivializing the soul of another (please include the word *body* there) we trivialize the atonement, which saved that soul and guaranteed its continued existence. And when one toys with the Son of Righteousness, the Day Star Himself, one toys with white heat and a flame hotter and holier than the noonday sun. You cannot do so and not be burned.”⁶ Pornography defiles and degrades the body and spirit. We need to respect the sacred nature of others and of ourselves.

It can keep us from reaching the fullest potential of our souls. Our Heavenly Father has created our bodies and our spirits. He knows how they work together best. He knows what will help us reach our potential and what will hinder our progress. He knows what we should take into our bodies and what we should leave out. Prophets have taught us that putting pornographic images into our minds is detrimental to our spirit and that in so doing, we jeopardize our ability to have happiness and joy. If, however, we follow the Lord’s directives from the scriptures and prophets, we will be able to experience the fullest potential of our souls.

It can become addictive. Repeatedly viewing pornography, especially when coupled with self-stimulation, can become habitual, even addictive. The addiction is established when a person becomes dependent on the “rush” of chemicals the body creates when one views pornography. He or she learns to depend on this activity to escape from or cope with life’s challenges and emotional stressors like hurt, anger, boredom, loneliness, or fatigue. This dependency becomes very difficult to break and sometimes escalates to sexual encounters outside the bonds of marriage.

It creates unhealthy expectations for marriage. When a person views pornography and becomes aroused, the body experiences the same arousal patterns as in a real

sexual encounter. When this behavior is repeated frequently, the body and the mind become conditioned to certain sexual images and behavior, which can create unrealistic and unhealthy expectations of what a sexual relationship should or will be. Such expectations carry over to marriage, creating pain, distrust, conflict, confusion, and betrayal of trust between spouses.

Unceasing Virtue

The Lord offers tremendous blessings to those who have clean and virtuous thoughts coupled with charity: “Let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God; and the doctrine of the priesthood shall distil upon thy soul as the dews from heaven. The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion” (D&C 121:45–46).

How does one maintain virtuous thoughts “unceasingly”? Those who succeed in overcoming inappropriate thoughts and behaviors are those who learn to engage in virtuous daily routines. These activities include the following:

- Listening to uplifting music.
- Enjoying God’s creations in nature.
- Keeping our bodies clean and healthy.
- Reading the scriptures and good literature.
- Delighting in laughter with good friends and family.
- Participating in conversation that is not demeaning or lewd.
- Giving thanks in prayer and pleading for power to resist temptation.
- Surrounding ourselves with virtuous things in our homes and workplaces, including pictures, paintings, gifts from loved ones, items that make us laugh, or things that help us recall meaningful memories.

All of these can become symbols of virtue, which can keep our minds focused and less susceptible to the cravings of the natural man. If youth can learn and implement these strategies in their lives, they will begin to experience the incredible blessings spoken of in Doctrine and Covenants 121.

It is also vital that they understand we all have weakness to overcome. Weakness does not make us unworthy of God's love. In fact, overcoming our weakness is part of the Lord's plan for us. When the Lord makes us aware of our weakness and we follow His directive to become humble and submissive (not distressed and hopeless), wonderful things



begin to happen. We can yield our hearts to the Lord in faith. Then, through His grace and power—not through our willpower alone—He will “make weak things become strong” (Ether 12:27) unto us.

We are not told that He will take our weakness away from us. We may continue to be tempted and troubled by our weakness, but as we are humble and maintain faith, the Lord will help us resist temptations.

When young people have problems with pornography, they need to know that they are not lost, that we and the Lord still love them, and that there is a way out. President Hinckley has said: “May you plead with the Lord out of the depths of your soul that He will remove from you the addiction which enslaves you. And may you have the courage to seek the

loving guidance of your bishop and, if necessary, the counsel of caring professionals.”⁷ Our youth should not feel ashamed of seeking parental, priesthood, and professional help.

As parents and leaders, we must be involved in our youths' lives, striving to create a safe environment for them. We need to be bold in our communication with them about these important issues, encouraging them to stay close to the principles of the gospel and to fortify themselves against the powers of the adversary. We need to be aware of and monitor our youths' activities—including their Internet use—and openly discuss the blessings and dangers of human sexuality, listening and giving sound direction and guidance.

Of course, we do not share personal accounts of our own intimate experiences. But using the principles discussed in this article, we can help our youth clearly understand the power and the potential of the sexual urges they have.

More important, we must set an example to our youth. They are watching how we cope with negative influences. Our youth need to know that *we* know the influence of the adversary is no match for the divine power and influence of the Lord, in whom we place our confidence. ■

NOTES

1. In Conference Report, Oct. 1913, 117.
2. *Of Souls, Symbols, and Sacraments* (2001), 11, 13.
3. *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (1982), 311.
4. “Why Stay Morally Clean,” *Ensign*, July 1972, 111; emphasis added.
5. “A Tragic Evil among Us,” *Liabona and Ensign*, Nov. 2004, 61.
6. *Of Souls, Symbols, and Sacraments*, 13.
7. *Liabona and Ensign*, Nov. 2004, 62.

HELP IN OVERCOMING PORNOGRAPHY

Let Virtue Garnish Thy Thoughts is a new pamphlet designed to help those struggling with pornography. It discusses how to:

- Recognize destructive media.
- Resist and avoid the temptation of pornography.
- Abandon pornography addictions.

Let Virtue Garnish Thy Thoughts (item no. 00460) also lists scriptures and other Church resources on repentance, the sanctity of the body, and overcoming worldly influences. Church leaders and family members can share the pamphlet with loved ones struggling with pornography.

