



ADDRESSING PORNOGRAPHY:

Protect, Respond, & Heal



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These three applications of love can help our children in the encounters they may face with pornography.

I am painfully aware of the influence of pornography upon even the youngest in our society—our children. A plague of epic proportions, pornography can cause shame, deceit, distorted feelings, loss of self-control, overwhelming addiction, and total consumption of time, thought, and energy. There is great need for all of us—parents, families, teachers, leaders—to really see, value, and protect our children and youth.

Love is among the greatest of God’s gifts. Loving God and loving one’s neighbor are the two greatest commandments given to us from Jesus Christ Himself. Love, I believe, is also our greatest weapon in fighting against pornography.

Indeed, as the popular catchphrase says, “porn kills love,” but let’s also remember that love kills porn. That doesn’t mean that our love for someone else can change their addiction or even their behavior. But love can motivate us—how we prepare, how we respond, how we listen—particularly with our children. If we are going to have any hope of eradicating this plague from the world, love must be both at the forefront and the foundation of all our efforts.

I wish to suggest three applications of love that I hope we will focus on, embrace, and enact. These three applications are tied to three phases of encounters with pornography our children may face.

First, we say “I love you” by truly protecting them. Second, we say “I still love you” by the way we respond to their exposure to pornography, whether intentional or not. And third, we say “I will always love you” by providing loving support for them as they work on healing if they’ve experienced compulsive use or addiction. In each phase, love is the key.

This problem is affecting our boys and our girls, and we're not talking about it enough.



1 PROTECTION: “I LOVE YOU”

Picture in your mind a child you love. When you tell this child, “I love you,” what does it mean? At its core, it means that we provide protection so that we can help those we love to become their best selves and face life’s challenges. Part of protection is creating strong, trusting, consistent relationships. These types of relationships help to draw our children close. As we build strong relationships of trust and protect our children and grandchildren—or any child—we give them a safe place to turn. This protection helps them understand who they are and helps them comprehend their relationship with God. Feeling valued and loved helps children envision and rely upon a caring Heavenly Father who gives instructions for their happiness.

I am concerned that many parents may not yet realize how dangerous pornography really is or may think it’s only a problem for the boy next door. The reality is that this problem is affecting

our boys and our girls, and we’re not talking about it enough.

Many years ago, my husband and I heard a meaningful story that we have repeated often to our children. The story is about an old rattlesnake who asked a passing young boy to carry him to the mountaintop to see one last sunset before the snake died. The boy was hesitant, but the rattlesnake promised not to bite him in exchange for the ride. After that concession, the boy kindly carried the snake to the top of the mountain where they watched the sunset together.

After carrying the snake back down to the valley floor, the boy prepared a meal for himself and a bed for the night. In the morning, the snake asked, “Please, little boy, will you take me back to my home? It is now time for me to leave this world, and I would like to return to my home.” The little boy felt he had been safe and

the snake had kept his word, so he decided he would take the snake home as requested.

He carefully picked up the snake, held it close to his chest, and carried him back into the desert to his home to die. Just before he laid the rattlesnake down, the rattlesnake turned and bit him in the chest. The little boy cried out and threw the snake upon the ground. “Mr. Snake, why did you do that? Now I will surely die!” The rattlesnake looked up at him and grinned: “You knew what I was when you picked me up.”

In today’s world, I see many parents handing their child a snake. I am speaking of smartphones. We cannot put cell phones with internet access into the hands of young children who aren’t old enough to have been sufficiently taught, do not yet have necessary reasoning and decision-making abilities, and who don’t have parental controls and other tools to help protect them. Jason S. Carroll, a professor of family life at Brigham Young University, stated, “We safeguard our children until the time they can safeguard themselves.” The brain stem, which houses the pleasure centers of the brain, develops first. Only later do the reasoning and decision-making abilities in the frontal cortex fully develop. “So kids have the gas pedal without the full brake.”¹

Every phone should have safeguards, even teens’. This is also good counsel for adults. No one is immune to the bite of a poisonous snake. Some parents opt for flip phones for their children to limit usage to calling and texting.

Beyond the smartphones are countless other devices that can access unwanted media via the internet. A recent study showed that 79 percent of unwanted pornography exposures take place in the home.² Children can be exposed to it on tablets, smartphones, game consoles, portable DVD players, and smart TVs, just to name a few devices. I know families who have designated

a single, high-traffic area in their home where electronic devices are used. These families call it a “media room,” and all their devices are kept in open view, in the light. Never is any one person alone in the room on a media device.

Other families have opted for rules like no phones in bedrooms or bathrooms. Some simply say, “Never alone with a phone.” Still others gradually add access to apps their children can use with software that allows the child’s phone to be configured by the parent. This way they teach that trust is earned and that phone safety is important.

Whatever the needs are for our individual families, let’s teach each family member to use technology wisely and positively from the start—to develop a moral mindset. Let’s educate children in constructive ways to use technology for good. We can teach them to evaluate by asking themselves, “Will using this serve a good purpose?” Our choices in how we teach our families now will influence future generations.

As parents, I hope we will consider the importance of our relationships with our children and the specific efforts we are making to protect them. As we strengthen these loving relationships, children will better understand why God warns against the evils of pornography, they will recognize how to avoid it, and they will be prepared if they do encounter it.

2 RESPONSE: “I STILL LOVE YOU”

Creating welcoming, open, inviting conversations that encourage children to share their thoughts, experiences, and questions with their parents is not easy. We can invite children of all ages to come forward if or when they develop any level of pornography problem—from early, inadvertent exposures to occasional use, to intensive use, and on down to compulsive use. Earlier discussions are better, and children will come forward more readily when they know they are loved and nothing they say or do can change that love.

Very rarely, however, does a child come forward voluntarily. It usually happens when an observant parent prompts a child with, “Is something wrong?” or “You don’t seem quite yourself.” The more love the child feels, the easier it is for him or her to open up.

This assurance of love is established in their minds from small experiences that take place over and over. Minor troubles talked about in a loving way create a foundation of a healthy response so that when big troubles come, communication is still open. Most importantly, children

know that your response will be, “I still love you. I don’t stop loving you because something happened. I always love you.”

For some reason, we don’t talk very much to youth and children about one of the strongest urges and biggest temptations they will face. Our reluctance sets them up to be taught primarily by the internet, other children or teenagers, or even popular media. Some of us may be hesitant to even use the word *pornography* around children in an effort to protect their innocence. It feels so awkward. Maybe our parents never talked that openly with us. What if our conversation encourages curiosity? What if they want to know more? How can we expect our children to talk about pornography with us if we never talk about it with them?

Parents, we must start the conversation and not wait for children to come to us. I love the suggestion of having regular, frequent, comfortable conversations instead of a one-time event. The benefits of caring conversations are that parents and trusted leaders are the experts, not Google; talking can occur in a safe environment; and talking increases the trust of the child. We want children to feel prepared and empowered, not scared. We want to talk with them and not at them.

As parents and teachers, we can’t help children if we aren’t educated ourselves. Teaching the *what* and the *why* is essential. We can learn for ourselves and help children understand why pornography is wrong, why it is so dangerous, why we don’t want it to hurt them, and what to do if they encounter it.

Are we giving our children a sufficient *why* in age-appropriate ways? If the only reason we give them to avoid pornography is “It’s bad,” that may end up being an inadequate reason. Instead, we must present as many whys as we can to establish a moral imperative that is motivating for our youth.

There are ample reasons to avoid pornography, but here are just a few motivations from the organization Fight the New Drug that might catch the interest of our young people:

- Porn can change and rewire your brain, and studies show that it can even make your brain smaller and less active.
- Porn can be addictive.
- Porn will destroy your self-confidence.
- Porn can leave you lonely.
- Porn can hurt those you love.
- Porn can ruin healthy sexuality.
- Porn is connected to violence.
- Porn causes people to eventually become dishonest.
- Porn will rob you of your time and energy.
- Porn causes depression, anxiety, and shame.

I would add that pornography is against the commandments of God. With these and a multitude of other reasons, we are building the case against pornography, but knowledge without implementation leads to frustration. We must set reasonable and helpful boundaries, limits, and expectations. Helping children create their own internal reasoning for wanting to stay away from porn is essential. If a child does not decide for him or herself where to stand on this issue, he or she will likely become part of the current staggering statistics.

3 HEALING: “I WILL ALWAYS LOVE YOU”

When children are exposed to pornography and entrapped by it, they struggle to react, to recover, and to heal. Sincere, earnest, constant, firm, and patient support is needed as children assume responsibility for their own recovery and make their way forward. No one can provide this kind of support like a parent can. After we have carefully and personally taught the truth, after we have gently built trust and encouraged conversations, then children need to know that despite their mistakes and choices, our assurance will be, “I will always love you no matter what.”

I recall a simple incident that occurred in our family years ago. My husband and I were away from home, and our oldest son was babysitting the other children. We received a call from a concerned neighbor alerting us that a fire truck was at our house. We raced home and found that our 10-year-old son had been playing in the backyard next to a six-acre field of



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tall, dry grass. He was trying to see if he could start a fire with sparks.

Obviously, he did! By the time we arrived, the small fire had been extinguished by the fire department, the firemen had lectured our son, and the neighbors were beginning to disperse. Our son was embarrassed, frightened, tearful, and knew he was surely in trouble.

We all went into the house. Our son was so afraid that, even though the situation was serious, all we could do was wrap our arms around this sweet boy and reassure him of our love and our relief that he wasn't hurt.

When children are exposed to pornography and especially when they get caught in its web, they will be embarrassed, frightened, and tearful too. It's difficult to take something that has been in the dark and expose it to light. It feels shameful and vulnerable. They may have failures and challenges along the way as they recover and heal. Their need for constant love is critical. However, parents need to be aware that their love will always help but not be all that is needed.

In healing, you will need to channel some of that love you have for your child into finding the right resources to help. Your love is a foundation for what needs to happen, but if someone you love is entrapped, you will likely need to seek out professionals who can help your loved one and also help you.

As you and your loved one seek healing, I hope that you will find strength in the One who has the power to heal all wounds, bind people together, and create relationships, quite beyond our present capacity to imagine. Our Savior, the gentle Healer, has the power to save. We can be parents to our children and point them to Him, but He alone can be their Savior. And the amazing thing is that He loves our children even more perfectly than we do—no matter what. ■

From a keynote address given at the 2018 Utah Coalition Against Pornography conference in Salt Lake City, Utah.

NOTES

1. Jason S. Carroll, in Lisa Ann Thomson, "Eight Strategies to Help Children Reject Pornography," *Ensign*, Aug. 2017, 55.
2. "The Facts about Online Threats," *Parents Television Council Watchdog* (blog), June 21, 2017, w2.parentstv.org/blog.