

*Nearly all of today's teenagers will come in contact with pornography by the time they turn 18. Parents, here are some actions to take.*

# Healing



# Hidden Wounds

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Church Magazines

In the great battle for the city of Cumeni, Helaman tells of his 2,060 stripling warriors who “fought most desperately” against their enemies (Alma 57:19). While “there was not one soul of them who did perish” in that battle, “neither was there one soul among them who had not received many wounds” (Alma 57:25). Many of these teenage soldiers were so terribly wounded that they fainted from the loss of blood.

These young warriors fought a battle that their parents could not fight for them, and they fought it because their society had been attacked. A similarly disastrous war rages among modern teenagers, for similar reasons. Today’s parents can no more fight the spiritual battles for their youth than the people of Ammon could. But they can learn to recognize the spiritual wounds this war inflicts and arm their children with the knowledge and resources they will need to survive.

## Let’s Face the Facts

Some studies show that close to one hundred percent of today’s teenagers will be exposed to pornography by the time they graduate from high school, and most of those exposures occur on the Internet while the child is doing homework.<sup>1</sup> As of 2008, an estimated 9 out of 10 young men and nearly one-third of young women reported using pornography.<sup>2</sup> The average age of exposure and addiction are the same: 11 years old. We hope that these numbers drop with the influence of the gospel, but research shows that Latter-day Saints “are no different when it comes to prevalence or magnitude of sexual addictions.”<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the question seems to be no longer *if* our



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children will be exposed to pornography but *when*—and *how* they will cope. Indeed, we can expect many of our youth to be wounded in this battle. But that doesn't mean they will perish.

In an effort to protect their children, parents can get bogged down with the do's and don'ts of Internet safety. "Filters are useful tools," said Linda S. Reeves, second counselor in the Relief Society general presidency, "but the greatest filter in the world, the only one that will ultimately work, is the personal internal filter that comes from a deep and abiding testimony of our Heavenly Father's love and our Savior's atoning sacrifice for each one of us."<sup>4</sup> While Internet blocks and family computer rules are critical and helpful, pornography addictions often develop outside the home at public libraries, friends' homes, or WiFi hotspots, where the Internet may not have as many obstacles.

Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has taught: "Reactions have focused on enacting more and stronger regulation. Perhaps that may dissuade some from unprincipled conduct, but others will simply get more creative in their circumvention. There could never be enough rules so finely crafted as to anticipate and cover every situation. . . . In the end, it is only an internal moral compass in each individual that can effectively deal with the root causes as well as the symptoms of societal decay."<sup>5</sup> In the end, the best defense you can instill in your youth is the desire for a virtuous life.

### **The Signs of Addiction**

We will never be able to misuse our physical body without also injuring our spirit, and that kind of injury always leaves spiritual scars.

Observant parents may be able to detect pornography addiction by watching for the following signs. A word of caution: these signs do not necessarily indicate a pornography addiction. If your teenager shows some of these behaviors, they indicate a deeper problem that could include substance abuse, pornography addiction, bullying, or something else. Regardless of the cause, you can use these signs to cue you in to initiate loving, interventional dialogue with your children.

#### **Decreased Self-Esteem**

Youth who struggle with pornography often experience debilitating shame that erodes their self-esteem. Some of the signs for loss in self-esteem include performing poorly in school, losing motivation for activities, and showing lack of discipline in good health practices or sleeping patterns.

#### **Social Withdrawal**

Addictions to pornography thrive in secret, and you may see your teenager withdrawing more from family time and social activities. This is the most common indicator of a problem with pornography. Teenagers who spend an inordinate amount of time in their room with the door locked and who isolate themselves from others

may not just be shy. Even when they are included in social situations, these teenagers often have difficulty interacting with others. Isolation becomes more pronounced as the addiction deepens, and teenagers often display anger when their personal space is invaded. Those who struggle with pornography develop distorted views of their own worth and of others' virtue, and they pull away from the people they imagine to be more virtuous because they feel unworthy, ashamed, and hypocritical.

### **Depression**

Depression is a double-edged blade because it can serve as both a symptom of and a trigger for an addiction. Continual expressions of hopelessness, insistent negativity, and admissions of helplessness can all be signs of depression. Teenagers who joke about suicide manifest depression. Other signs of depression include eating more or less than normal, sleeplessness or oversleeping, and physical exhaustion—basically anything that could be considered extreme behaviors.

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Other signs of involvement with pornography include increased anger, dishonesty, pride, and discomfort or boredom in spiritual settings.

We cannot list all the signs of pornography addiction. Parents can best gauge whether or not their teens are adequately armored against pornography when they keep an open dialogue with them about sexuality and their emotional and spiritual health.

### **My Child Is Addicted. Now What?**

Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said, "No matter what addictive cycle one is caught in, there is always hope" because of the Atonement of Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup>

At their root, "all addictions are maladaptive coping strategies," says Mark Butler, professor of family life at Brigham Young University. Children who have not learned how to deal with guilt, shame, sorrow, or pain will often turn to addictive behaviors to numb their negative emotions.



Even less serious emotions such as stress, boredom, or loneliness can lead to addictive behaviors if the child doesn't understand how to cope.

Parents can help their children develop healthy coping strategies by modeling that behavior themselves. The following questions may help you evaluate your own coping strategies: When you are stressed, tired, or in despair, do you isolate yourself? Do you rely on entertainment to escape your problems instead of addressing them? Do you demonstrate that the healthiest way to solve problems is to rely on Heavenly Father, the Savior, and your relationships with others?

Children must learn to recognize the signs of spiritual wounds such as grief, guilt, and pain so they can turn their pain into learning experiences. Emotional pain is not bad. Alma the younger describes the pains of his sins as “exquisite” and “bitter” (Alma 36:21); Peter “wept bitterly” after he denied the Savior (Luke 22:62); and Zeezrom was tormented “on account of his wickedness”

## ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Most teenagers will tell their bishops when they're struggling with pornography before they will tell their parents because (1) their bishops ask them direct questions about it, and (2) they often feel uncomfortable having conversations with their parents where they feel vulnerable. Bruce Carpenter, professor of psychology at Brigham Young University, recommends that parents develop the capacity to have sensitive conversations before they ask direct questions about pornography. This could include engaging your teenager in conversations on the general topic of morality and standards.



- What is the attitude among your friends about sexuality?
- What is your perspective on the Church's standard of morality?
- Do you ever struggle with pornography? Would you feel comfortable telling me if you did?
- In which situations do you find yourself most vulnerable?
- Where are you likely to view pornography?
- Which friends present the biggest problem? How do you think we can address that?

(Alma 15:3). You can help your children learn to relate to pain not as a horrible emotion to be avoided but as a teacher that can lead to incredible growth. Alma, Peter, and Zeezrom all used the pains of their sins to spur them to repentance, and they became devoted ambassadors of the gospel. Your example and guidance can help your children learn to value repentance over addiction.

President Dieter F. Uchtdorf, Second Counselor in the First Presidency, taught: “There is an important difference between the sorrow for sin that leads to repentance and the sorrow that leads to despair.

“The Apostle Paul taught that ‘*godly sorrow* worketh repentance to salvation . . . but the *sorrow of the world* worketh death’ [2 Corinthians 7:10; emphasis added]. *Godly sorrow* inspires change and hope through the Atonement of Jesus Christ. *Worldly sorrow* pulls us down, extinguishes hope, and persuades us to give in to further temptation. . . .

Although Professor Carpenter says it's more helpful to focus on building a relationship than to follow a list of questions, he suggests asking questions like those at left in your regular interviews with your teenager.

Teenagers often become extremely uncomfortable during these conversations, and it's best if parents can respond by being open, sensitive, and nonjudgmental. Youth will be less likely to confess to parents who respond in highly emotional ways or take unwarranted disciplinary action.<sup>1</sup>

### NOTE

1. Bruce Carpenter, from an interview with the author, Sept. 12, 2013.



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“True repentance is about transformation, not torture or torment. Yes, heartfelt regret and true remorse for disobedience are often painful and very important steps in the sacred process of repentance. But when guilt leads to self-loathing or prevents us from rising up again, it is impeding rather than promoting our repentance.”<sup>7</sup>

Your children will be able to persevere through their spiritual wounds when they have the vision of and hope for a virtuous life. This vision is built through fervent prayer and sincere scripture study on a daily basis.<sup>8</sup> Professor Butler advises parents: “By the power of your examples, create a compelling vision of the joy, peace, and happiness of a virtuous life. There is a long journey between the desire for a virtuous life and its achievement, but desire is the germinal seed.” It may take a while for the desire for virtue to grow. “The natural man is a highly durable creature and often takes a long time to evict,” Professor Butler says. And while the word *addiction* does

not remove responsibility for choices, it does mean that more malignant habits often need patient and persistent intervention (such as the Church’s addiction recovery program) in order to overcome.

### Hope Ahead

Like Helaman’s warriors, our youth often demonstrate “great courage” when confronted with evil (Alma 56:45). Just as those Book of Mormon warriors relied on their parents’ faith, we must also communicate our testimonies of and devotion to the gospel so that our youth can say, “We do not doubt our mothers [and fathers] knew it” (Alma 56:48). The Lord has promised, “I will fight your battles” (D&C 105:14). As our youth exercise faith in the Atonement of Jesus Christ, they will become “mighty even unto the power of deliverance” (1 Nephi 1:20). ■

*For more information and resources on this topic, see [overcomingpornography.org](http://overcomingpornography.org).*

### NOTES

1. See John L. Hart, “In Your Family? Undetected, Pornography Invades Homes, Ruins Lives,” *Church News*, Mar. 3, 2007; [ldschurchnews.com](http://ldschurchnews.com).
2. See Jason S. Carroll and others, “Generation XXX: Pornography Acceptance and Use among Emerging Adults,” *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 23, no. 1 (2008): 6–30.
3. John L. Hart and Sarah Jane Weaver, “Defending the Home against Pornography,” *Church News*, Apr. 21, 2007, [ldschurchnews.com](http://ldschurchnews.com).
4. Linda S. Reeves, “Protection from Pornography—a Christ-Focused Home,” *Ensign or Liahona*, May 2014, 16; see also Mark H. Butler, *Spiritual Exodus: A Latter-day Saint Guide to Recovery from Behavioral Addiction*; Boyd K. Packer, “The Shield of Faith,” *Ensign*, May 1995, 7.
5. D. Todd Christofferson, “Moral Discipline,” *Ensign or Liahona*, Nov. 2009, 106.
6. M. Russell Ballard, “O That Cunning Plan of the Evil One,” *Ensign or Liahona*, Nov. 2010, 110.
7. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “You Can Do It Now!” *Ensign or Liahona*, Nov. 2013, 56.
8. See M. Russell Ballard, “O That Cunning Plan,” 110.