

Effects of Media Pornography on Children

Synthesis Paper: [The Effects of Pornography on Individuals, Marriage, Family and Community](#)

The phenomenal growth of mass media during the late 20th century, and particularly the establishment of the Internet, has vastly increased accessibility to pornography and other sexually-related information. This creates a major obstacle to the healthy development of sexuality, especially among youth.

Though most U.S. parents (78 percent) are worried about their adolescents accessing Internet pornography, not all teenagers readily take to this sexualized culture. Most start out being ill at ease with any display of pornography: they tend to be upset or embarrassed,¹⁾ with reactions ranging from fear to shame to anger to fascination.²⁾ In one survey, about a quarter were “very” upset by this exposure,³⁾ but they tend not to report it.⁴⁾

1. Unintentional Exposure to Pornography

Adolescents often come across pornography accidentally on the Internet. One study found that 70 percent of youth aged 15 to 17 accidentally came across pornography online.⁵⁾ A study of 1,501 youth aged ten to seventeen examined unwanted exposure incidents more thoroughly: in 26 percent of the cases, respondents reported that when they tried to exit an unwanted site, they were actually brought to an additional sex site.⁶⁾ The same study showed that out of the total number of unwanted exposure incidents, 44 percent of the time the youth did not disclose the episode to anyone else.⁷⁾

2. Return to Pornography

These initial reactions of disgust, however, rapidly dissipate so that older adolescents tend to use sexually explicit Internet material more often than younger adolescents⁸⁾ and are twice as likely to report intentional pornography use as are younger adolescents.⁹⁾ Repeated exposure to pornography eventually wipes out any feelings of shame and disgust and gives way, instead, to unadulterated enjoyment.

A 2005 survey showed that respondents who reported unintentional exposure to pornography were over 2.5 times as likely to then report intentional exposure as those who did not report any unintentional exposure. It seems the unintentional exposure has its effect of bringing them back for more, which of course is one of the fears of parents.

Several factors predict an adolescent’s use of pornography. Teenagers who watch pornography more frequently tend to be high sensation seekers, less satisfied with their lives, have a fast Internet connection, and have friends who are younger. Adolescents are at greater risk for intentionally seeking out sexual material when they have high levels of computer use. The more time spent on the computer, the more likely these adolescents will search for sexually explicit content. Not surprisingly, given all that has already been reported, viewers who masturbate while viewing sexually explicit material assess the material more favorably than those who do not masturbate.

3. Reasons for Viewing Pornography

There is a difference between boys' and girls' reasons for seeking pornographic sites, differences that parallel the different patterns of adult male and female use of pornography. Boys tend to seek pornography initially because they are curious or want sexual arousal, while girls tend first to go to non-pornographic but sexually oriented sites for sexual health or relationship-related information. Also, the impacts are different for boys and girls: males report more positive memories of sexually explicit material than females, and report "more positive attitudes toward uncommitted sexual exploration" as their use of pornography increases. In one study, adolescents who watched the highest level of sexual content on television doubled the likelihood they would initiate intercourse.

¹⁾ C. Von Feilitzen and U. Carlsson, *Children in the New Media Landscape: Games, Pornography, Perceptions* (Goteburg: UNESCO/Nordicom, 2000).

²⁾ J. Cantor, M.L. Mares, and J.S. Hyde, "Autobiographical memories of exposure to sexual media content," *Media Psychology* 5 (2003): 1-31. The most common emotional responses to sexually explicit material (not necessarily online) were disgust (24.5 percent), shock or surprise (23.6 percent), embarrassment (21.4 percent), interest or curiosity (20.9 percent), anger (18.4 percent), amusement (15.3 percent), fear (11.2 percent), and sadness (9.2 percent).

³⁾ Kimberly J. Mitchell, David Finkelhor, and Janis Wolak, "Victimization of Youths on the Internet," *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment, & Trauma* 8 (2003): 1-39 (9).

⁴⁾ K. Wigley and B. Clarke, National Opinion Poll's Kids.net (2000), <http://www.nop.co.uk> (accessed January 2003), in S. Livingstone, "Children's Use of the Internet: Reflections on the Emerging Research Agenda," *New Media & Society* 5 (2003): 147-66 (156).

⁵⁾ Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation Report, 2002, <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/loader.cfm?url=/commonspot/security/getfile.cfm&PageID=14095> (accessed October 19, 2009).

⁶⁾ Kimberly J. Mitchell, David Finkelhor, and Janis Wolak, "Victimization of Youths on the Internet," *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment, & Trauma* 8 (2003): 18.

⁷⁾ Kimberly J. Mitchell, David Finkelhor, and Janis Wolak, "Victimization of Youths on the Internet," *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment, & Trauma* 8 (2003): 19.

⁸⁾ Jochen Peter and Patt M. Valkenburg, "Adolescents' Exposure to Sexually Explicit Material on the Internet," *Communication Research* 33 (2006): 591.

⁹⁾ Michele L. Ybarra and Kimberly J. Mitchell, "Exposure to Internet Pornography among Children and Adolescents: A National Survey," *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 8 (2005): 483.

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