

The Teen Porn Epidemic...and what to do about it

Posted By [Matt Fradd](#) On June 7, 2012 @ 12:00 am In [Featured-Large,Media & Culture](#) | [10 Comments](#)

When Nathan started using internet pornography, he found that over time it somehow got less and less exciting. His daily routine soon included hours spent consuming porn, yet he had grown “almost numb to it,” he recalls. Like many men with addictions, he was discovering that the compulsive use of porn dulls the pleasure receptors of the brain, forcing them to seek ever-greater amounts of stimulation in a desperate quest for sexual satisfaction.

But Nathan was not yet a man. He was just twelve years old. And unfortunately, he is not alone. We are witnessing the beginning of nothing less than an epidemic of porn addiction among teens and even younger children.

In today’s wired world, internet porn is everywhere, it’s easy to get, and it’s washing like a wave over every child who can hold an iPhone or log on to a laptop—according to one recent study, by the time they reach eighteen only three percent of boys and seventeen percent of girls will have never laid eyes on it. And these kids aren’t witnessing the kind of “soft-core” centerfold images that their parents may have stumbled across in a magazine or cable TV twenty years ago; no, they’re filling their heads with explicit, graphic depictions of sexual acts. In fact, according to the same study, which surveyed 563 teenage boys and girls, sixty-five percent had seen depictions of group sex, and twelve percent had seen rape or sexual violence.

This exposure to porn, which in adults causes dependent behaviors, spiritual emptiness, and a diminished ability to love, does additional harm to children by distorting their mental, emotional, and social development. One young woman—for it’s not just boys who are getting hooked on porn—who like Nathan became addicted at the age of twelve, observed, “I started to isolate myself, because I hated what I was doing. I hated that I couldn’t stop.” A bewildered mother wrote of her eleven-year-old son, whose dependence on internet porn had left him psychologically devastated, “How could my beautiful boy, who could light up a room and my heart with his smile, have turned into this hollow, self-hating shell? What had I done wrong?”

With the threat that pornography use poses to their children only continuing to grow (as technology makes porn access ever easier and as porn becomes destigmatized in mainstream culture), more parents are sharing this mother’s despair. What can be done? Today’s world is a different place for children than it was even for an adult generation that grew up trained to be wary of drugs, bullies, and sexual predators on every street corner. Today’s new world poses new threats, and those threats require new strategies to keep children safe. But don’t despair! Effective strategies *do* exist for protecting your children, even in our sex-saturated society, from the many harms caused by porn.

As someone who first encountered porn at the age of eight (well before the dawn of the internet), I know firsthand the confusion, pain, and destruction it can wreak. I have spent years speaking and writing about the scourge of porn, and have heard countless stories of the damage has done in other people’s lives. There have

been many stories of healing and freedom from porn, too—by God’s grace I’m one of them. But it’s better never to have been wounded in the first place.

As a father, then, I focus on prevention, which involves not only shielding kids from harmful influences, but also *forming them in a way that equips them to face the dangers and temptations of the online world*. It’s no longer enough to ask, “How do we protect our kids from the internet?” We must also ask, “How do we train our kids to be pure in heart?”

The first thing is to know that God is faithful and will guide and bless your efforts. Drawing from my experiences, allow me to offer three strategies that you can implement to cooperate with God’s grace.

1 – Affirm the goodness of their sexuality

Sometimes Catholic parents, especially when they themselves were brought up with a standard of chastity that focused on a list of sins and temptations to be avoided, may feel unprepared to provide their kids with an *affirmative* view of sex and the body. But raising them to value their sexuality as something good and holy is essential to protecting them from exposure to porn, and to inculcating in them a positive desire for purity generally. They will be trained to see clearly the great difference between the lies of porn and unchastity and the great truths of God’s plan for human sexuality.

It is also useful when it comes to teaching modesty and self-control, even at a young age. It is precisely *because* your child’s body is good and wonderful that he is not to treat it like a toy; it is precisely *because* your child’s body is sacred that she should veil what demands the reverence.

Even when they’re very young, my wife and I make it a priority to affirm our children’s sexuality daily—teaching them that God created them male or female so that they can become a gift in self-donating love. Each night before bed I lay my hands on them and offer this prayer: *Dear Heavenly Father, I thank you that you have created [name] to be a strong boy/ beautiful girl. I ask that he/she would grow up to be a strong man/beautiful and strong woman to give his/her life away as a priest or a husband/nun or a wife.*

2 – Be a parent, not a buddy

I know that you know this – or that you *think* you know this, but it bears repeating. Your child *needs* you to parent him. And a large part of parenting means saying “no!” In fact, if your child hasn’t gotten angry at you over the past week because you would not let him have his way – you’re probably not doing a very good job parenting him.

In the sphere of chastity, saying “no” is the flip side of affirming your children’s sexuality. It doesn’t mean to shelter kids from every possible bad influence in the world; rather, it’s about exercising prudent vigilance. There never was a teenager who couldn’t survive without a smart phone, but there are countless thousands whose internet-connected phones become personal porn terminals. Laptops behind locked bedroom doors might help a little with homework, but they’re also inviters of

temptation. Your child was invited to a sleepover: do you know what kind of supervision the host family exercises over the computer or cable box? If you're not prepared to say "no" you might find all your vigilance undone by another family's carelessness.

3 – Use Filters and Accountability Software

We have talked first about giving kids a foundation that affirms God's gift of their bodies, then about circumstances in which we must be prepared to say "no" in order to protect that gift.

As a supplement to rather than a replacement for our work of forming and parenting our kids, internet filters and other content-blocking tools can be useful, especially when your children are young. As they grow older, however, it's important that you not simply block them but continue to teach them. This is how *accountability software* differs from filtering. Instead of blocking certain websites, it monitors all the sites that your child visits and then sends a report to an accountability partner (you). This changes the mentality of the child surfing the internet. Rather than him wondering how he could get around a filter to visit some forbidden-fruit website, he will know that he *could* visit the website, but that he will have to answer for it.

When you think about it, isn't this how the heavenly Father acts towards us? He *could* "block" us from turning our backs on him and from the pain our sins bring, but he does not. Rather he teaches us right from wrong, and implores us to do what's right (while giving us the grace necessary to do it). He does not censor our every thought and action because he desires us to grow up to be responsible moral agents: sons and daughters who freely choose what is good. We parents ought to follow his example.

(In my opinion, the best accountability software can be found at www.covenanteyes.org. Use the promo code "pureinheart" for a free 30-day trial.)

We as parents have a grave responsibility to protect the purity of our children. We will be answerable to almighty God if we fail to protect and guide them, particularly in the face of the unprecedented evils that porn poses to their minds, hearts, and souls. "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin," Jesus said, "it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matt. 18:6). As Peter Kreeft once noted, there are no Styrofoam millstones.



After experiencing a profound conversion at World Youth Day in Rome in 2000, **Matthew Fradd** has committed himself to inviting others to know Jesus Christ and the Church he founded. As a full-time apologist with [Catholic Answers](#)⁽¹⁾, Matt speaks internationally to thousands of teens and young adults each year about chastity. He also speaks to parish audiences on a wide variety of faith topics.