

Understanding Boys and Pornography

Definition of Pornography

Pornography (porn), over time, has been defined in many ways by many communities and cultures around the world. In fact, what may be porn to one, may not be porn for another. Interestingly, in a 1964 Supreme Court decision defining porn as free speech, Justice Stewart Potter struggled with accurately defining porn, but famously wrote. "...I know it when I see it." For simplicity's sake, porn can be defined as sexually explicit videos, images, writings, etc., produced to elicit sexual arousal (and masturbation) among its consumers. Pornography is produced solely for adult audiences.

How Common is Pornography in Boys' Lives?

Long gone are the days of Playboy, Penthouse and others that used to occupy the curiosity of adolescent males. Today, with the advent of the Internet, pornography is ubiquitous and its availability to and access by boys is beyond commonplace. For most, the first viewing of porn, intended or not, is a middle school phenomenon, with the average age of 12, usually 6th and 7th grades. By the time boys graduate from high school, a large majority of them have been exposed/watched porn. In fact, it is so common it may be seen as a rite-of-passage for many boys.

What Functions Does It Serve?

With the onset of puberty and all its physical, psychological, and social changes, a boy's perspective about his sexuality also changes. Because of the ubiquity of porn and the lack of comprehensive school-based Health/Sexual Health Education programs across the country, boys are left with few choices about finding the information they so desperately want. With such easy access, porn offers boys what they are looking for. For many, it serves as an introduction to sex education; it allows for sexual exploration which is a normal part of healthy development; and serves as a sexual outlet via masturbation and ejaculation.

The Negative Side of Viewing Pornography

Watching porn has its harsh realities as well. Boys too often view pornography as a window defining masculinity and virility and it is quite common for boys to compare themselves to the actors they see on the screen. These are unfair and unrealistic comparisons given that the performances are staged and scripted- "Lights, Camera, Action!" Moreover, the performers' bodies are unlike those in the real world. Males have larger than average penis sizes and performances rarely include condom use. Women are often surgically enhanced. More disturbing, porn often portrays women in hostile, misogynistic stereotypes such as sex objects including violence and aggression (hitting, slapping, choking).

Boys who constantly watch and rely on porn at the expense of human interactions are at risk for a multitude of negative health and psychological consequences that may affect relationships and intimacy into adulthood. Some of those consequences include erectile dysfunction and the inability to ejaculate without porn. They often lose the ability to form close human relationships and often find themselves depressed and in despair. Although not an official mental health diagnosis, be aware that porn is addictive and often takes a toll on those who fall victim.

What Can Parents Do?

Given that viewing porn is so common among boys, it is not unusual for parents to make that discovery one way or the other. If that is the case, do not panic! Anger is not the solution. Considering that viewing porn has a role in normal adolescent sexual development, parents should provide guidance relative to the amount that is watched and warn of the dangers of porn as a substitute for human relationships and intimacy. Instead of parents waiting until they discover their son is watching porn, they should be proactive and initiate conversations about sexuality broadly, beginning no later than elementary school. These conversations should be non-judgmental, on-going, and developmentally appropriate as he ages into adolescence and young adulthood.

Aside from providing guidance, support and understanding, parents should also advocate for more comprehensive, skills-based Health Education programs in schools, including a Sexual Health component. These programs may or may not include a porn literacy component. In the absence of that component, programs proven effective such as The Truth about Pornography: A Pornography Curriculum for High School Students, should be considered to supplement any Health Education programs that may be in place. Although The Truth about Pornography can be implemented as a stand-alone program, it is more effective if included in a more comprehensive curriculum.

