

Fair Warning and a Fighting Chance

The impact of pornography on children today

Fair Warning

“It’s like the difference between a pop quiz when you’ve missed a week of class and a regular test you studied for. Obviously, you’re going to do better on the test you studied for.”

These are not my words. They are the observations of an 11-year-old boy.

He’s in the process of telling me why it’s “not weird” that his parents talk to him regularly about the harms of pornography.

You see, they’ve explained to their son from an early age what pornography is and how easy it is to stumble across—even when you’re not looking for it. He also knows that other kids might think it’s funny or “cool” to share inappropriate pictures or videos with him from their phone or tablet.

They’ve talked about what he can do in these circumstances—things like, always tell a trusted adult. He knows he should never be embarrassed or ashamed to speak up.

I can tell by the way he talks to me that he feels empowered. There’s confidence in his voice. And why wouldn’t there be? As he said, he’s been prepared. In an 11-year-old way, he knows what could be on the test.

Growing up today

Children and teens growing up in today’s media-saturated world face challenges, unlike anything most of us would have experienced in our youth. The proliferation of online pornography and its ease of access has dramatically changed the world they’re living in.

As such we need to have a new, bold conversation with our children and teens about pornography, sex, and relationships. They deserve fair warning and a fighting chance!

A culture of exploitation

On December 4, 2020, writer for the New York Times, Nicholas Kristof awoke the world to some of the devastating consequences for failing to call pornography out for what it is—for failing to give our children a fighting chance.

In his article, *The Children of Pornhub*¹, Serena Fleites, along with several other brave young women share their stories of being sexually exploited while underage—one of them as young as 9 years old.

I mention Serena in particular because it is through her experience we can glimpse the profound extent to which so many of our children are being taken advantage of on both sides of the screen.

- First, from a predatory industry that encourages user-generated content to be uploaded to its platforms without the verification of age or consent.
- Second, because that same industry shamelessly distributes pornographic content to our children.

It is this second point that I will address today. The very real challenges facing our children and teens because of the ease of access to hardcore pornography—and how *that* shapes the experiences they have in the real world.

Serena was 14 when **the** intimate image she had **hesitantly** sent to her first-time boyfriend ended up on Pornhub. A fact she discovered when a classmate (presumably, another 14-year-old) first discovered then sent her the link.

Serena testified before members of Canadian parliament that until this particular boyfriend, she had not so much as kissed another boy. In fact, when he first asked her for the video, she was confused and didn't know what he meant. But, it was easy enough for him to send her an example—one, which he found on Pornhub.

He then continued to pressure Serena daily saying things like: *It's perfectly fine. Everybody our age is doing it. If you truly cared for me, then you would send me a video.* She finally relented.

There will be those who hear Serena's story and think this could not possibly be the experience of the teens in their home, or the kids on their kids' sports teams, or the teen

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/04/opinion/sunday/pornhub-rape-trafficking.html>

that babysits their younger children, or the youth that shows up in the church pew next to them.

But I would argue that it is the experience of EVERY young person today. Pornography has become so normalized via the internet that exploitation defines the culture they are growing up in. At the very least, pornography has become the lens through which they and their peers evaluate the world.

This is a fact that was poignantly reinforced when singer-songwriter Billy Eilish told Howard Stern in a recent radio interview that she experiences nightmares from the violent pornography she discovered and consumed beginning at age 11.² (Eilish describe the content as BDSM.)

- "I thought it was how you learned how to have sex," she said
- She admitted that what she consumed shaped her sexual expectations and led her to "**not say no** to things that **were not good**" when she began having sex.

The truth is, if we were to survey any middle or high school across this country we would uncover dozens and dozens of similar stories.

- Either young people who've felt coerced into sending intimate photos or videos of themselves—only to find out that it has been shared beyond the intended recipient.
- Or young people groomed by porn to accept sexual experiences they would not readily consent to otherwise.

A study conducted by Sara Thomas of Northwestern University found that 92% of girls who had sent nudes did so either to acquiesce to, or avoid conflict with a boy—and that the requests often progressed from promises of affection to "anger displays, harassment, and threats."³

Targeting our children

For more than two decades internet pornography has been targeting our children. Yet at almost every level of our society, we have failed to speak about porn's impact on this rising generation. We've either turned a blind-eye, imagining that this is someone else's

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-59658663>

³ <https://www.sesp.northwestern.edu/news-center/news/2017/12/teen-girls-bombarded-and-confused-by-sexting-requests.html>

problem. Or we've bought into the dangerous lie that kids will be kids, boys will be boys, and a little porn won't hurt.

But there is no such thing as "a little bit of porn" in the age of the internet.

As adults, we really do underestimate how much sexualized information our kids are hearing, seeing, and digesting in their everyday experiences.

Children's brains are structured for discovery. They are exceptional at processing information quickly (much more so than adults). They are like sponges, soaking up everything around them. And they are very curious! Curious about how things work. Curious about their own bodies. And, of course, they are curious about sex.

Tragically, porn has become their number one sex educator for children and teens. Not because it has any kind of helpful information. With its extreme and degrading themes, it actually teaches dangerous misinformation! But 11, 12, 13-year-olds who have access to it, don't know enough to spot the lies. They turn to pornography simply because it's available, it's in their face, and it is incredibly enticing!

Their body and brain is wired to light up when confronted with *any* sexualized information. Internet pornography happens to be especially expert at eliciting a sexual response.

Being curious about sex is normal and natural. Having one's sexual development hijacked by internet pornography is not! We must provide our children with a better alternative!

Here's what an older teen said looking back on his early sexual curiosity:

"It would have been a lot easier on me if my parents had given me some idea of what was out there. The first time I found porn I was 11. I overheard kids talking about something at school. I was curious, so I looked it up on the internet when I got home. I had no idea what I was getting into." —teen boy

Today, this young man actually feels trapped by porn, as if it's a drug. And it frightens him that he can't seem to break free from a habit that started with a curious look when he was only eleven years old.

Gary Wilson, author of *Your Brain On Porn*, describes internet pornography as "the fastest moving, most global experiment ever **unconsciously** conducted."

Research confirms that pornography tops the list of highly addictive substances. It has the ability to reshape the brain and inhibit executive functioning. Adolescents are especially vulnerable because their prefrontal cortex is not yet fully developed.

Pornography has also been linked to the rise of child-on-child sexual assault. Across the globe, the most consistent age of perpetrators (those demonstrating problematic sexual behavior toward children) is between 11 to 15 years old.

Staff observations at Children’s Mercy Hospital in Kansas City report that children and teens with no history of victimization themselves—**other than access to screens and pornography**—are committing violent sexual acts against other children.

Like it or not, this is part of their culture

By the time kids reach middle school, knowledge of porn and sexting is part of the culture. And for many, it’s part of their routine. But they didn’t ask for it and it’s not what they want.

A study conducted by the British Board of Film Classification found that **56% of 11-13-year-olds agree with the statement, “I want to be locked out of websites that are for 18-plus-year-olds.”**⁴ Yet, most boys interviewed in that same survey reported watching pornography **daily** for a period of their lives, usually between the age of 14-16.

So how do we help our girls and boys? How do we give them a fighting chance? How do we provide them an alternative?

We have to change the conversation! When we put the topic of pornography on the table in a loving and sincere way, even when we are not perfect, it is a lifeline to our children. They are waiting for us to start this conversation.

Like the 11-year-old who told me that *conversations* with his parents about pornography help him feel prepared, all kids deserve a fair warning.

To give our children a fighting chance against pornography we need to talk to them. They need to know from us:

- What pornography is
- Why it’s harmful

⁴ <https://www.bbfc.co.uk/about-us/news/children-see-pornography-as-young-as-seven-new-report-finds>

- And how they can be empowered reject it.

These are conversations that happen bit-by-bit, over time. At every age and stage of development, we can adapt how we not only safeguard our kids—But more importantly, prepare and empower them to reject a culture of exploitation.