

## Creating a Safe Place to Talk about Sex and Pornography

Talking about sex and pornography has quickly become a top priority for parents and their children to discuss in recent years, and with research indicating that adolescents today appear to be using pornography much more than any other age-group, parents need to know how to talk about pornography and how to recognize signs that their child may be already struggling with pornography. Talking about pornography and sex is particularly difficult for parents who didn't have that type of talk with their parents when they were growing up. Some parents are unsure or confused about when to talk to their children about such an important topic and feel torn between giving their child too much information or too little for their age. In whatever situation parents find themselves in, President James E. Faust's counsel may provide the comfort needed for parents to begin this ongoing conversation with their children. He said, "It is never too late to change, to make things right" ("Unwanted Messages," *Ensign*, Nov. 1986, 10).

The first thing parents should realize as they begin having these conversations with their children is that this is not a one-time "talk" that will occur in an evening or at dinner. Many people have described their experience of having the one-time "talk" with their parents. One young man shared that his father took him on a long walk when he was 12 years old and that when the walk ended, he never heard anything about sex or pornography again. He told me, "I was in shock! My dad talked for two hours about things I had never heard of before." The result was that the boy took all of the confusing information his father gave him and did two things: (1) He asked his friends about it. He shared that this confused him more than before because it was clear that many of his friends were as ignorant as he was. (2) He went to the Internet and looked things up. This boy's Internet inquiry began innocently enough, but that day it ended in an exposure to pornography. Periodically having this discussion with a son or daughter provides room for them to sort through confusing information and experiences, and it also ensures that the parent is the person who gives the most accurate, safe information.

It is also helpful to remember that an adolescent will open up about things in stages and rarely opens up about something all at once. Teenagers are trying to make sense of what is going on around them, what their peers are doing, and if they will be accepted or not. Sometimes parents scare their children away when their child comes to them with one question. Parents become so eager to help—perhaps after so many times of not being able to help—that they might think, "At last, a chance to unload!" As the parent unloads everything, the child will likely tune out and feel lectured and, most importantly, the child's needs will not be met. Elder Neal A. Maxwell counseled that we must remember that "we worship a Lord who teaches us precept by precept. ... So even when we are teaching our children [we should] not dump the whole load of hay." ("Remember How Merciful the Lord Hath Been," *Ensign*, May 2004). Learning about sex and pornography is a process that takes time and requires safety in asking questions. There isn't one right way to discuss this topic as long as the discussions take place—parents should find a framework or analogy or way to talk about this that fits for them and draws upon values that are important to them and their family.

Parents should begin ongoing conversations that occur many times about pornography that can provide an opportunity to clarify values and beliefs, express opinions, instill truths about sexuality, and answer questions that their child will have. Jill Manning has said parents need to “start having new kinds of conversations about pornography—ones that go beyond scary statistics, frightening forecasts, graphic details, and dire realities, and which shift into dialogues that are empowering, hopeful, and arm people with practical strategies for being able to address this issue in their own [lives] effectively.” These types of conversations go well beyond why pornography is bad and explore what a son or daughter thinks and feels about pornography, especially if he or she has been exposed to pornography already. In essence, parents need to create a safe place for their children to talk about challenging things such as pornography.

Here are some tips that can help parents create safety for their children to talk about dangerous things:

-One way to begin fostering an environment of safety is to stay calm when your son or daughter begins to ask questions about sex or pornography or shares his or her experience about learning about sex or pornography. Teenagers are attuned to their parents non-verbal cues and will avoid talking about things or asking questions if they sense that mom or dad is anxious or upset. Staying calm is particularly important if parents discover that their teenager has been looking at pornography. In this case, parents should carefully plan a response that is based on understanding and helping their teen versus punishing or shaming him or her. One of the most important things a parent can do is to ask questions, such as “How long have you been viewing pornography?” or “What kind of pornography are you using?” If teens have been using pornography for a significant amount of time, they may need help, and if parents can provide a safe place for teens to share about their struggle, they will be more likely to come out of hiding. One teen said this: “When my parents caught me looking at porn, it was an answer to prayer! The night before, I prayed that something would happen so I could stop looking at porn. I have tried and tried to stop by myself, and I just couldn’t do it. I was relieved when my parents found out!” In this case, the parents and teen are more likely to get the help they need to begin recovery. Another teen shared this: “The last people I want to tell are my parents! Whenever the subject of pornography comes up, my parents talk about how sick and wrong people are who look at it! Well I look at it, so they will not love me if I tell them.” The way parents talk about people who look at porn will contribute to creating a safe place or creating a hostile place for their children to come to them. Showing children that what they share with their parents isn’t going to send their parents over the emotional edge creates a lot of safety and encourages them to share more.

-It is also important that parents create room to make mistakes along the way as teens begin recovery. Telling a teen “don’t ever let me catch you looking at porn again” or “don’t you dare do this again” may cause a lot of panic, especially if he or she has already attempted to stop and failed. One young man shared that after his parents caught him, they scolded him and forbade him to ever do it again. He said, “My parents didn’t understand! I had already tried to stop and I couldn’t do it. How do they expect me to just turn it off? So I just stopped talking about it with them, because I didn’t want to disappoint them anymore.” Teenagers need a safe place to talk about how a slip affects them and how to do better the next time. Parents who invite their children to come to them whenever they are struggling open the door and prevent their children from going underground with their behavior.

-Many parents also get caught in the trap of offering false forgiveness when their teen begins the disclosure process. False forgiveness usually occurs soon after an adolescent discloses something to his or her parent, and the parent says something to this effect: "It doesn't matter; it's water under the bridge. I forgive you and I love you. I've always loved you!" While communicating love when your son or daughter has done something wrong is important, love is not forgiveness. Remember that, much of the time, initial disclosure begins the process of getting the whole story and is rarely the whole story! Offering forgiveness to someone who knows that there is more will most likely feel cheap and fake, and it does nothing to provide safety. It also devalues the learning process for adolescents to be accountable for what they have done. The bottom line is to remember that forgiveness is a process just like disclosure, and reminding your son or daughter that you are committed to work with him or her will create a lot of safety. It is generally more helpful for parents to commit to their teens that they will be there for them and help them in any way possible to overcome their pornography use.

The most important thing to keep in mind as parents talk with their teens about pornography is that together they can find solutions. Pornography has less influence on a teen who has a safe place to talk about it. It is useful to remember President Gordon B. Hinckley's counsel: "Our safety lies in repentance. Our strength comes of obedience" ("The Times in Which We Live," *Ensign*, November 2001)

Supporting teens through the process of repentance can be an experience that will strengthen family relationships and draw them closer to you and their Heavenly Father.