

Sexual Imagery on the Internet

We want to help our kids develop healthy perspectives about sex, and not let the media be their only source of information. On the Internet, even innocent searches can lead to sexual imagery or pornographic content. So, it's important to talk early and often to make sure your kids get the messages you care most about communicating.

- **Figure out what you want your kid to know.**

Identify your own personal concerns: What are you most worried about with respect to sexual imagery on the Internet? Why? How might the Internet interfere with your goals for your child's healthy sexual development? What alternative messages do you want to make sure they receive?

It may be awkward, but it's important to talk to your kid about:

- your key concerns regarding his or her exposure to age-inappropriate sexual images and messages
- why you have these concerns
- what you hope for your son or daughter with respect to intimate relationships, now and for the future

At the same time, you can encourage your kids to view media messages critically. Point out that sex often gets everyone's attention, so in the media sex is often used to sell something. It is important that your children understand that scripted sex is not reality. Pornography is extreme and not representative of the vast landscape of human sexuality; plus it can convey an exploitive and degrading perspective.

- **Pay attention to your tone.**

It is important to remember that how you talk to your teen regarding this subject is just as important as what you discuss. Your tone and body language will communicate as much as your words! Think of two or three adjectives that describe how you hope you'll come across to your child when talking about sexuality. Then, keep those words in the front of your mind as you enter the conversation. Humiliating, shaming, or using scare tactics on your child regarding their sexual curiosity is both damaging and counterproductive. Your child's interest and exploration of sex and their own sexuality is both natural and normal. By making your son or daughter feel ashamed, you will lose the opportunity to help him or her navigate future challenges and develop his or her own values.

- **Take that first (difficult) step.**

A great way to start the conversation is by simply asking your child if any of their friends have had conversations with their parents about pornography or sexual imagery on the Internet. You can say, “I know it can be awkward to talk about at first, but there are some really important things I want you to know.” If you are nervous, write down what you want to say or practice when no one is around.

Remember that no matter how the first conversation goes, this isn’t meant to be a one-time discussion; you can (and should!) revisit or continue the conversation later if you forgot to include something or want to reemphasize a particular point. You’ve already fought half the battle just by taking on the conversation. Just by starting a conversation, you have communicated to your child that this is on your mind and that you’re clued-in, aware, and concerned.

If you or your teen comes across any material that sexually exploits minors, you do have a duty to report it. You can report it to your local authorities or contact the CyberTipline for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. You can contact the center 24 hours a day at 1-800-THE-LOST or report an incident online at **www.cybertipline.com**.

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Digital Dilemmas are brief hypothetical situations and corresponding questions designed to foster cross-generational conversations about different aspects of adolescents' digital lives. Use this fictitious scenario, based on real-life stories, to spark a conversation at home with your children and open up the discussion about these very important topics.

Sketchy Videos

Kai hopped on his laptop to look for a new remote-controlled helicopter and found a cool YouTube video showing how to make intricate aerial dives. He watched the video on repeat, trying to learn the new moves. On the side of the screen, sketchy video suggestions kept popping up, but he did his best to ignore them. When his friend Carter came by to see what he was watching, Carter told Kai he wanted to show him something. "Click on that ad over there, I bet I know where it leads." Kai clicked on one of the sketchy videos and was surprised to pull up a pornographic website. He knew he probably shouldn't be on the site, but he was instantly intrigued. Over the next couple of weeks, Kai continued to look up different sites all with pornography material on them. Before he knew it, he felt like he was "hooked."

- ❓ What is your gut reaction to this story?
- ❓ Has this kind of thing happened to anyone you know?
- ❓ What do you think Kai saw on the sites? What do people mean when they talk about "pornographic material"?
- ❓ Do you think that watching pornography has any impact on people's perceptions of sex or of members of the opposite sex? In what ways?
- ❓ If you were a parent, what would you tell your kids about pornography?