



How can we keep children safe? Dr. John Foubert helps us understand how pornography affects the brain and is a recipe for sexual violence. You'll be disturbed, shocked, motivated, and empowered. Practical suggestions at the end of each chapter give parents advice on how to apply the information.

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Chapter 1

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE ABOUT PORNOGRAPHY

You walk into your eleven-year-old son's bedroom. His back is to you. Over his shoulder, you can see that on his phone he is watching a violent pornographic video clip. How you react then may well have a significant impact on the rest of his life. Will you yell, ignore it, freak out? The best thing you can do as a parent is have a calm conversation with him about it, based on the facts of what pornography does to him, and to others. Are you ready for that conversation? If you are not sure you are ready for that conversation, then this book is for you.

Not long ago, the harmful nature of pornography struck me in the face and shocked my conscience. While researching ways to prevent sexual violence on college campuses, I was struck by how the pornography industry undermined my work without mercy. I wrote

this book with the intent of shocking your conscience as well. Like all parents, I know you want what's best for your kids. And in this day and age, it isn't always easy to know what's best. Even if you have strong opinions on what might be harmful to your children, protecting them can feel unrealistic or even impossible. But we must do our best to help our kids navigate a world where people seek to turn a profit by turning sex and sexual violence into a product and selling it to our kids. I'm here to help you understand the many ways that porn can hurt your kids and what you can do about it.

There are any number of reasons why you might not want your children viewing pornography, or you may be on the fence about it. In this book, I will provide you with data and arguments as to why viewing pornography is more harmful than you ever imagined. I also will provide you with practical suggestions on how to talk with your children about the harms of pornography. In order to have such conversations, I want you to know why viewing pornography should be avoided, beyond many of the obvious reasons that may occur to you at the outset.

I want you to understand the very latest research, perspectives of people who study pornography, and the real life stories of those whose lives have been forever changed by the products and services of an industry that makes billions by hijacking their sexuality. The intent of this book is to describe to parents what the best research today shows about the harms of pornography so that you will have a thorough understanding of the intent and effect of today's porn. That will help you in many ways. First, it will help you have informed conversations with your children to educate them about those harms and empower them to make the choice to avoid pornography when possible. In addition, we need a more well-informed public debate about the actual harms of pornography; I sought to distill the latest and best available research for you into this book so that you can have a better informed perspective on the real, devastating harms

of pornography to your children, and indeed to us all. You will read interviews from scholars who have studied pornography for many years. You'll also read about interviews from dozens of people whose lives have been changed forever because of the lies they were sold by the porn industry.

I often hear the argument that people who perform in pornographic media choose to be there, love what they do, and find it empowering. The reality is, those perspectives are largely untrue.

It is degrading. You are constantly called names, you are constantly beat, choked, gagged; there are actually a lot of women who are held against their will. There was one girl I helped that was held against her will for about four days and was violently raped during that period. . . . It is just crazy that someone can get away with such a violent act against someone but everybody justifies it because you know they say, "Oh well, these women ask for it because this is the life that they chose." It is anything but empowering.¹

These are the words of January Villarubia, who, like most women who have been in the porn industry, went by an assumed name in her films. Alongside the latest research about porn, you will meet her, and many others whose lives have been affected by pornography, in this book. I encourage you to share her story, and those like it, with your children so that they can be more well-informed about the harms involved if they choose to view pornography. This is one such harm—they may perpetuate the abuse against women in pornography. Those women are somebody's daughter, sister, or special someone. As you discuss her story with your children, I encourage you to help them recognize that January is a real person, not an object.

Like in January's story, I'm going to talk you through some difficult material. It isn't easy reading about things like the violence in today's pornography. But it is critically important for us as parents

because in order for us to talk with our children about pornography, we have to understand what it is that they may be coming across on their devices. Furthermore, I think it is very important that parents understand how bad today's pornography is, so that we can be all the more motivated to protect our children from its harms. If you are reading this, you likely would do most anything to help your kids. Part of helping them is understanding that our children inhabit a porn-saturated world that we didn't experience as children, and they need our help to navigate the dangerous road ahead. This is perhaps one of the most difficult things we will do as parents; but it is also critically important. If we want our kids to be protected from the harms of pornography, we have to start by understanding those harms ourselves. This book will bring you to the point of understanding how bad and harmful pornography is, and it will provide you with numerous practical suggestions regarding what you can do to fight back, including topics to bring up with your children and questions to ask them at the end of each chapter.

Porn Is Violent

In the past few decades, the violence that kids (and others) have been exposed to in pornography has grown from occurring in a small niche market, to being more common, to being in almost every scene and image.² Pornography scholar Megan Tyler notes that the early 1990s brought in a new level of violence into mainstream pornography. In the late 1990s, violence increased further. Most recently, acts so violent in pornography that they lead women to vomit are mainstream.³ Scenes degrading women by showing men's bodily fluids on their face are now commonplace on the internet.⁴ Though some pornographers, and those who support them, occasionally play down the violence in pornography, scholars who study pornography note that men in the industry celebrate the fact that their work is abusive.⁵

One of the most important things about pornography that we need to understand as parents is the way that it objectifies the people in porn, particularly the women. At some point in your life, you have probably heard the phrase “pornography objectifies women.” Essentially what this means is that pornography turns a human being into an object to be acted upon, without agency, and without humanity. Objectification in pornography isn’t just a philosophical statement; it is fact supported by strong evidence. Research has shown that the more pornography men use, the more they see women as objects, not as people.⁶ And given the content of pornography, it is no wonder that men see women in it as objects. A 2020 study of internet video clips found that 45% of scenes in online pornography include at least one act of physical aggression. Spanking, gagging, slapping, hair pulling, and choking are the five most common forms of physical aggression.⁷ Furthermore, in pornography with aggression, women are the target in 97% of the scenes, and the response that they have been told to have during the aggression, while they were being filmed, is almost always either neutral or positive. Men were the perpetrators of aggression against women in 76% of scenes.⁸ Thus, pornography teaches viewers that women like to be hit during intimate activity, sending the message that men’s violence against women is acceptable. This is a message that we obviously don’t want being sent to, or believed by, our children.

Why do you need to know about pornography if you don’t already? For too long, people have thought of pornography use as a private issue that wasn’t anyone else’s business. In fact, pornography is harmful to those who make it and to those who use it, and in turn, harmful to sexual partners or victims who may be hurt by the mistaken point of view that women like to be objects of violence.

One of the scholars I interviewed for this book, Dr. Robert Jensen, is an emeritus professor of journalism at the University of Texas and the author of *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of*

Masculinity.⁹ Dr. Jensen has studied trends in pornography for several decades. He commented on the change in pornography in recent decades.

In the last twenty-five years we know that porn got more aggressive, porn got more extreme. The sexualization of male dominance over females intensified. That is unquestionably true. Nobody in the industry would argue that. . . . We also know that porn got more culturally acceptable, not that everybody likes it, but it is part of mainstream culture in a way it wasn't before. That is the paradox of porn. You would think that something that got more cruel, more callous, more aggressive and more racist at the same time would not become more acceptable in the culture. That tells you something important. It tells you that pornographic values are in fact mainstream. In some sense a lot of that was predictable. What wasn't predictable I think, although in retrospect it should have been, is the degree to which younger women would embrace porn as a sign of liberation. That caught me by surprise.¹⁰

Porn Is Central in American Culture

So just how mainstream are pornography and pornographic values today? One in four internet searches are done to access pornography.¹¹ A study done in 2020 found that 94% of men and 87% of women have seen pornography at some point in their lifetime.¹² Among users of Amazon.com, 92% of men and 60% of women viewed some form of pornography in the previous month. The three primary kinds of pornography consumed were written pornography, pictures, and videos. Videos were consumed most often, but women were much more likely to consume written pornography than men.¹³

Of course, it isn't just adults who are looking at pornography. About half of eighth graders have viewed pornography. Such viewing

makes early sexual debut, unsafe sex, and multiple sexual partners more likely.¹⁴ On average, boys see pornography first at the age of thirteen and girls at the age of seventeen.¹⁵ Access to pornography is easy for this age group, given that pornography is most often accessed through smartphones.¹⁶ This fact should give pause to any parent whose child wants a smartphone.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, pornography use increased by 11%.¹⁷ Data released by one of the world's most popular internet porn sites reveals that in 2019 alone, there were over 42 billion visits to its website.¹⁸ If you watched all the new videos uploaded in just one year on that popular pornography site, it would take you 168 years to watch them all.¹⁹

The mainstream nature of pornography in society today is made possible by the universal *accessibility* of pornography through portable electronic devices. Smartphones have allowed internet pornography use to increase dramatically.²⁰ Along with accessibility, technological changes have made obtaining and viewing pornography something that people, regardless of their age, can do *anonymously*. In the past, to obtain pornography, people needed to interact directly with a live person—workers at video rental stores or check-out staff in convenience stores. Identification would need to be shown. This deterred some children from directly accessing pornography, though they could still often get it from other people. However, today any kid with a smartphone, computer, or iPad can access millions of free images through a simple web browser. Rounding out the “Three A’s” of pornography,

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affordability is another reason that use is so ubiquitous.²¹ There is a lot of free porn available, even on the initial screens of paid websites.

Pornography is mainstream not only in popular culture, but also in the business world. In order to understand pornography, the first thing to realize is that it is a business that wants to maximize profit. In 2010, worldwide pornography revenues from a variety of sources (the internet, sex shops, videos rented in hotel rooms) were approximately \$100 billion.²² That staggering amount of money is more than the combined revenues of Microsoft, Google, Amazon, eBay, Yahoo, Apple, and Netflix that same year.²³ The money that porn makes in the United States each year, about \$13 billion, exceeds the combined revenues of the National Football League, Major League Baseball, and the National Basketball Association.²⁴

When you think about where all of this money goes, you are likely thinking the big pornography producers. And to a large extent, you are right. However, a significant amount of money is also being made by companies that aren't usually thought of as being part of the larger money-generating machine of porn. Not long ago, Time Warner reportedly made so much money off of pornography that it had the rapt attention of their then-CEO, Glenn Britt. In an article for a pornography business trade publication, Britt is quoted as complaining that revenues from their video-on-demand service were falling. He blamed the decline in profits on the rising availability of free online pornography.²⁵ Of course the major credit card companies make a lot of money from paid online sites, though that may be changing with their realization that they are subsidizing child exploitation. It is important to note that there are many mainstream businesses that have a substantial investment in keeping pornography as a vibrant moneymaker for them.

Of course, most pornography today is free to the user, at least at first. But people who use it for free still make money for the pornography websites through advertising revenue. The more people who

visit a “free” porn site, the more money they can charge for advertising. Even free porn isn’t really free. Another scholar I interviewed, Dr. Walter DeKeseredy, has written about twenty books and is the author of a prominent theory about sexual violence. Currently, he serves as director of the Research Center on Violence at West Virginia University. According to Dr. DeKeseredy, making such a high volume of pornography free is a trick to get the user to spend money in other ways—for example, on using phone sex or premium content that is behind a pay wall. He noted significant concern about how young people are having their brains rewired to think of sexual relations as violent. This violence is creating a generation of children who are increasingly likely to think that sex and violence should mix.

If you were alive and old enough to understand the news in the year 1994, you likely remember the iconic picture of leaders of several big tobacco companies testifying before Congress.²⁶ In contrast to a mountain of data available, some of which they themselves reportedly suppressed, the tobacco industry executives testified that they didn’t believe cigarettes were addictive. Interestingly, they also said they hoped that their own children wouldn’t smoke. In a similar way, there are powerful voices today that try to convince the public that using pornography isn’t harmful.²⁷ Their claims stand against hundreds if not thousands of studies demonstrating that pornography harms people, often badly.²⁸ Just because someone who is powerful says something that sounds convincing, doesn’t make it accurate. Sometimes, these people have ulterior motives. As you read this book, I hope that first and foremost you will consider the evidence offered and come to your own conclusions.

Pornography Impacts Behavior

Does viewing pornography impact the behavior of our children, and others? The weight of the scientific evidence offers a convincing

response: yes. How? Pornography creates a sexual script that then guides people's sexual experiences.²⁹ A sexual script essentially expresses the ideas that people have in their mind about how a sexual encounter unfolds from beginning to end. The script that today's pornography encourages is anything but consensual and affectionate. It is extremely violent, steering people into selfish acts of sexualized violence.

Anti-pornography author Pamela Paul notes that the ubiquity of pornography has made our culture "pornified," meaning that aspects of and values within pornography have seeped into popular culture. Indeed, the vast *majority* of movies made today are pornographic. The most recent data reveals that 11,000 new porn films are shot each year versus just four hundred G, PG, PG-13, and R-rated Hollywood movies. The 11,000 figure doesn't even include pornography that is not in a movie, such as in still photographs or increasingly popular short snippets on a website.³⁰

Much of this book will help you as a parent understand the connection between watching pornography and acting out what one sees. One way that pornography is affecting today's sexual behavior is in the rising popularity of anal sex, including among teenagers. In fact much of today's pornography includes male-to-female anal sex. There is growing evidence that men are requesting this behavior in their own sexual relationships. In my interview with Dr. DeKeseredy, he noted that medical journals are now showing an increase in women's rectal damage from anal sex. It doesn't take a physician to tell you that there is a connection between the two.

Perhaps more than any group, pornography is impacting young men. One of the leading scholars of gender and masculinity is Dr. Michael Kimmel, a professor at SUNY Stony Brook. He describes a typical pornography scene as an "erotic paradise where both women and men are constantly on the prowl, looking for opportunities for sexual gratification," robbing women of their agency and creating a

fantasy world that “is in fact a projection of men’s sexuality.”³¹

No wonder so many guys want to look, and get hooked. One of Kimmel’s more interesting findings is that young men gravitate toward more extreme, violent forms of pornography. Their viewing patterns are often group oriented with casual banter among guys making fun of the women in the images they ingest. By contrast, today’s adult men tend to watch pornography alone or with a partner, and lean toward genres where women appear to have high sexual desire and enjoy what they are doing. Younger guys do not typically seek women’s expressed pleasure in pornographic media. Though the female actor may speak words of enjoyment, the facial expressions, tears, and positions make the woman out to be pained, prostituted, and humiliated. Furthermore, the language used by pornography users encourages the denigration of women.³² This trend toward younger guys seeking more violent pornography is a dangerous sign for our children, given the connections between watching and imitating sexualized violence.

Another harm, referred to in my interview with Dr. Robert Jensen, comes up in men’s intimate relationships. He noted that after his talks about pornography to a variety of audiences, he often has men come up to him saying, “I can’t get an erection without thinking about porn. I can’t perform sexually if I don’t have a pornographic loop going on in my mind.” Research I will review later in this book confirms this observation.

One of the leading thinkers about pornography today is philosopher Dr. Rebecca Whisnant at the University of Dayton. When I interviewed Dr. Whisnant, she noted that the pornography industry has a financial incentive to get people, especially boys and men, habituated early in life on a kind of online sexual experience so that they, as an industry, can maximize profit.

Another scholar I will introduce you to in this book is Dr. Mary Anne Layden; she is the director of the Sexual Trauma and

Psychopathology Program at the University of Pennsylvania. She points to yet another harm of pornography she realized through her practice as a therapist. In a book chapter she wrote in *The Social Costs of Pornography* she shared:

I've been a psychotherapist for twenty-five years. I specialize in the treatment of sexual violence victims and perpetrators and sex addicts. I spend all day, every day talking to rapists, and rape victims, pedophiles and incest survivors, sex addicts, pornography addicts, prostitutes, strippers, and pornography models. After I had done this work for about ten years, I had a sudden realization that I hadn't treated one case of sexual violence that didn't involve pornography. You don't have to have a PhD in psychology to realize something is going on here.³³

The people she has treated evidence the link between pornography and sexual violence. We will go into this phenomenon in detail in chapter 3.

Indeed, something is going on here. In the rest of the book, we will explore the issues I've introduced in this chapter more thoroughly. As we do, the definition I will use for pornography is one used by researcher Michael Lastoria: "Any kind of material aimed at creating or enhancing sexual feelings or thoughts in the recipient and at the same time containing explicit exposure and/or descriptions of the genitals and/or sexual acts."³⁴ This definition encompasses pornographic materials such as videos, pictures, and text. This definition will allow us to look broadly at a wide variety of impacts. The research on these impacts sends a strong message: pornography inflicts devastating harms on the viewer.

Why This Book?

I wrote this book so that you could gain a better understanding of the research on how pornography is harming our relationships, our children, our society, and us. Depending upon how you view the world, you may believe that pornography harms a great deal, or little to not at all. You may believe that there are some obvious benefits to pornography. I start by saying I respect where you, the reader, are coming from on this topic. What I hope you will consider as you read this book is that there are harms of pornography that you likely have not thought about before, particularly harms that can be done to your children when they become exposed to it. You have probably discovered harms in this very chapter that you were unaware of before. Whether you think porn is a cancer on our society or is a tool for women's empowerment, I hope that you will read this book critically and consider the evidence it offers.

I wrote this book to shock your conscience because shocked consciences promote action—and action is exactly what I hope to inspire, action to curtail the use of pornography, action to protect our children from having their sexuality hijacked, and action to hold pornographers accountable for their distribution of illegal, obscene material. I don't intend to make my arguments with flimsy statistics or hyperbolic statements. Rather, I intend to expose you to the reality of the content, intent, and effects of pornography on you and those you love, most especially, your children.

On the personal side, it may be that you have viewed pornography a few times and thought it was gross, you may love it and watch it daily, or you may have never seen it. No matter what exposure to pornography you have had, others around you have been exposed. The statistics I share in this chapter, and throughout the book, testify to that reality. Pornography use has become nearly ubiquitous for men in the United States, for a growing number of women, and for a

majority of teens and a growing number of preteens. The lessons they learn from porn shape our culture—the culture you inhabit.

I intend to describe, in the plainest and most reliable way possible, the effects of pornography. I am a scholar who has studied and written about sexual violence since 1992; I've studied the effects of pornography since 2006. In addition to findings from rigorous, peer-reviewed research, I will interweave descriptions of experiences of people I interviewed for this book who are like you and those you know. They will describe how pornography has affected their lives. Their stories are likely to resonate with you. Each research participant I interviewed selected their own pseudonym for this book, so I will refer to each using the name they chose. I have altered details that are not central to understanding their lives, in order to help protect their anonymity. In this book, I will also share the perspectives of some of the most renowned scholars and thought leaders about pornography today. Their real names are used, with their permission. This book will introduce you to their professional roles and their best research and ideas about pornography.

I caution you. If you are someone who has experienced sexual violence or someone who might be described as “easily grossed out”—there are portions of this book that you may find very difficult to read. You may choose not to read some parts or even choose not to read this book at all and give it away to a friend. While doing the research for this book, I often became sick to my stomach or deeply disturbed by the research I read, and the interviews I conducted; especially when I thought about how pornography could affect my children. I encourage you to proceed cautiously with reading what is contained in this book. Do so if and only if you believe you are ready to hear disturbing material. And please take good care of yourself as you do. My great hope is that this book will play a pivotal role in motivating a new generation of parents who can speak intelligently about the harms of pornography to their children and to others and

who understand why we need to band together to fight the hundred-billion-dollar porn industry. The health of the next generation depends upon it. Thank you for choosing this book. I hope you find it powerful, informative, and motivating. For even more updated information on the harms of pornography, please visit my website, www.johnfoubert.com and check out the section “Is Porn Bad?” for the latest research on the harms of pornography.

Practical Suggestions

We opened this chapter with a scenario in which you find your eleven-year-old son using pornography. My best suggestion is to have many conversations with your children before they enter the tween years, conversations where you talk about your family’s values on taking pictures and how we don’t take pictures of people without their clothes on. Because we don’t take pictures of people who don’t have clothes on, we also don’t look at pictures of people without their clothes on.

Even before having that talk, it is important to build a relationship where having such conversations is possible. Dr. Cynthia Chioco-Conroy is a clinical psychologist I interviewed for this book. Her major piece of practical advice for parents is to foster a relationship with your children where lines of communication are wide open. She suggests that as you make parenting decisions, you prioritize making choices that nurture and protect the parent/child open communication relationship. She also had advice on many practical questions to ask your children. Throughout this book, I will share, at the end of each chapter, questions you can ask your children.

Dr. Chioco-Conroy acknowledges that it is difficult to have a conversation with your child about the issue of pornography; she also states that it is critical and that it should be an ongoing dialogue. As

a resource, she recommends the website Defendyoungminds.com as one that can be very helpful.

Questions that Dr. Chioco-Conroy suggests that we use when talking with our younger children about pornography include: “Have

you heard your friends or other people talking about pornography?” “What are some things that you remember them saying?” “What do they talk about?” “Do you know what pornography is?” And give them a simple definition of what it is. Other questions might be, “Have any of

Questions to ask tweens and teens include “Have you seen pornography when you have been with your friends?”

your friends seen pornography? Have you yourself seen anything you know that made you feel uncomfortable? Have you seen pornography? Has anything on your computer popped up that you think might have been pornography?”

For older children who are in the tweens and teens stage, Dr. Chioco-Conroy notes that we should acknowledge the importance of their peer group. Questions to ask tweens and teens include “Have you seen pornography when you have been with your friends?” “What questions do you have about things that you have seen or heard?” Equally important is listening carefully to what your child says and let that guide you to ask further questions. She added, “In the teens and tweens stage, that peer group becomes important, so ask them, when they have seen pornography, have they been with their friends? And really listening to what your child says will guide you then to know what next questions to ask. But those might be ways to begin that conversation.” Also: “What questions do you have about things that you have seen or heard?”

Another counselor I interviewed is Donnie Van Curen, LMFT (licensed marriage and family therapist). I asked him for some advice

on what parents can do to prepare to educate their kids about pornography. Similar to Dr. Chioco-Conroy, he emphasized that parents should make it a high priority to build a strong relationship with their children. He recommends investing time in our children (with our phones off) and focusing on building a solid relationship.

So, if you were to find your eleven-year-old son looking at pornography, my advice as a father and as someone who has studied pornography for many years is to build on the relationship you have built with your son and have a calm conversation with him about it. Discuss how it is natural for him to be drawn to these images, but these pictures are harmful to his development as a person. As you read the rest of this book, you will learn much more about these harms and can educate your children about them using your own style, preferences, and manner. Now, I hope you will read on to learn about these harms as we work together to educate and protect our children. Let's continue unpacking the problem of pornography in these next pages.

Talk with Your Children

This chapter briefly introduces several topics. I encourage you to bring up all of these with your children, bearing in mind which of them are, in your view, age-appropriate. Many of these topics will be dealt with later in the book in greater detail, offering you a chance to discuss them further. At the end of each chapter you will find a “Talk with Your Children” section, which both summarizes key topics and themes and includes thought-provoking questions for your teen or tween children. You might also read aloud from the chapter, choosing sections or passages you find most relevant.

The topics below are ones I recommend you discuss with your children. After having an initial discussion of these concepts, go to the next section and consider asking your children the questions provided.

Topic 1: Pornography is degrading to people in it. People in pornography note that they are treated violently and some are even held hostage while the pornographic material is being filmed. Those women are somebody's daughter, sister, or special someone.

Topic 2: Pornography is degrading, especially toward women.

Topic 3: Pornography objectifies women (and men). That means you don't really see someone as a person worthy of respect, but as an object to be used. Research has shown that the more pornography people use, the more they see women as objects and not as people. This is dangerous because the more you see someone as an object the easier it is to justify hurting them. In much of pornography, the lesson is that women like to be hit during intimate activity, sending the message that men's violence against women is okay.

Topic 4: The more some people watch pornography, the more they will want to experience what they see. This is dangerous because so much of today's pornography is violent.

Topic 5: The more some men watch pornography, the less able they are to function sexually with a real-life partner.

Questions to Ask Your Children

You can use the questions below to talk with your children about the content in this chapter.

Children who are 8–12 years old

1. If someone showed you a picture of people who didn't have their clothes on, what do you think you would do?
2. Do you think it is okay to watch videos where people have no clothes on?
3. If you are over at a friend's house and they told you they wanted to show you something cool but that you can't tell your parents, what would you say?

Children who are 13–17 years old

1. When your friends hand you their iPhones or iPads, what kinds of things do they show you?
2. In the past, what have you done when a friend of yours handed you a smartphone and it had pictures of people who didn't have clothes on?
3. How did looking at the pictures make you feel inside?
4. Were any of the images you've seen in pornography violent?
5. What do you think the makers of pornography want you to think when they show violent content in their video clips?
6. If you based your views on what sex should be like on the pornography you have seen, what do you think the consequences of that decision would be?

