



Project Protect, Part I

Providing practical ways to keep your family safe in today's culture.

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One misspelled word and one click of the mouse. That's all it takes to expose a child to hardcore pornography and some of the most deviant material imaginable. In comments before a Senate Judiciary subcommittee last year, Sen. Sam Brownback (R-Kansas) said, "One in five children between the ages of 10 and 17 have received a sexual solicitation over the Internet and 9 out of 10 children between the ages of 8 and 16, who have Internet access, have viewed porn Web sites. Nine out of 10 children – usually during the course of looking up information for homework." These statistics are frightening. Clearly, it is incumbent upon us to understand the issues impacting our children in this sexualized secular culture and take practical steps as parents and grandparents to protect them as best we can.

The Problem of Porn

Children are being exposed to pornography at earlier and earlier ages and when they are, their thinking can be distorted and their emotions damaged. A generation ago, the average age of first exposure to pornography was age 11. Now it's age five. Even soft core porn has the ability to affect a child's attitude about sexuality for the rest of his or her life. Boys and men who are exposed to pornography are socialized to view women as sex toys and body parts, not as human beings made in the image of God. With this type of attitude, healthy and lasting relationships will be hard to come by.

Porn can be addictive, and progressively so. There is a psychological component to porn that makes a permanent impact on the brain. According to Dr. Victor Cline's testimony before the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, research suggests that "experiences at times of emotional or sexual arousal get locked in the brain by the chemical epinephrine and become virtually impossible to erase." The mind replays them, stimulating the child over and over again, suggesting the need for further stimulation – building addiction. In time, there is an increased probability of acting out through sexual behavior. Pornography can even condition a person toward deviant sexual behavior and sexual violence.

Our children are getting hooked. According to Family Safe Media, children ages 12 to 17 are the largest consumers of Internet pornography. How do we protect them from exposure to pornography and from the predators we've heard so much about who lurk online?

Reducing the risk of exposure

First and foremost, pray that God will protect your children from the prevalence of sexual material and innuendo in today's culture. Then, take whatever steps you can to provide that protection. For example, equip your children in the area of sexuality. Help them have a healthy attitude about sex with an understanding of the emotional, physical and spiritual consequences of premarital sex. Give them God-honoring standards to follow. If you don't teach them about sex, someone else will. Don't leave it up to the schools and certainly don't leave it up to their friends and the Internet! Let your children know that, with God's help, they can flee any temptation (1Corinthians 10:13)

Where technology is concerned, please, don't even consider having a home computer with Internet access without a content filter. It's simplest and most effective way to keep your children – and you – safe online. Just pennies a day will buy a reliable server-based filter that is tamper proof and cannot be disabled without a secure password. Many include reporting of Web sites visited and other tools for parents or accountability partners. Some even offer free trials. Be sure you're using a spam filter as well, through your Internet service provider or by purchasing a reliable and powerful one separately.

If possible, keep your computer in a common area of your home. Have rules about using the Internet, with consequences for breaking those rules. According to a Henry J. Kaiser Foundation study, just 23 percent of parents have rules about what their kids can do on the computer.

Show children what to do if they come across an inappropriate Web site, including reporting it to you without fear of punishment for an accidental exposure. Make sure they know not to download anything without first asking a parent. Set up bookmarks for frequently used Web sites so children don't type in incorrect addresses. Children need to know that they shouldn't guess at Web site names by typing them into your browser. The enemy is very devious. Pornographers specifically target children through the use of domain names similar to popular games and toys.

Protecting kids from predators

Children know not to talk to strangers on the street. Be sure they know not to talk to them online. The Internet gives child molesters worldwide access to their victims. Inside chat rooms lurk adults, often masquerading as children, who seek to establish relationships with our kids and, quickly or over time, track them down for sex. Law enforcement officials estimate that as many as 50,000 sexual predators are online at any given moment (Dateline, January 2006).

Consider blocking chat rooms and instant messaging where 89 percent of sexual solicitations are made (Pew Study, JAMA 6/01). Children report just 25 percent of these solicitations to parents. A new study by Cox Communications and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children revealed that 14 percent of teens have had in-person meetings with people they've met online. If you allow chat-related cyber activity, supervision is clearly warranted. Take all possible measures to restrict contact to only other children they know and make sure your children know not to share personal or contact information online – ever. Netsmartz (www.netsmartz.org) has downloadable Internet safety pledges based on age.

Next month, we'll discuss other means predators use to reach children, like the popular personal Web page sites such as Myspace. We'll also look at ways to monitor other technology and media in our homes and communities.

Looking for resources? For information on Internet filtering and more resources to help you as a parent, visit our Web site at <http://ca.cwfa.org> and click the "Protect Your Family" link. Download the Project Protect Resource list and CWA's "14 Ways to Protect Your Children Online" brochure. Consider purchasing a copy of the valuable book *Protecting Your Child in an X-Rated World* by Frank York and Jan LaRue at <http://shop.cwfa.org/cwfa/>.

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