

# Blindsided Kids



Thanks to the Internet and the Supreme Court,  
Pornography Is Now Available In Every Home In America

by Marcia Segelstein

**P**ornography has long been a fact of life in America, thanks in large part to the publication of *Playboy* magazine in 1953. That marked a kind of coming-out party for porn, which until then had been largely undercover, if not underground. Pornography has come a long way from the days of Hugh Hefner, *Playboy* bunnies, and dirty magazines furtively purchased at the corner smoke shop. Thanks to the internet, and the Supreme Court, pornography is now available in every home that has a computer and access to the web. According to one estimate, there are currently more than four million pornographic websites in operation.

If you picture dirty old men when you think of who's watching internet porn, it will surprise you to learn that the largest group of viewers of online pornography is children between the ages of 12 and 17. Those statistics come from the non-profit advocacy organization Enough is Enough, citing a variety of studies. And there are additional disturbing pieces of research data. The average age of first exposure to internet porn is estimated to be 11. Among 15-to-17-year-olds, 80 percent have been exposed to hardcore pornography multiple times. A Canadian study found that among 13- and 14-year-olds, 90 percent of boys

and 70 percent of girls reported accessing sexually explicit media content at least once. There is evidence that much exposure is accidental, often happening in the course of doing homework.

### Vulnerable Adolescents

The Witherspoon Institute, a research center based in Princeton, New Jersey, recently launched a two-year project to study the social costs of pornography.

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**The secret is the power of images. . . .**

If we plant the same kind of image in them over and over again . . . they'll gradually be desensitized. . . . There's nothing, literally nothing, these creatures won't allow.

—from a letter to Braintwister, a devil-in-training, from his uncle Snakebite in *The Snakebite Letters*, by Peter Kreeft

**I believe pornography is the most successfully marketed insult and attack on our divine nature as human beings that has ever existed.** There's never been anything so calculated and widespread and so effective at reaching so many people at such a young age.

—Dr. Jill C. Manning, author of *What's the Big Deal About Pornography? A Guide for the Internet Generation*

Dr. Jill Manning was one of the presenting scholars at the Witherspoon Institute gathering. A therapist specializing in pornography issues and problematic sexual behavior, she is also the author of *What's the Big Deal About Pornography? A Guide for the Internet Generation*. Her practice includes many teenage patients, and she believes that adolescents are the most vulnerable audience when it comes to sexually explicit material because it can have a gravely negative impact on their sexual, psychological, and emotional development.

One danger is that young people who are exposed to pornographic images at a formative stage of their growth as sexual beings will often come to see sexuality as completely disconnected from relationships, and certainly from any spiritual context. Another is that they will learn to objectify human beings, and to see others in a context

Last December, a wide range of experts in various fields, hosted by Princeton University professor Robert P. George, met to present their research on the problem of pornography in our society. The project's overview statement addressed the issue starkly:

Today's pornography . . . is increasingly of the hard-core variety, meaning the presentation, through moving images, of real sexual acts, in which the focus of attention is on the sexual organs of the participants, male or female, heterosexual or homosexual, adult or child. . . . A few futile attempts are made to protect children, but these attempts cannot withstand the tide of permissiveness. In a culture in which pornography is permitted to flourish . . . children cannot be insulated even from its direct effects, much less its indirect ones.

devoid of feelings, personalities, and needs.

In Dr. Manning's experience, many teenagers initially turn to pornography for sexual information. They hear a word or a term they're too embarrassed to ask about, so they go online to find out what it means. But doing so can lead them into a world of outrageously graphic and often perverse demonstrations of sexual behavior, for which they have no frame of reference. Seeking information, they end up with misinformation, because, as Dr. Manning put it, "there are so many lies inherent in pornographic material about bodies, about relationships, about gender, about sexual response. It's all one big fat lie."

But they are not only misinformed; they can also be damaged. Pornographic images, according to Manning and other mental health professionals, can have a lasting negative and even traumatic impact on the brain and the psychological well-being of children and adolescents. In one research study, college students were asked about their first encounters with pornographic material. The impressions left were extremely vivid, lasting, and almost always negative.

### Long-Term Damage

A study by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, funded by Congress, found that young people



often inadvertently stumble upon sexually explicit material while doing otherwise innocent internet searches, or simply when opening email. In fact, according to one study, 34 percent of adolescents reported being exposed to unwanted sexual material online. Another study conducted five years later showed that figure to have risen to 43 percent.

A Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation Report conducted in 2002 found that 70 percent of teens aged 15 to 17 reported accidentally coming across online pornography. As Dr. Manning noted, "It is strange how the virtual world has seemingly escaped the societal standards accepted in various public squares even though the internet has been alive and well since the early 1990s."

Some of Dr. Manning's patients report first encountering pornography at the very young age of 5 or 6. One patient—now a grown man—is struggling with same-sex attraction. He firmly believes he is straight, and wants to get married and have a family. But his first sexual experience was with homosexual pornography—at the age of 9.

In Dr. Manning's view, pornography should not be taken lightly. "It's not something you dabble in for a few years and then clean up your act before you get married. This will handicap your ability to be intimate in marriage. If you desire a satisfying sexual experience with a spouse someday, this is a surefire, fast-track way to ruin that."

Of course, not every child or teenager who is exposed to pornography will return to it habitually, but many do, putting them at risk for a variety of negative consequences. Young viewers of pornography are statistically more likely to engage in sexual intercourse at an earlier age than their unexposed peers.

According to Dr. Manning, there is also evidence that young people who view pornography are less likely to desire marriage and family. "They start letting go of some of those goals and dreams. They begin to think that marriage is just a hassle and a hindrance, and that they'll attain greater sexual satisfaction in life if they're engaged in casual encounters. And they are certainly at an increased risk for developing sexual compulsions and addictive behavior." Studies have shown that habitual users of pornography often need harder and more deviant material over time to achieve satisfaction.

There is documented evidence that children and adolescents directly exposed to pornography are also more likely to overestimate the prevalence of less common practices such as group sex, bestiality, and sadomasochistic activity. Perhaps most frightening is the fact that studies have indicated that during certain periods of childhood, the brain undergoes a kind of programming for sexual orientation. It becomes "hardwired" for what the person will be aroused by. So exposure to unhealthy sexual norms in the form of pornography has the potential to permanently imprint sexual deviance on a child's brain.

### Increasing Deviance and Degradation

The Supreme Court has declared pornography that falls under the category of "soft porn" to be free speech. Many consider it a form of artistic expression. Still others think that it's just part of growing up. For years, some experts have taken strong exception to those notions. On top of that, despite the fact that it's illegal, much (many would say most) of the pornography on the internet is "hard core." So the pornography widely available today is in a whole new league. Dr. Manning believes that most teenage boys today, for example, would be completely unfazed by a *Playboy* magazine from the 1960s. "Their reaction would be that they see that at the mall, or on TV, that it's no big deal. Today's pornography has become deviant, vile and graphic. Young people are witnessing rape, torture, and all kinds of degrading material."

Dr. Judith Reisman has been sounding the alarm about the negative effects of

# Sex Perception

Interview by Marcia Segelstein

The following is an interview with “Jeffrey” (not his real name), whose addiction to pornography started when he was a child, and was finally overcome through therapy.

**Q: How old were you when you were first exposed to pornography?**

A: The first time I can remember I was in fifth grade, so I was about 10. I watched a video that my uncle, who was five or six years older than me, had for some reason. I vividly remember the video. Around the same time I came across some magazines when some relatives were cleaning out an apartment.

**Q: Did your uncle show you the video?**

A: Yes.

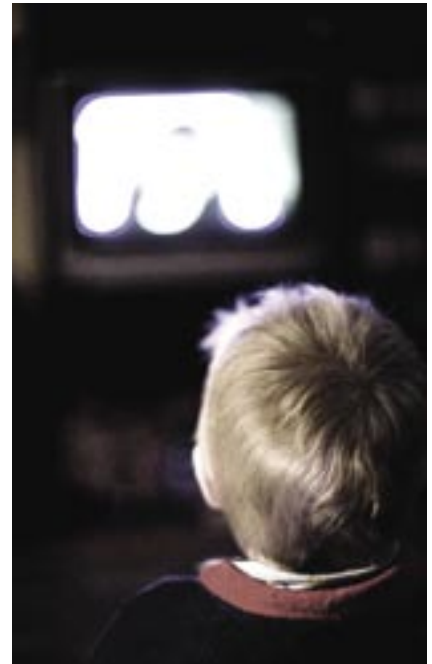
**Q: How would you describe it?**

A: It was old-school heterosexual pornography involving a group of people, a couple of guys and a couple of girls.

**Q: How did it affect you as a child?**

A: It made me very curious about sex in an unhealthy way. I became extremely curious about who was doing what, where and when. Later, as I went through therapy, I learned that a lot of the things I was very focused on—obsessed with—had to do with that first exposure. The thing I remember in the video was a depiction of oral sex and that became a major source of curiosity for me. The pornography that I searched out was about that. At ten years old, you don’t know how to process that stuff.

**Q: Would you say that you became addicted to pornography?**



A: Absolutely. It became a behavior I didn’t want to do, but still did it. Adolescence was quite peppered with pornography. Later, as I got older, and as I got more involved in my church, I did better, but it still ended up being something that I would always come back to. And it was behavior that I absolutely appalled, behavior I didn’t want to engage in, but there was this driving thing there.

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pornography since the 1980s, long before widespread use of home computers and the internet. Her 1991 book, *“Soft Porn” Plays Hardball*, addresses the issue of children and pornography, when exposure was primarily through magazines.

It is generally accepted that premature exposure to sexually stimulating images affects children negatively. . . . The “fantasies” displayed in soft porn magazines are too often blueprints for brutal crime. The Pollyannas who argue that sadosexual pictures do not encourage and stimulate anger, aggression, and crime in some children and adults should, as

they say, wake up and smell the coffee. Or, start reading the reports—like the FBI study which found that nearly all serial rapist-murderers admit pornography as their major interest.

As long ago as 1970, the “President’s Report on Obscenity and Pornography” cited the fact that young children use pornography to educate themselves about sex. In his 1979 book, *“Teenage Sexuality,”* Dr. Aaron Hass discussed the widespread use of pornography by children. At that time, *Playboy* magazine was the source for most of the children he interviewed. He writes: “Many adolescents turn to movies, pictures and articles to find out exactly how to have sexual relations. . . . The children said ‘you really learn a lot . . . in the *Playboy* advisor . . . I wanted to learn the real facts. . . . These magazines give me something to go by.”

There is documented evidence of the negative effects

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produced by such “soft-core” pornography on both adults and children in the 1970s. Now imagine, thirty years later, the “education” any child with a computer can get by viewing “hard-core” moving images of what most people would consider sexually deviant behavior.

Dr. Ana Bridges, a psychologist at the University of Arkansas, presented findings from her research at the Witherspoon Institute meeting that expose another disturbing aspect of today’s porn. A study of 50 top-selling adult videos revealed the prevalence of a theme: Women were overwhelmingly depicted as victims of aggression. And if that weren’t enough, only a tiny percentage of

those aggressive acts elicited a negative response from the victim.

Dr. Manning, in her testimony to the Witherspoon Institute, carried that theme a step further.

I am witnessing more female adolescents tolerating emotional, physical and sexual abuse in dating relationships, feeling pressure to make out with females as a way to turn guys on . . . and

There was this addiction.

**Q: What long-term effects do you think it had on you?**

A: As an adult, it definitely affected my perception of sex. I had a very unrealistic expectation of what sex was. It also created a dichotomy where I had my spiritual life on one side and this addiction on the other side. It created a lot of guilt and shame. Thankfully, my wife has worked through this with me and stayed with me, and helped me immensely in overcoming my addiction. But it definitely impacted our marriage. I was “sober,” without receiving treatment, for about the first six months into our marriage. Then the pressures of my unrealistic expectations of what sex was supposed to be

because of pornography led to my feeling that something was wrong in our marriage. I looked for answers to that in the world of pornography and that led to increasing my addiction. The problem I see with young people, or anyone for that matter, being exposed to pornography is that it paints this picture that is totally unrealistic compared to what real, intimate sexuality is about. It’s taking just one component of sexuality—the pleasure part—and making it the be-all and end-all of sex.

**Q: What advice would you have for parents who discover that their kids have been exposed to pornography?**

A: They need to talk. I always felt very ashamed. I never felt that I could go to my parents about it. So if you find out your kids have seen pornography, start talking about what real sexuality is about. Talk about intimacy and commitment. Explain that this can become problematic in their lives. I think kids know it’s wrong. They feel something’s wrong about it but they don’t know where to go.

**Q: What would you say to parents who think it’s no big deal—even normal—for kids, especially boys**

**perhaps, to look at pornography?**

A: I’d say they’re absolutely wrong. I would say that if you believe pornography is going to

. . . if you believe pornography is going to teach healthy sexuality, then you should investigate the pornography industry.

teach healthy sexuality, then you should investigate the pornography industry. It’s like playing Santa Claus with sexuality. Pornography is like continuing to pretend that something’s real when it’s not.

Then, when you get married and your wife doesn’t instantly climax when you say hello to her, you’re going to think something’s wrong. It’s intended to be fake. Parents should ask themselves if they think it’s acceptable for their child to think that’s what sex is about. That there’s no commitment, no consequences, no need for any emotional contact. Is that what they want their kid to learn about sexuality? Anyone who thinks that’s good or normal really needs to evaluate what pornography teaches. •



normalizing sexual abuse done to them because they see the same acts eroticized in pornography. After all, how bad can it be if the larger culture around you finds abusive and demeaning acts a turn on?

### Unprotected Children

As studies have indicated, many children come across pornography online accidentally. Operators of pornographic websites often use words and terms a child might innocently put into a search engine. A British study found that searches for 26 popular children's character names such as "Pokemon" and "My Little Pony" led to thousands of links to porn sites. Another survey determined that approximately one quarter of pornographic websites use popular brand names, some of which are specifically aimed at children, such as "Disney" and "Barbie." Another common practice is to use domain names similar to legitimate ones, even official government agencies.

Enough is Enough is a non-profit organization founded in 1994 with the goal of making the internet safe for children. One of its stated objectives is keeping pornography off their computer screens. A paragraph on its website ([enough.org](http://enough.org)) sums up where things stand at the moment:

Any computer-literate child can view adult pornography, such as images that appear in *Playboy* or *Penthouse*, as well as pornography that is prosecutable as obscenity, which might include pictures of women having sex with animals; men engaged in sexual acts with children; and the rape, torture, and mutilation of women.

So while the law protects minors by making it illegal for them to purchase a pornographic magazine at a newsstand, or to be admitted to an R-rated movie in a theater, or to rent an X-rated video, it does not protect them from viewing similar—or worse—images on the internet.

Congress has made two attempts to put such protections in place. The first was the Communications Decency Act, passed in 1995. According to Donna Rice Hughes, President of Enough is Enough, that bill prohibited pornography from being sent by email or posted on websites where children would have access to it. After the Supreme Court struck this act down as unconstitutional, Congress revisited the issue and, in 1998, passed the Child Online Protection Act (COPA).

COPA specifically targeted pornographers using the worldwide web, and would have essentially forced them, as Hughes put it, "to put a brown cyber-wrapper around

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otherwise free pictures on websites and place them behind an adult verification mechanism." Despite being signed into law by President Clinton, COPA never went into effect. Challenged by the ACLU, the law was batted back and forth between the Supreme Court and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit. In early 2009, the Supreme Court decided that it would not hear the case again, effectively killing the law once and for all.


This was an enormous defeat for those working in the field. As Hughes told me, "If the Supreme Court had been willing to uphold that 1998 law, for the past ten years kids would have been protected from this material on the Internet."

Not everyone agrees that COPA would have been such a panacea. Steve Ensley, the Executive Director of American Family Online ([afo.net](http://afo.net)), a Christian Internet Service Provider, has asserted: "From a social standpoint, it would have sent a very powerful signal that we need to protect our children. But it wouldn't have been enforceable. There would have been too many ways around it." For one thing, according to Ensley, pornography is a worldwide phenomenon, and it would take more than U.S. laws to protect against it.

### Good Cyber-Parenting Required

So what can parents do? First, they need to understand that the responsibility for protecting their children from online pornography lies *entirely* with them. Many parents, accustomed to the safety nets in place for print and broadcast, simply don't realize that they bear this burden for the internet. Thankfully, help is available for the asking.

For example, Enough is Enough has produced a



program for parents called "Internet Safety 101," which has the goal of educating parents about the serious risks that the internet poses for children, and which provides steps they can take to help protect them. Considering the fact that 80 percent of online pornography viewing by children occurs at home, parents can effectively intervene by using various filtering programs, monitoring software, time limiting tools, and software to block chat rooms. "Become a good cyber-parent, or put your children at risk," is Hughes's advice.

Dr. Manning believes that parents also need to discuss the existence and the dangers of pornography with their children, much as they do with drugs and alcohol. After all, filters and parental supervision may not exist at a friend's house, and filters aren't 100 percent effective.

There are also internet service providers (ISPs), such as American Family Online, that offer significant protection. AFO, and others like it, differ from ISPs such as AOL by using a different client/server configuration. AFO's customers have software installed in their computers that directs all incoming and outgoing traffic through AFO's own servers, which are heavily filtered. By contrast, online connections made using the larger, better-known providers are routed directly to the web-hosting servers.

According to Ensley, providers that use AFO's type of configuration are able to prevent 99 percent of accidental exposure to pornographic material, and a very high percentage of deliberate exposure. "No filter is perfect, but we can make it very difficult to find pornography," Ensley told me. Yet, although AFO's fees are often competitive with other providers, according to Ensley, "We don't have people beating down our doors."

From a technical standpoint, there is no reason why

all ISPs couldn't offer that same kind of configuration, and hence, the same level of protection for families. For a variety of reasons—economic, practical, and legal—the vast majority choose not to. Complications, such as determining what constitutes pornography, would undoubtedly arise, for example. Customers who use providers like AFO, on the other hand, know exactly what they're getting—and not getting—up front.

The DVD included with Enough is Enough's "Internet Safety 101" program contains strikingly candid interviews with teenagers discussing their experiences with pornography. One teenage boy talks about not wanting to have relationships with girls after watching pornography, just wanting to have sex with as many as possible. A teenage girl discusses the negative impact porn had on her relationships with boys, and on her self-respect. Another boy comments on the difficulties of avoiding pornography on the internet, emphasizing the brilliant marketing strategies of pornographers. "It will find you," he warns.

### Saving a Generation

But it may be parents who need the most warning. They are, in effect, the only line of defense between children and pornography, at least wherever there's a computer with internet access. Dr. Manning, most of whose clients are Christians, believes that parents need a wake-up call. Many simply don't know what's out there, and how easily it can be accessed. Many don't know that their kids might come across it by mistake. Many have the attitude that it simply couldn't—or wouldn't—happen in their homes.

On the "Internet Safety 101" DVD, one courageous mother tells a cautionary tale. She and her husband discovered that their then 11-year-old son had been getting up in the middle of the night to watch pornography. When she and her husband checked the computer's history, they found that he had visited over 900 porn websites. At the age of 20, he is still trying to overcome his addiction.

Sadly, he is far from alone. As Dr. Manning told me, "I believe we are raising a whole generation that believes sex is a spectator sport." We must act quickly if we hope to save them. ☹