

White Paper:

Online Explicit Content and Teens

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Bio

Dr. Wes Crenshaw is a Kansas Licensed Psychologist and Board Certified in Family and Couples Psychology by the American Board of Professional Psychology (ABPP). He specializes in working with teens and young adults from all over the Kansas City, Lawrence and Topeka area from his practice in Lawrence. He's coauthored the weekly Double Take column in the Lawrence Journal World since 2004 and is author of the Dear Dr. Wes series of books for parents and teens (<http://www.dr-wes.com/index-4.html>). He is a frequent guest on Kansas City Public Radio and the Fox4 Morning Show. He holds a PhD in Counseling Psychology from The University of Kansas, as well as a bachelor's degree in political science, sociology and history from Southwestern College.

WARNING

This paper provides additional content on topics discussed during my appearance on the September 16, 2013 edition of Up to Date with Steve Kraske on 89.3 FM KCUR and the Tuesday (9/10/13) Double Take column. It is intended to clarify and extend that discussion, which was carefully edited to be informative while protecting the listening audience and readers from specifics. This paper will discuss an array of sexual practices portrayed online, which are within three click access of any device having unfiltered access to the Internet.

I have attempted to be as tactful as possible in this paper and have kept the language clinical, but I will describe the types of material available to your teen.

If you do not wish to be exposed to a written description of explicit online content (EOC), please do not continue reading.

Sex Education 2013

As I have said many times on the air and in our columns, parents remain the most important determinant of their children's values later in life—not peers or media. Because nearly everyone will at some point become sexually active, we must work proactively with our children, pre-teens and teenagers to explain the full breadth of

human sexuality, focusing on both its positive and negative aspects and our desired values in approaching it.

Today, whether parents like it or not, that means going well beyond reproduction, contraception and disease. It means having an ongoing dialog about the emotional, ethical, physical and spiritual dimensions of sexuality to encourage a lifetime of healthy coupling and sexual expression. It also means discussing how sexuality is portrayed online and offering a competing message to that content.

Unless you live in an Internet free zone and have found some way to isolate your children from every other unfiltered smart phone, tablet or computer screen in their daily world, your kids will eventually be exposed to explicit online content (EOC). And even if you've achieved the minor miracle of electronic isolation, your children will eventually leave your home and come face-to-face with the vast array of graphic imagery streaming twenty-four hours a day.

Exposure is inevitable. Adverse consequence depends on you.

Pornography Then and Now

Today's online pornography is different in three critical ways that make it particularly impactful to society, especially teens: Ease of availability; lack of cost; and explicitness of content. By explicit, I mean the acts depicted are by any standard extreme and graphic. I'll further explain this later in the paper.

You have to look at the history of pornography to understand how we got to the point that anyone can download just about any sexual image in under three minutes. That's a very long story and well documented by historians—including some fine documentaries on The History Channel, HBO and Showtime—so I'll just provide a brief overview from my own research.

Until recently, there have been some limits on what society deemed as “decent” versus “obscene,” which in turn limited distribution. There have also been age limits on who could view explicit material—though that's done little more than make the process a bit more difficult for teens.

Though pornography dates back as far as human history, it really went mainstream in America in the Playboy magazine era of the early 1950s. Back then only bare breasts were permitted in the legitimate press and even that was pushing the limits. Female nudity below the waist did not include any view of the pubic region, and male nudes were not shown at all. There were certainly more graphic underground publications, but the principal players held to that standard.

That continued through the late sixties. Then in 1969, *Penthouse* magazine came from Europe to the United States, where it was already showing the pubic region of female models. When they began doing the same here, a competition erupted, which New York Magazine referred to as “Each magazine striving to show just a little bit more than the other, without getting too crude.” So even within an industry built on

sexual imagery there was a sense that you had to stay inside a certain boundary, even if you were always pushing that boundary. And that's how things went for most of the 1970s. During this time *Playgirl* magazine began publishing similar pictures of men. Intended for sale to straight women, *Playgirl* appealed equally to gay men—whether the publishers realized it or not.

During that same era and on through the late seventies, crude, soundless 8mm pornographic films were produced. Often called “stag films,” they appealed to a mostly male audience who had the disposable income to purchase a small projector and reel-to-reel media. But in 1972, the real change in pornographic film came with the unexpected prominence of the movie *Deep Throat*. In the context of the ongoing sexual revolution of that era, the movie made explicit material mainstream. The documentary *Inside Deep Throat* (2005) explores various aspects of the original movie, including how it impacted American society, the women's movement, the emerging pornography industry and the lives of those involved with its production.

While *Deep Throat* became one of the most profitable movies in history—it cost \$25,000 to make and grossed \$600 million—the film also caused a substantial legal backlash, as well as a strong reaction from political organizations advocating for women's rights and equality. *Ms. Magazine* founder Gloria Steinem famously faced off against Hugh Hefner, publically pushing the idea that sexually graphic material represented a *de facto* exploitation of women. Though it probably did more to publicize explicit material than quash it, the country was actually engaged in a serious debate of graphic material, some excellent examples of which are portrayed in the documentary, *Inside Deep Throat*.

And right in the middle of that discussion came an even more significant media revolution—the VCR. Being able to rent or purchase explicit videos in the late 1970s didn't lower the cost, because both the machines and the media weren't cheap, but it increased audience access to pornography just as it did for mainstream films. The critically acclaimed and Academy Award nominated film *Boogie Nights* (1997) offers a fictionalized, and at times very sad, account of this era.

From 1976 through the late 1990s, increased access began to change the level of explicitness in pornography. Since adults could purchase or rent explicit material for private use at home, one could select whatever style of content he or she wanted to watch. That menu in turn, grew to meet a market that demanded more and more graphic and diverse content.

There are two schools of thought on why this escalation occurred. Some argue that pornography is intrinsically addictive. There's no evidence however, that this is any truer for explicit material than for say, video games or golf or any other pleasurable activity. Anything one likes a lot has a potential for what we call “behavioral addiction.” But if you favor an addiction theory of pornography, then you believe in tolerance building, meaning the more you look at this material, the more you're desire to look at it grows and the more you're looking for something different to “up

the dosage,” if you will. So the market follows that decreased sensitivity and increased stimulus to get the viewer “high.”

I prefer to think of it in a way that’s more applicable to the large population of consumers. The market drives pornography production, the market has historically been male dominated, and when it comes to sexual imagery men are always looking for novelty. So that industry keeps churning out product that is different. That necessarily means more extreme.

When I ask young women about this, those who like to look at pornography (and they remain a minority compared to guys) also indicate an interest in diverse images. So, it may really be that people who consume pornography all tend to look for something different, whether they’re male or female.

Either way you look at this, the body of content developed over the last ten years has inarguably become more explicit and diverse than at any time in the past.

Enter The Internet

As with just about everything else in life, the next big revolution in pornographic content distribution came with the Internet. At first greater access came from online stores that sold videos and DVDs delivered directly to one’s home. Initially these were pretty crude, but today purchasing explicit content in a DVD format is about five clicks and a credit card’s worth of effort. Amazon even sells moderately explicit videos and *extremely* explicit written material, much of it self-published. This encourages distribution by eliminating the local pornography store as point of sale, increasing privacy and security in purchasing.

But the real Internet uber-revolution came with live streaming of video, which in turn opened up access to everyone.

Here’s why. Under the old DVD/credit card purchase model, the access and price-point limited teens from direct purchase. Live streaming, most familiarly YouTube, and high-speed broadband, created a 21st century distribution system for any video media. It downloads at a quality of definition that puts to shame any video media of the early part of this century. About the first thing folks did with that technology was to make pornography and to make it more accessible. Based on history, this was predictable. The minute a new technology comes out—printing press, film, audio, video, broadband—a market for explicit content develops around it. And that’s exactly what’s happened here.

But this change isn’t limited to improved access—which is now as easy as Googling the word “free pornography.” What’s really new is the price point of zero. At this moment, there’s an unbelievable amount of explicit content available online for free. And that’s been growing since late 2009, shortly after YouTube appeared and super fast broadband made it practical to use. Even though YouTube isn’t actually carrying those explicit videos, the same video sharing technology is used for sites that are.

This zero-price point for EOC is the difference between say, the old style video games where our play was limited by a quantity of quarters, and the modern world where you buy an Xbox and play endlessly. The only cost is the computer or smartphone and most people own those already. To be sure, kids were accessing some material for free under the old model. Just as the “dirty magazine” appeared under a teens mattress, the “dirty DVD” came from an older friend, parent’s explicit material stash, or a clever peer who figured out the workarounds for online purchase, usually the debit or cash card.

Today, young people needn’t expend the time or energy to do that. They have access to an entire universe of EOC for free.

How This Works

At one point pornography was so profitable that the mob got involved with its sale and distribution. In fact, as the documentary shows, *Deep Throat* was basically taken over by organized crime and some of the principals in *Playgirl* were prosecuted with the Gambino family. There are tremendous concerns today about underworld involvement in sex trafficking and the extent to which that may play a role in some EOC. So its counter-intuitive that anyone would be giving away explicit material for free.

But they are.

I’m oversimplifying this, but in general there appear to be two overlapping sources of free EOC and you have to understand them to appreciate why all this content is floating around, unfettered. It’s hard to figure some of this out, because as with all things Internet, there’s more that exists below the surface than on top. Here’s my best educated guess. I think it will do for the purposes of this paper—which is to educate parents so they can talk with their kids intelligently and enact reasonable restrictions on access.

The first source appears to be amateurs with video cameras. There’s a growing body of material that’s nothing more than people filming themselves in their own bedrooms (and quite a few other places), then posting that to a variety of online sites. It’s not necessarily someone exploiting someone or using a covert camera—though that seems difficult to verify. It’s people who think this is a fun activity.

Surprised? Don’t be. The idea of doing your own erotic photography is so mainstream now that it appeared this season on the HBO series *The Newsroom*. One of the anchors found her own nude photos posted after a bad breakup. It’s not shocking any more to hear a celebrity getting caught doing this.

For a less famous segment of the population, voluntarily posting your own photos or videos is kind of like being famous—an oddly logical outgrowth of self-absorbed social media. As we’re all too aware, teens are making their own explicit selfies too—though most now understand that posting them online is child pornography. That’s a topic we’ve covered on the air and in previous column.

There's a second group of amateurs who are actually trying to make money with their own EOC. In fact, Amazon sells several books on how to make and sell your own explicit home movies.

And then there's the rest of the content. Some are stolen clips from older films that were originally released on VHS or DVD, which is quite upsetting for the legacy pornography industry and has generated legal action. But most of the material comes from upstart businesses that are filming explicit material to sell.

So how does any of this end up online for free? The vast library of shorter clips creates a loss leader to advertise the host sites full-length films or online video chats, which viewers must pay to see. The free content draws consumers who, while viewing it, get hit with a barrage of advertising. Moreover, donors of the material often post a link back their site, so viewers can click over and see what they're offering too.

It's really a new spin on a very traditional advertising model. A commercial newspaper, radio or TV station puts up free content and sells advertising positions around it. Except in this case, it would be like the *Kansas City Star* posting donated stories and then advertising its own used cars or haircuts for sale in front of the building. This creates a vertically integrated business model. Because the market is so vast and the donors are so many, the content is almost limitless.

And that's why pornography is now free.

Here's why it's extreme.

The online market is competitive. There are lots of explicit services chasing lots of dollars. To succeed, the producers have to create material that stands out. Think of it like Las Vegas. There's plenty of money walking up and down the street, but there are also a lot of casinos. The casino owners need something flashy to really grab an amateur gambler's attention, so they build a model of the Empire State Building or a pirate ship that sinks every thirty minutes under a hail of gunfire. An even better and more familiar example can be found in today's reality shows. The programs get weirder and more extreme as the channels and shows multiply. So the producers seek stranger people and ever changing angles and situations to get viewers.

Knowing that viewers look for something infinitely different, the producers of EOC create a body of increasingly extreme material. They ask, "hmm, what haven't we done yet?" and try that. Since production costs are pretty low, they can afford to throw up just about anything and see how the audience reacts in terms of votes and click-through. This makes it easy to follow what draws in the dollars.

What Does Extreme Mean?

If you listened to the KCUR show or read the column, you know that this is where we dialed in the “Delicate Cycle.”

In this paper we’ll turn it up to “Heavy Duty.”

Feel free to shield your eyes—except that won’t help you respond in a serious way to this trend. Think of it this way. Barring the sort of sheltering I discussed earlier, your child has seen or is going to see about every one of the things I’m about to describe in brief. You could spend three clicks and a half hour online and see it all for yourself. But if you’re sensitive to such things I’d suggest a quick read as the better alternative to doing your own research, which is quite frankly, not very pleasant. Believe me.

As I said on the air and in our column, I have several concerns about modern pornography, all of which are tremendously amplified for teenagers. Here they are:

Inaccuracy of Information. I always tell kids and parents that learning about sex from pornography is like learning about the animal kingdom from watching *The Roadrunner and Wile E. Coyote*. Online content is a cartoon of human sexuality. It’s visually interesting for the camera, but emphasizes the most mechanical and stimulating aspects of sexuality. That’s actually the least important thing when you’re really one-to-one. EOC provides no context, no storyline, no before and after, and except in rare instances, no relationship between the parties.

Worse, because it leans to the extreme, pornography highlights sexual acts that few teens and not many adults are able to replicate. At least, they should not be expected to try them outside of a highly functional sexual relationship—which rarely defines the teen dating culture. Yet this is increasingly the goal among teens—mostly boys, but they are not without female partners.

I first ran into this in an early 2012 letter to my newspaper column in which a girl complained that she was being pressured (by other girls) to have a Brazilian wax job so she’d be well received in the dating pool. If you don’t know what this is, I’ll explain it quite simply—all pubic hair is removed. That column also appears in our *Dear Dr. Wes* books for parents and teens (<http://www.dr-wes.com/index-4.html>).

My immediate reaction was that this represented something kids were learning in pornography, where this look has been especially popular in the last ten or fifteen years.

But, when I asked this question of young people I know—and with whom I share an appropriate relationship to be asking such things—I was astonished at the response. First, I was admonished for showing any disdain for this practice. Young women said that they too preferred this look. One said that if she had the money, she’d wax too, but for now she just shaved. Another bragged on how good her wax person was (I won’t go into detail, but she did). When asked if this was pretty much expected at

this point, most instead indicated it was simply considered the norm, whether using wax or a razor. Several hoped to one day get laser hair removal and have it gone once and for all. Though all agreed this probably originated in pornography but they saw it more as a matter of personal hygiene and attractiveness. This position was shared by several adults with whom I spoke.

I learn something new every day.

I ran the column making sure to withhold judgment about the practice and instead admonished anyone who would try and force a friend to do this—which was the point of the original letter.

I remain concerned that the influence of pornography may be greater and subtler than this single practice, extending to how girls view their bodies; that they may be inclined now to emulate pornography stars as much as pop music stars, even if they do not actually consume explicit material themselves. And given how little parents are paying attention to these trends, I began to follow this story.

Shortly thereafter, this same point was made in the documentary *Sexy Baby* (2012), which is both excellent and difficult to watch. All parents should view it privately and then perhaps watch it again with their late teens. It addresses and extends the same issues I noted on air and in this paper. It forms a great point of departure for the sort of parent/teen discussion I suggest later on, because the film features teens, parents and young adult women confronting exactly these issues at a personal and societal level.

An even more graphic, detectable and potentially serious impact of pornography on the sexual practice of teens will undoubtedly come as an even greater surprise to parents. A common sex act portrayed in current EOC is anal intercourse. I first realized this because increasingly that topic is coming up in my office too. Young men from 16 to mid-20s are commonly asking partners for anal sex and everyone agrees that this is a direct result of seeing it portrayed regularly online.

Even more surprising, is how girls respond. Some see this as a non-starter. They simply will not do it. Others are ambivalent, requiring an exclusive relationship before consenting. Still other girls—and I believe they are a minority—have few restrictions on this practice. Regardless, this is the new discussion for teens. They are talking about it with peers and with their partners.

They are not discussing it with their parents. And that needs to change.

Many folks enjoy anal sex and I am not opining on that or any sex practice in this paper. It is however, a more complicated and advanced practice than most teens are prepared to try and it requires a level of empathy and partnership that is rarely present in that age group. Yet it is being advertised online in thousands of explicit videos available to your teen without any instructions or context, as if it were the “it” practice for everyone to try.

Another genre of videos portrays various forms of oral sex. This practice has been common among teens for many years, however the more extreme online variants in EOC raise questions similar to those noted above. The most notable of these is what is referred to as “rough” oral sex, meaning that it is done to the male by a female (or gay male) in an intentionally harsh and even violent way.

And I probably don't need to say this, but EOC does not include any portrayal of safe sex.

There are quite simply, no limits. Sex is entertainment and nothing more.

There is, in contrast, a genre of explicit content that actually emphasizes the relationship between the partners and portrays the sharing of reciprocal sexuality. But it's like a needle in a haystack. Its romantic, couples-based storyline isn't likely to rise up among the bulk of the bawdy imagery and it probably won't appeal to the biggest teen consumers—boys. Moreover, without a discussion of ethics, empathy and excellence of behavior in sexual practice, even gentle EOC lacks the context teens need to interpret their own and each other's sexuality.

We call it “adult material” for a reason.

And we're not even to the worst of it.

Violence. There's an extensive—and by this I mean virtually unlimited—genre of free EOC involving staged sadomasochism. To be clear, that behavior is not considered pathological if the parties are consenting, so I don't want to offend or shame any adult who does this with a consenting partner. *Fifty Shades of Grey* was popular for a reason and that reason wasn't awesome writing.

But when graphic sexual violence—including bondage, simulated rape, torture and even murder—is portrayed in a video that is then mainstreamed to anyone in the world who doesn't have a strong filter on their computer—any context of healthy sexual expression is lost and all you see is violence. Teens and most certainly, pre-teens are in no psychological or neurological position to discriminate sexual role-play from something that is intended to hurt or humiliate. And to be as clear as I can possibly be about this, all you need is a cursory Google search on an unfiltered computer and within two minutes you'll be streaming this extreme material.

Since kids are computer wizards, it might take them half that time.

Degradation. Beyond overt violence, there's an even larger body of material that I would refer to as degrading, even cruel, but not exactly violent. One of Gloria Steinem's major complaints about Playboy and similar soft-pornography was that it degraded and exploited women. And I know women who still feel that way. But I also know many women in diverse age groups who now see that perspective as somewhere between quaint and oppressive. They enjoy erotic material. *Fifty Shades of Grey* had a huge reading audience and I've yet to meet a man who's picked it up.

So there's no consensus among women as to what does and doesn't degrade women (or men) in pornography anymore. That said, this body of EOC is overtly designed to degrade women and, in the case of gay pornography, men. In fact, some sites are branded with language about humiliation. That's their selling point. So there's no pretense in this material.

This includes acts of aggressive, multi-partner sex in which perhaps three, five or even ten or twelve men have sex with a single women or a man in gay EOC. In addition to "rough oral sex" it includes a genre in which a woman (or man) is "forced" into all manner of sexual humiliation in front of a live audience.

It is difficult to define exactly what discriminates these specific images from similar scenes that don't appear intended to be degrading, but the best determinant is that it is not reciprocal. The scene may or may not look painful to the party involved, but it is definitely about power, dominance and even harm.

Again, I'm not here to judge what any adult male or female wants to do within a consensual sexual relationship. Many adults enjoy "power play" as a form of sexual expression. But what one does or views privately is a different matter than what we as a society, accept for wholesale distribution on the Internet street corner to anyone of any age.

Regardless of one's sexual proclivities, we all agree that teens and pre-teens are too early in their psychosexual development to give informed consent for the range of practices available to adults, which brings us to the next topic.

Impact on Teens

Among adults and many teen girls, I've encountered approximately two responses to the issue of EOC and teens: Abject horror and devout resignation. For parents, neither is particularly helpful because neither constitutes a viable intervention.

Those who want to look the other way may equate sexually explicit material with the era described earlier, in which access was limited, cost was prohibitive and explicitness fell within some defined boundaries. As I've pointed out, those days are gone.

Moreover, limiting sexual imagery has always been important, even as our ability to do it has always been imperfect. There's always been a mattress to hide a "dirty magazine" under. There's always an unfiltered computer to look up EOC.

What we really have to do as parents is to give these materials an ethical context.

But how? We certainly don't have to watch EOC with our kids in order to critique and discuss its mores, as we might an R-rated movie. That would be creepy and probably against the law in most states. But we do have to know what's out there and discuss it intelligently—which was my goal in this paper and on the air. That discussion can make sexuality less deviant and thus explicit material less desirable.

To have that conversation, we have to understand why EOC is problematic in the first place. There's nothing kids hate more than "Because I said so." That tack is condescending and anti-intellectual. So to get you started, here's how I see the impact of explicit content on teens so you can pass it on to your kids.

Body Image. Historically, pornographic images have sold best if they feature certain shaped bodies. For women, that usually meant a Barbie metaphor—large breasts, wide hips and a very small waist. Once second-generation silicon breast implant technology came along in the late 1970s, most adult actresses got surgery to boost their careers.

I think we all know what worked for male actors—though implants weren't an option—men with larger than average penises won the roles.

This has changed a bit in the last few years among woman models. Breast implants have fallen out of favor, while perfectly toned, natural bodies are back in style. Unfortunately, none of that sets an achievable goal for girls or young women. Not surprisingly, this is what they complain most about to their boyfriends (and husbands)—that they are in competition with images of nude models for a partner's attention. While most guys don't see it that way (they're seeking diverse imagery, not a different partner), girls and women still feel marginalized by an impossible standard of physical perfection. We've spent lots of energy in our society critiquing images on the cover of *Seventeen* magazine, not considering the underground modeling competition between teen girls and nude young women, roughly their same age, in online explicit content. And I would argue that battle is more impactful now.

Because boys don't discuss the issue of penis size—nor much of anything sexual—in a healthy way, it's hard to assess the impact of pornography on their body image. Anyone who lived a slightly enlightened life in the 1970s, remembers being reassured that where penises were concerned, it was not "size that mattered, but how you use it." Early pioneers in popular sex education, like David Rueben (*Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Sex But Were Afraid to Ask*), were adamant that men shouldn't worry about this issue, pointing out that penis size was, on average, 5.6 inches. Today however, mainstream advertising tells us that "Size Matters!" in a product. Whether you realize it or not, that's a subtle, jokey response to that old adage of reassurance.

And so it is in the current wave of explicit content.

One of the strongest messages in modern porn is exactly the same—size matters and it matters a lot. Penis size is emphasized in both gay and straight porn. From a sex education standpoint, this is an unhealthy turn of events especially for teen boys who, statistically speaking, won't measure up to what looks good online.

In sum, in its cartoonish presentation of sex, EOC portrays impossible images for teens and may well encourage them to have poorer body image.

Youth. One might be happy to hear that breast implants have gone by the wayside in EOC, both from a health standpoint and in terms of encouraging that same desire among teens. There was a period in the 90s when the preferred birthday gift for well to do eighteen-year-old girls in California and Florida were breast implants.

Unfortunately, my take isn't so rosy. I believe the large-breast trend has passed because smaller breasts are associated with younger girls. The current tack in explicit material is to hit what I've called in previous columns, the "golden mean of sexuality" in our society.

That "golden mean" is a sixteen-year-old girl.

Yes, disturbing as it is to say and to read, the goal in a lot of explicit material (as well as mainstream media) is to as emulate as closely as is legally possible, the look of a young teen girl—perhaps even younger than sixteen. We find this replete in mainstream media too. One need only view Miley Cyrus' recent weirdness at the Video Music Awards. Forget her twerking, which is as common among twenty-year-olds as the iPhone. Focus instead on how her performance was staged to overlap sexuality and childhood, particularly for a star who was making her way on Disney Channel just five years ago, now dancing among teddy bears. As the mother of Robin Thicke (Miley's dance partner), wrote, "I can never unsee that."

Most celebrities (and parents) found it difficult to watch.

Another hint on this is the pubic hair situation. Regardless of it's popularity now, I remain suspicious that in the context of EOC, the Brazillian was intended to make girls seem as young as possible while adhering to legal requirements that they be over eighteen years of age. An extensive body of EOC collectively referred to as "Barely Legal" supports that position.

As one who has worked with sexual abuse victims much of my career, a body of material that caters to that interest is disturbing enough. But to see that look quietly permeate the teen dating pool (or VMA)—even if it is doing so out of the conscious awareness of teens—is that much more disconcerting.

We have enough of a problem in our culture pressuring women to hit a "golden mean" of physical attractiveness that is nearly impossible even at sixteen. I believe explicit online content is contributing substantially to that situation, particularly because it flies under the radar and therefore is not a part of the normal family or societal discourse.

Increased Sexualization of Teen Relationships. Not only are girls in competition with young nude models, but those models are doing things on camera that many girls have not considered doing or even imagined possible. And that's what boys are asking for.

I firmly believe that this dynamic (taken with those noted above) has in no small part, driven the dating pool increasingly toward more sexualized encounters that

exist outside of exclusive relationships. Boys take in volumes of explicit material, which raises their “virtual” sexual experience far beyond previous generations (they might now see thousands of explicit and diverse videos, where as earlier teen boys saw a few hundred softer stills and just a few explicit videos). This increases a boy’s imagination of what is possible and he conveys those expectations to his partner, who then feels she has to comply to remain competitive in the dating pool.

From clinical experience and some early research in the field, I believe this level of EOC consumption also reduces a teen boy’s empathy for his sexual partners. I’m not saying pornography is turning anyone into a sociopath, but only that repetitive viewing of gratuitous sex acts (i.e., lacking any context or relational storyline) causes boys and perhaps also girls, to objectify their partners and to focus instead on their own needs and pleasure. That’s pretty much the opposite of what we want to see in developing healthy dating relationships—and it’s something I’m hearing a lot these days. I believe there’s a correlation.

Likewise, I’ve spoken often of how girls don’t expect much out of boys anymore in terms of relationship building. I think this is an indirect response to the amount of explicit material consumed. Girls experience this objectification at an age when they are reaching out and seeking validation for their own sexuality. Instead they experience high expectations for how they look and how they perform sexually and get little in the way of reciprocation—emotionally and sexually—from their partners. This is because for boys, EOC is basically a one-way street. It’s all give and no take. As a result, boys begin to associate arousal and orgasm with receiving physically and emotionally. Giving back becomes secondary.

I can’t prove that link, but it seems pretty obvious when you start with the kind of online material I’ve discussed in this paper and move forward to the dating and coupling experience now reported by girls.

What to Do?

Parents were no doubt hoping that we’d get to this point sooner. But understanding those details is both necessary to and a lot easier than intervening.

Nevertheless, here’s my list of best practices based on a lot of conversations with teens and parents.

Filter Filter Filter. As imperfect as content filters are, they are necessary. As parents our job is to set a standard for what we believe is important and the wholesale consumption of sexual content by teenagers is a problem requiring a response. Many parents may filter house computers. A few may even filter tablets. But how many have filtering software on their iPhones or Android devices? These exist both at the data network provider level and within software available for the phones. You just have to get online or call your provider and get them set up.

Parents shouldn’t hand out a smart phone without those filters in place.

That said, don't kid yourself. Filtering won't keep your kid safe from online pornography. But it will do two important things: a) It will reduce the total amount of material he or she consumes over adolescence, thus lowering the "dosage" affect and saving a lot of time and bandwidth; and b) send a strong message about what you believe is good for teens. That will in turn, create a strong, ongoing discussion of what's really important—*why* you set up those filters.

And if you're a consumer of explicit content yourself (a lot of adults are or else there wouldn't be a mega-market for EOC) you need to go to great lengths to isolate that material from your family. I wish I had a dollar for every teen whose primary source of content was a parent's online stash of images and videos. It's easy to set up a completely separate computer account on your desk- or laptop for your online life.

Just do it.

Explicit Material—Define What is Good and What's Bad and Explain Why: I find a tremendous and irreconcilable conundrum between what might work in educating kids about pornography and what is really practical. If we posit that teen boys and many girls are going to encounter and consume pornography, we might consider guiding them in that consumption, as we would say, alcohol. We have long known that teens drink and parents have offered to do what it takes to keep them out of trouble with drinking by setting up drunk driving contracts and reinforcing other standards for safe drinking. Some parents teach responsible drinking by allowing limited alcohol consumption in the home. In Wisconsin teens can attend a bar with a parent and drink.

Sounds great, right? The problem is that teen drinking is dangerous and illegal because teens lack the neurological maturity to follow parental guidelines. So our attempts to tolerate that behavior and guide its practice might instead be seen as enabling.

The point of adolescence is to do teenager things. The point of parenting is to do parent things. Enabling is not a parent thing.

Likewise, most parents would not consider directing their kids to the gentle EOC I referenced earlier. Even if these films emphasize the kind of sexual liaisons we should all want for our children—reciprocal, empathic, consensual and loving—we would not offer the material up. In fact, this might be a crime in and of itself. And it seems kind of creepy, doesn't it?

Yet "filter and hope for the best" is an untenable position. We have to be in the conversation, a point made quite well by the mother in *Sexy Baby*. At no point in our history has the need for sexual communication with teens been greater. I understand that just getting through the basics is hard enough—but one cannot address extreme online pornography with a talk about birds and bees.

Parents have to encourage kids to have intelligent, ethical sex and to respect themselves and others; as well as to respect the idea of not having sex and not

pressuring others to do so. If kids feel they have authentic choice, they make better decisions. But you have to define what you believe is good and what you believe is problematic. That gives kids both an authentic choice and an informed one.

It does however, require a lot of potentially awkward communication. I know a lot about this because I do nothing but sit around and have awkward conversations with teens, who greatly appreciate that opportunity and usually don't find them awkward at all. That's the most important thing I've learned over the years—kids like talking to adults who speak to them with respect and honesty.

The ease of those conversations is due in part to the fact that I'm not the parent of my clients, so they feel freer to share. But it's mostly knowing how to have a comfortable conversation between equals that creates an atmosphere of safety and non-judgment. You can use the same general approach to talk to your kids. That doesn't mean there will be a lack of conflict. It means that conflict occurs in a supportive atmosphere where kids trust a parent's judgment and it actually resolves something or teaches important lessons.

To get you started, I've adapted the following example from those conversations and put it in the voice of the parent. By the way, I only included the parent side because one of the differences between my discussions and yours is that yours will come in what I call a "silent dialog." You want to anticipate what your child would say if he or she were sharing and encourage him/her to do so, but you should not expect that to happen. In fact, I suggest you tell your child s/he doesn't have to say a word.

If s/he does, you did a darn good job of starting this discussion a long time ago.

Here's another tip that might make things easier. Try and have these conversations in increments and in response to something naturally occurring in the environment. That Miley Cyrus VMA performance generated quite a bit of talk in my home. Much involved puzzlement over her whacky tongue thrusts, but the rest provoked a discussion of teen (and child) sexualization in mainstream media.

Such images and situations are common in mainstream media and they offer an endless stream of opportunities for discussion. Don't fear them. Cherish and use them. If you need to create one, buy *Sexy Baby*.

Unfortunately, one of the most common naturally occurring opportunities will involve "catching" a teen using sexual imagery. That's a bit like closing the awkward barn door after the awkward cows are heading out awkwardly, but it does allow for the sort of discussion I'm proposing—though I'd leave it alone for a few days to let the awkward dust settle, and then gently return to the issue.

Whatever the precipitant, this conversation needs to be as gentle and natural as you can make it. I even suggest having it first with your spouse, a friend, or at very least, yourself in front of a mirror. The more you discuss these issues, the easier it is to discuss them. Trust me. I wasn't born talking easily with young people about sex—although my dad did teach human sexuality to church youth groups for many years.

I had to develop that skill myself over many years of practice and today it's easy and friendly.

So here's my proposed script. You'll want to modify it for different kids as you see fit, but it gets at some of the big issues we've discussed above.

PARENT: "That incident the other night [with Miley Cyrus; catching you looking at EOC, etc.] got me to thinking and I wanted to talk to you about something that's kind of awkward, but I think it's important. Don't worry, I'm just asking you to listen to my thoughts. If you want to share yours, I'd love to hear them, but you don't need to if you don't want to. It's just important that you know how I feel about this.

"I understand that even if I filter your media you're going to get access to sexually explicit material at some point in your life. I'm not judging you or shaming you in any way for that, but I do worry about what you'll see. Learning about sex from online explicit content is like learning about the animal world from watching Roadrunner and Wile E. Coyote [or make up your own metaphor]. A lot of what you see has nothing to do with how most people enjoy sex. So don't assume anything based on that. I have some good books on sex and I'm going to leave them in your room and you can read them or not. I just think they're more accurate than a lot of stuff you'll find online. Sex is a good and important thing and I want you to treat yourself with love when you get involved with it. I don't think online material really shows much about love.

"I also want to talk to you about consent. Consent means you really actually mean to do what you're doing. It's not maybe. It's yes. In sex, nothing is more important than that and a lot of online explicit material leaves consent out of the picture—sometimes really far out.

"A lot of those images are intended to be degrading to women as well as to men. That's kind of what they're selling because it's weird and weird sells. What is most important to me is that any real life partner you're with, you treat with dignity and that you expect them to treat you with dignity, and that you don't tolerate anything less. A big part of that dignity is being assured you have their consent for anything you're doing and that you are certain what you've consented to. I don't mean that somebody doesn't say "no" I mean that they clearly are saying yes. Not maybe. Before you're sexually involved with anyone, you should be able to talk to them. That not only keeps you safer from disease and pregnancy, but it makes the experience a lot better.

"I also think that a lot of online material makes people feel inferior because, whose body really looks like that? (NOTE: If your kid's body does look like that, this is exactly the wrong thing to say because it will create an even greater sense of inadequacy. In that case, skip it and move on to this...). Good sex isn't about having a perfect body, it's about finding joy in each other's bodies, so don't compare yourself with anything you see online.

“Most sex acts portrayed online are really done because they look wild on camera. Some people your age (especially boys) take that a little too seriously and want to act those same things out. Think hard before you do anything you see online and read up about those practices in the books I’m giving you. They explain the pros and cons of pretty much everything. Your body is your own and you don’t have to do anything to it or with it that you don’t feel is right for you at this time in life. It’s for you to decide and everything you do is a decision.

“Some of those sex acts are violent, even they are consensual. I’m not judging people for how they have sex, but the main point of having sex is to think about your partner and what they like, not just about yourself or what’s going on in a video. No matter what you’re doing, you should do it with respect for the person you’re with and as an expression of love, not contempt.

“You may not be real excited to talk to me about these kinds of things, and I understand that. That’s why I got you the books or if you want to talk to a professional sex educator, I can arrange that. I just want to be sure you have a better resource than free online pornography guiding how you view things—whether you’re watching it or you partner is.”

Resources

For shy parents, I used to suggest buying sex education books you like and leaving them around the house where they can’t be missed by teens. But I’ve decided that old tactic is too subtle for today’s teens. It was based on the idea that teens would grab any sexual information they could. Today, as I’ve discussed in this paper, teens don’t have to play hide and go seek with books to get that info.

Many parents directly furnish sex education materials to their kids and I favor that approach. But what books to choose? It would be easy to say, “Whatever you’re comfortable with,” but that’s not likely to happen. What makes you comfortable will probably be well beneath your teens’ need-to-know level and sophistication. In an era in which *Fifty Shades of Grey* is being passed around by thirteen-year-old girls, one cannot rely on old standbys like *Changing Bodies Changing Lives* (1998). Besides, anything older than a couple of years is hopelessly outdated.

I’ve reviewed the synopses of a number of books on Amazon and found only one that consistently meets three criteria for teens sixteen and over: a) good accurate information; b) interesting and non-condescending to a generation who has a lot more information on sex than we realize—most of it not so great; and c) explicit enough to keep up with the current trend toward sexualization of culture, without being gratuitous, and thus can compete with the Internet.

That book has the descriptive but rather intimidating title of *The Guide to Getting it On*. Up to date in its eighth edition, it’s often used as a primary text in college sexuality classes. It works equally well for 16+ teen boys and girls and will keep you ahead of the curve, even if it feels uncomfortable. I suggest getting the eBook because the paperback is 1185 pages long and doesn’t exactly fit in your pocket. But

if your kid isn't into eBooks, and most aren't, it will fit under the bed (if your teen has about five inches of clearance there). It also has the property of being a reference book, so kids can look things up when they need to know them and ignore the rest.

The Guide really is the new “*Everything You Always Wanted to Know*” which served a generation or two quite well, back in the day.

Another book I like, but which is both clinically sound and relationship-based is Laura Berman's salaciously titled, but practically written *Secrets of a Sexually Satisfied Woman* (2005). It's actually a little tame for adults, but pretty basic for teens—because they have so much Internet access to information.

As for younger teens, I suggest Heather Corinna's book: *S.E.X.: The All You Need to Know Progressive Sexuality Guide to Get You Through High School and College*. Though its on my reading list and comes highly recommended by my colleague Jenni Skyler, PhD, MEd, a Boulder Colorado sex therapist who also works with teens and young adults. It's based on the website www.Scarleteen.com, which is a resource many teens use for good quality sexual advice.

These books may scare you a bit, because they're devoutly sex-positive, but I'm suggesting them specifically to compete with the problematic messages that are blasting out loudly and clearly from your child's computer. To do that today's books can't be shy.

You can find all these resources in my online store at www.dr-wes.com.

Conclusion

Look, we made it to the end!

Breathe.

Over twenty years of practice, I've learned that if we're going to work with teens we have to understand that the core developmental tasks of adolescence are: a) organizing sexuality; and b) differentiating from family of origin. Together, these tasks create psychologically successful adults. Parents have a lot of influence in how that plays out. Best that we use it.

If you need help on your teen's journey or your own, do not hesitate to contact our office (ask@dr-wes.com) with either a question for our newspaper column (http://wellcommons.com/news/columns/double_take/) or a request for services. Everyone needs a boost now and then, and we're happy to help out with even the most delicate of family subjects. Believe me, we've heard it all before.

You can also follow me on twitter @wescreshawphd to get several daily tweets of advice on parenting teens (and being one).

Thanks for having the courage to join me here and keep listening!