



## **PORNOGRAPHY – The Uninvited Guest**

From the earliest civilization there are depictions of sexual acts in paintings and sculpture that would provide sexual arousal and satisfaction. In the middle of the eighteenth century in England society began to consider whether some depictions of sexuality were deemed too explicit and would offend the sensitivities of women, children and the working classes. The Obscene Publications Act was the first law criminalising pornography and introduced in the United Kingdom in 1857. From the invention of the printing press every new media technology has been exploited for mass production and distribution of pornography.

In the past pornography was mainly confined to the top shelf in the newsagents and in red light areas of large cities but technological advances have made pornography instantly accessible on mobile phones, video games and laptops. Mobile phones with tiny high definition cameras as standard are used to capture pornographic photographs and videos and forwarded to other individuals, a practice known as sexting. The internet and digital television have brought pornography into our homes uninvited. Pop music and advertising increasingly use sexualised imagery, dance and lyrics which many view as obscene and overtly sexually explicit. Even talent shows that are considered family viewing early on a Saturday evening have been criticised for the sexual content of their performances.

Almost all adults have seen some type of pornographic material by accident or by choice, and have received unwanted exposure to pornography via pop-ups and emails. Since the arrival of the internet, pornography is far more readily available and less regulated.

In 2010 there were 24 million pornographic websites (12% of all internet sites) being viewed by 28, 258 users every second. 1 in 3 of these users were women, and 70% of 18-24 year old men visited porn sites every month, 20% of men admit viewing porn at work. The most common day to view online pornography is a Sunday. The worldwide pornography industry was earning about \$4.9 billion per annum and their income continues to grow. (<http://www.onlinemba.com/blog/stats-on-internet-pornography/>)

It is impossible to ban pornography internet sites but it is important that we consider how viewing pornography can change the way we feel about ourselves and about sex. Pornographic images are often violent and degrading. Some men will want to act out sexual practices they have seen, often without the consent of their partner, leaving women feeling degraded and abused and men angry and frustrated when women do not consent. Pornography can be upsetting and disturbing and what arouses one person can be obscene and frightening to someone else.

Research published by the Ministry of Justice and Department of Health in September 2007 (Ministry of Justice Research Series 11/07) considered what effects does viewing extreme pornographic material has on those adults who access it. Their meta analyses provided clear evidence of a correlation between sexual arousal to sexually violent pornography and increases in sexually aggressive attitudes, beliefs and behaviours.

Sex is a natural part of a loving relationship but pornography takes it out of context and promotes sex without responsibilities and commitment as acceptable and desirable.



Addiction to internet pornography is increasing at an alarming rate. The majority of those who become fixated on viewing pornography are middle-class, white-collar workers whose professions bring them into contact with the internet on a daily basis. Many use it as an escape from the stresses of their working life and, unsurprisingly, retired men who find themselves at home with nothing to do are also among an increasing group of users. (Daily Mail 7 July 2011)

The instant accessibility and the ability to view anonymously and in privacy are proving to be a dangerous combination. Although the vast majority of people view pornography without developing an addiction, the leap from occasional viewing to full-blown obsession is never far away. Habitual consumption of pornography may lead to diminished satisfaction with mild forms of pornography resulting in a desire for more deviant and violent material.

There will be men and women in our church congregations who are struggling with the temptation to view pornography. As a church, it is only when we acknowledge there is a problem that we will be able to help individuals and couples struggling to deal with addiction and the damage it causes to relationships.

In July 2010 a 24 hour telephone helpline was established to provide support to the 1.2 million pornography addicts in the UK ([www.helpaddictions.org](http://www.helpaddictions.org)). There are many online organisations to provide help for individuals who struggle with the temptation to visit inappropriate websites and who are prepared to accept that what they do online impacts their lives offline, for example, Covenant Eyes ([www.covenanteyes.com](http://www.covenanteyes.com)) provides internet software to protect integrity online by monitoring how the internet is used and sending a report to a designated person such as a friend, parent or mentor. This online transparency helps and supports the individual seeking to deal with addiction. There are many internet security programmes that can also be used by parents. Programmes not only install filters on children's computers but monitor internet sites visited, words used in search engine and set time limits to restrict internet access throughout the week e.g. Netnanny

As parents we need to consider the risk that pornography may expose our children to explicit deviant sexual material. This can have a damaging impact on their sexuality, behaviour and relationships. ([www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10579105](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10579105))

A survey of 14-16 year old teenagers in the UK found that three quarters of them had never discussed pornography with their parents and yet one third had seen their first sexual images online when they were less than ten years old. 81% had seen them when in their own homes and 63% on their mobile phones. (Psychologies Magazine July 2010)

Pornography can expose children to sexual sensations that they are developmentally unprepared to contend with. The sexual excitement and eventual release through pornography is mood altering. Repeated behaviour can result in conditioning to sexual arousal associated with photographs which can become permanent. This may lead to problems in finding fulfilment in meaningful relationships in later life. (Jerry Bergman, Ph.D., "The Influence of Pornography on Sexual Development: Three Case Histories," *Family Therapy IX*, no. 3 (1982): 265.)



Girls and women who view pornography can experience lower self-esteem, and may see themselves as sex objects denied of their own sexual desires.

As parents we want our young people to make healthy choices about sex, to respect their partners and to enjoy sex as part of loving meaningful relationship.

In June 2011 the Department of Education in the U.K. published a report. "Letting Children be Children", a report of an independent review of the commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood by Reg Bailey. The report recognised increased frequency of sexualised images in public places, on TV, the internet, music videos, magazines and newspapers.

There are different approaches to tackling the problem. One approach focuses on trying to keep children wholly innocent and unknowing until they are adults, acknowledging that the world is a nasty place and children should be unsullied by it until mature enough to deal with it. The other approach accepts the world as it is and strives to give children the tools to understand it and navigate their way through it better.

The Bailey report suggests that the way forward should not focus on either of these two extremes. A truly family friendly society would not need to erect barriers between age groups to shield the young, it would instead uphold and re-enforce healthy norms for adults and children alike, so that excess is recognised for what it is and there is transparency about its consequences. This is an aspiration at present but we need to stop greater sexualisation of children and help parents protect children.

The report calls upon the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) to explore ways to make it easier for parents to block adult and age-restricted material from the internet, video on demand and mobile phones. In response to this report, four of the UK's biggest internet service providers, BT, Virgin Media, Sky and Talk Talk have already agreed to introduce measures to force customers to opt in if they want to view porn rather than including pornography channels in all their digital television packages.

As parents we need to understand internet and mobile phone settings and ensure the necessary filters and blocks are turned on to prevent access to adult only material. Social networking can also put young people at risk of exposure to pornography and sexually predatory behaviour. Children as young as thirteen can join social network sites and if parents are unaware of social networking they are not in a position to safeguard the online safety of their children.

The UK Council for Child Internet Safety brings together over 170 organisations and individuals from government, industry, law enforcement, academia and charities, including parenting groups to work in partnership to keep children and young people safe online ([www.ukccis.org.uk](http://www.ukccis.org.uk)) Advice is available for parents at [www.saferinternet.org](http://www.saferinternet.org), [www.protectkids.com](http://www.protectkids.com), [www.care.org.uk](http://www.care.org.uk), [www.ceop.com](http://www.ceop.com).

The Council on Social Responsibility of the Methodist Church in Ireland feels that it is important that the church and its members understand the nature of the problems associated with pornography. As a church we have an opportunity to promote wholesome personal relationships and challenge the assumptions that viewing pornography does not have adverse effects. Within pastoral care we may encounter those who are struggling with the addiction of viewing pornography and those who feel



their relationships have been undermined by it. As a church we need to speak out against the increase in pornography and its use. This opposition should not be regarded as anti-sex but as upholding the importance of sex as part of loving meaningful relationships.

***Council on Social Responsibility  
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