

Protecting God's Children for Adults



Vol. 20 No. 8

Pornography Addiction and Neurobiology

By [Rev. David Songy, O.F.M.Cap., S.T.D., Psy.D.](#)

Introduction:

When it comes to



protecting children and youth from sexual abuse and exploitation, a key component involves protecting them from the dangers of pornographic material and limiting their access. Pornography is an important issue because it's open access for most youth and can be easily found online on any device. When pornography becomes an addiction for youth, it alters their brain chemistry and their ability to grow in a healthy way. Viewing pornography also affects a youth's boundaries and can make them more likely to be sexually abused. Abusers and people with inappropriate boundaries often use pornography to their advantage to test the youth and to desensitize them.

As caring adults, one way we can combat the dangers of pornography in our society is to help young people understand the detrimental effects of pornography and how this is linked to physical changes in neurobiology. We can also become more informed about how sexualized materials can contribute to the victimization of children.

The Dangers of Pornography:

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Rev. David Songy, O.F.M.Cap., S.T.D., Psy.D.

Rev. David Songy, O.F.M.Cap., S.T.D., Psy.D., is a psychologist who has extensive experience working with clergy and religious, including integrated psychological and spiritual treatment, multicultural candidate assessments and initial and ongoing

While many would agree that pornography use has become a significant problem for many, contemporary society often accepts it as normal, or, at the very least, unavoidable. An overwhelming percentage of teens (96 percent) have access to the Internet.¹ Some encounter sexual materials without actively seeking them. One in five children see unwanted sexual material online.² Surprisingly, research denotes that the largest consumers of free internet pornography are children between the ages of 12-17. Children exposed to sexuality, even in the media, were more likely to have premarital intercourse while still a minor. And children who have viewed pornography are more likely to be sexually abused.

However, it is not just the possible or intentional exposure to pornography that is problematic here; it is how even small exposures are affecting our youth, along with the risk and relationship between pornography and the sexual exploitation of children and sexual abuse. While most are aware that any pornography involving images of children and youth is considered child sexual abuse, pornography involving any person is also victimizing them in a way that goes against their human dignity.

Pornography and the Brain:

Pornography has a sobering effect on the brain, and research has demonstrated that pornography use can alter brain chemistry and anatomy. The brain naturally releases hormones in response to sexual stimuli, producing—in addition to arousal—excitement, attraction and ecstasy.³ This is all extremely concerning given the fact that children's brains are still developing, and pornography usage by children can alter their brain's development.

Each hormone plays a specific role in encouraging a couple to enjoy their time together, feel close and become attached. The initial attraction to someone, falling in love, attachment and bonding, as well as ongoing satisfaction within an intimate relationship are human experiences facilitated by this complex combination of hormones, which influence decisions and behaviors. The human brain has evolved to support relationships between couples and children, as well as the formation of societies. As Christians, we believe this process to be guided by a nature gifted to us by God.

However, nature did not anticipate the development of pornography. When pornography replaces the sexual "stimulus" of a person, the brain produces hormones that produce sexual responses meant to encourage relationships: engraving imagery on the mind, causing feelings of bonding and leading to relaxation in the

formation. He previously served as spiritual director and prefect of studies at Redemptoris Mater Missionary Seminary and held several positions at St. John Vianney Theological Seminary, both in Denver. He also was director of counseling services for the Pontifical North American College in Rome. Fr. Songy served on the Provincial Council for the Capuchin Province of Mid-America and was formation director and safe environment coordinator. He holds a doctorate in psychology from the University of Denver, a doctorate in sacred theology from the Teresianum in Rome and a master's degree in pastoral counseling from Loyola College.

presence of another. Pornography is a sexual stimulus that endangers the formation of true and healthy relationships. In place of an intimate spouse, one entertains, even without the intention or realization of doing so within the brain, "relationships" with hundreds of images. A pathological connection emerges between the individual and pornography after repeated exposure.

In addition, the brain becomes desensitized to the images and requires greater input for the same result. In other words, a person may no longer receive pleasure from looking at a still photo, so searches for a video. Here the addiction principle of **tolerance** distinguishes a *bad habit* from an *addiction*. Compared to alcohol abuse, a bad habit might entail getting drunk every other night or so after consuming six beers. However, someone addicted to alcohol will often drink *every* day and over time will need more drinks, perhaps 10 beers, to achieve the same drunken effect as the body and brain exhibit more tolerance.

Pornography Addiction:

Pornography addiction leads not only to increased time of viewing, but also to viewing more stimulating objects. For example, the heterosexual may eventually begin to view homosexual material. A person may search for and employ the means to obtain "better" material. The person may begin to find sexual material with younger persons more gratifying. Finally, illegal materials, such as child pornography, may help fulfill the need for "more." Please note that one does not have to be a "pedophile" (one who is attracted to pre-pubescent children) or an actual child sexual abuser to seek the stimulus, because the known danger and risk are themselves stimulating. This is the power of addiction.

Another important addiction principle is **dependence**, i.e., to develop a physiological need for a particular substance or behavior.⁴ The neurobiology underlying these principles of **tolerance** and **dependence** suggests that addictive substances and behaviors can dysregulate the cerebrum, which controls emotions, personality, decision making, and memory. The brain will eventually adapt its role of providing positive reinforcement for a substance or behavior to *requiring* such behaviors, i.e., producing cravings and painful withdrawal symptoms. The frontal lobe, which generally aids in prudent decision making, ceases to influence the person, allowing lower brain systems to reinforce sexual behaviors that are not tied to the development of mature interpersonal relationships. While the human brain has evolved to support the complexity of human relationships, an addiction to pornography will lead the brain to delegate all sexual behaviors to these lower brain systems.

Given this neurobiological process, it is understandable that pornography addiction can lead a person to cease engaging in an intimate relationship and give preference to pornography. Many spouses who struggle with the normal challenges of marriage can experience greater division because of pornography use.

When It Has to Do Specifically with Children:

There is an extremely important element that everyone should also know about pornography: *the viewing of child pornography (pornographic images or scenes with sexualized content of a minor) is a form of child abuse.* Even though the child may not be physically present in the room in that moment, the viewing, use or possession of even a sexualized image of a child is considered tangible cooperation in the original abuse. Please note that it is not a victimless crime, as the child is re-victimized and exploited every single time someone looks at the image or video, downloads it or shares it with others. Even if due to an addiction, the act of looking at children portrayed in sexual ways is objectively immoral and illegal.

Please also note a disturbing element of child abuse. Persons who sexually abuse children, whether through exploitation online or through in-person encounters, will often use pornographic material as a means to groom the child or youth, which is part of their overall manipulation process. While showing a child pornographic images is sexual abuse itself, abusers use pornography to test the child, to desensitize the child and further cross his or her boundaries to continue to sexually abuse them.

More insidious, many young people are exposed at an early age to pornography (whether of their own accord or by someone else's actions) and do not possess the moral maturity to reject its influence. Before they have developed the capacity for intimate spousal relationships, they will have learned to identify sexuality as a non-personal process, and it will affect their relationships.

What You Can Do:

- Every person who struggles with pornography use should take time to consider how this has affected current relationships, because, from a neurological perspective, it will have affected relationships, possibly without the person realizing.
- If it is an increasingly bad habit, or, if it has reached the level of pornography *abuse*, i.e., become problematic to the point of affecting one's everyday life, then speaking with a professional about an assessment is in order. Knowing how neurobiology significantly impacts human responses to sexual stimuli and the capacity to engage freely in human

relationships should help people to act before pornography abuse reaches the level of an addiction, when a person may be tempted to move beyond immoral behavior to more dangerous and even illegal acts.

- Talk to the children in your care about addictions and the content mentioned in this article (in age-appropriate ways).
- [Discuss](#) with children the reality of sexual exploitation,⁵ posting or sharing sexualized images of themselves or others, and what to do if someone has solicited them, or shared sexualized materials with them.⁶
- Be on the lookout for possible pornography addictions amongst youth.⁷

Understanding how pornography impacts neurobiology helps us in our mission to protect children and youth from sexual abuse. Pornography materials clearly negatively impact children; the easy access to the pornographic materials while using the internet, along with the harm of exposure, all increase the risk of adverse neurological effects, increased risk of addiction, and increased risk of addiction and sexual exploitation or abuse.

References

1 Journal of Adolescent Health and Society for Adolescent Medicine. "Exposure to Sexually Explicit Web Sites and Adolescent Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors." Vol. 45. Issue 2. 156. Web. 3 Dec 2009. (<http://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054?139Xpercent2808percent2900658?7/abstract>).

2 Time. "Here's How Many Young People Are Seeing Unwanted Sexual Content Online". Retrieved from the Internet on July 13, 2021. Available at <https://time.com/5308162/unwanted-online-sex-content/>

3 The brain hormones that are naturally released in response to sexual stimuli include testosterone, dopamine, norepinephrine, oxytocin and serotonin.

4 Note from the author: In the case of the alcoholic, the body requires a certain amount of alcohol for stability, and a lack will trigger withdrawal symptoms, which may prove fatal. In the case of pornography addiction, there is "arousal dependence." A lack of pornographic images will cause withdrawal symptoms. While not fatal in this case, they are quite uncomfortable. People have been known to use computers in public places, break into other people's offices, and engage in other dangerous, risky behaviors in order to get their "fix" of pornography.

5 www.endsexualexploitation.org

6 National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. Child Sexual Abuse Material. Accessed on the Internet July 1, 2021, found at: <https://www.missingkids.org/theissues/csam>

7 A helpful website with sage advice if you suspect a child has a pornography addiction, or would like to look for the signs, is www.integrityrestored.com

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1) The principle of "tolerance" suggests that as a person becomes more addicted to pornography,

- A) he/she will try to justify their behaviors.
- B) he/she will look for more stimulating material.
- C) he/she will become more accepting of their sinfulness.

D) he/she will not tolerate interference with Internet use.

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