

## **Poison Control**

*How to protect your child's heart and mind from the power of pornography*

By Michelle Lippincott

The beautiful bride on the back cover of my Victoria magazine appeared carefree and radiant. Dressed in a strapless white gown, she was running down the beach followed by her exquisite wedding party. There was nothing indecent about the scene, but moments earlier when I asked my 6-year-old son why he was carrying around my magazine, he showed me this picture. And he looked ashamed.

That day, as never before, I realized the battle for a child's mind begins very early. Although the picture that captured my son's interest was not pornographic, it was a reminder to me that he will be a curious 9-year-old before I know it. It won't be long before he discovers images far more tantalizing than the woman in the white gown.

Our culture feeds children a visual diet of images that arouse the imagination—images that are not lost on young children. Socially palatable pornography is everywhere. It can be found on the cover of a magazine in the grocery store checkout line or the department store circulars stuffed in with the Sunday paper.

I know there are parents who will think my son's interest in a perfume ad was no big deal. But experts have found that a child's understanding of sex and sexuality is formed early on. Russell Willingham, pastoral counselor and the author of *Breaking Free: Understanding Sexual Addiction & the Healing Power of Jesus* (InterVarsity) has found that 40 to 65 percent of Christian men struggle with pornography, a struggle that often begins in childhood.

Willingham says, "Early exposure to provocative images arouses sexual feelings prematurely, which leads to confusion, guilt, and a myriad of other emotions in a young child." My son's sense of shame was evidence that indeed, he felt uncomfortable with what he'd seen. Willingham also says that images of women in sexually appealing situations typically cause boys to view women in a one-dimensional way; women become a set of body parts designed only to please the sexual appetite.

Essentially, exposure to pornography plants the seeds of lust. Willingham adds that if there is an emotional vacuum in a boy's life, he will often turn to pornography to meet it. He says, "Lust combined with a lack of nurturing is the genesis of sexual addiction."

While our culture tends to think of pornography as a boy's problem, Willingham points out that it influences girls as well. They learn to pose, act, and dress like the models in those sensual materials. For girls, however, their desire is not so much to be sexual as to be cool and accepted. Still, Willingham notes that he has seen a marked rise in the number of women seeking counseling for sexual addictions.

There is no foolproof formula to keep a child's mind and heart pure, but there are steps parents can take to help our children deal with the sexual temptations that will inevitably come their way.

### **Healthy Homes**

When our oldest son started crawling, we were careful to put poisons and other harmful substances out of his reach. We've recognized that we have to be just as vigilant about the toxic images that come into our home. Luke 17:1 says, "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come." That passage goes on to say it would be better to be drowned than to cause a little one to sin. In other words, parents have an enormous responsibility to keep the home safe.

The obvious place to start is with media. TV, music, the Internet, they all tend to promote an unhealthy view of sexuality and parents are wise to monitor what their children watch and listen to and where they surf.

But as I discovered with my son, inappropriate images can sneak in where you least expect them. Once I started paying closer attention, I saw that I was letting—even asking for—some inappropriate material to come in through the mail. Aside from Victoria, I once got on the mailing list for one of those goofy trinket catalogs. My husband and I were laughing at some of the items for sale, but my son pointed out a small picture of a sexual video. I called the company and asked to be removed from the mailing list. If I want my children to desire purity I have to be willing to pursue it myself.

### **Cautious Concern**

Our children interact with a whole range of people each day—friends, teachers, other parents, babysitters, relatives. We've decided to be vigilant about making sure the other people who will influence our boys are people we trust.

There is more to this decision than simply wanting to protect my children. The trust between a parent and child is sacred; it echoes the trust between God and his children. If I allow someone to be with my kids who might harm their hearts and minds, it's as though I have given tacit permission for this harm to take place. In some ways, that breach of trust can be even more devastating than the damage done by the other person. My children need to know that I will protect them and I dare not let them down.

We are particularly choosy about babysitters. Because we have sons, some people have suggested we have male babysitters. But the subject of teen boys babysitting warrants

consideration. The teen years are a time of sexual exploration for young men and prudence would suggest they not be placed in potentially tempting situations. We have decided to have only female babysitters.

We are also careful about the adults we allow to care for our sons. Just because someone is family does not mean they are qualified to be alone with children; it was members of my husband's extended family that had the greatest negative influence on him as a boy. We typically stick to adult women we know and trust—studies show that women are far less likely to victimize a child than men. They are also less likely to look at unsuitable websites or tell off-color jokes in the presence of children than men.

We know that kids' friends have a great deal of influence in their lives, so we try to help our sons make good decisions about whom they spend time with. But we also take the time to get to know the parents of our sons' friends. It is important to us that the parents are not just giving lip service to morality, but practicing it as well. My neighbor expressed concern about our culture's moral decline, but in the next sentence excused a poster of a bikini-clad, Budweiser model hanging in the room shared by her 7 and 13-year-old sons.

There are those who encourage parents to let their children be lights in the lives of non-Christian families. While I hope that my sons are always reflecting the love of God, I believe that parents are under no obligation to allow their kids to spend time with ungodly neighbors in the name of evangelism. The Bible never specifically instructs children to evangelize. Jesus himself did not begin his public ministry until he was an adult. I Corinthians 15:33 says, "Bad company corrupts good character." It is not worth losing a child's innocence in the hope someone may turn to salvation. God will provide ways to do his work without exposing young minds to godless values. Instead, pray for these families and invite their children to your house where they can see God's love in action.

### **Clear Communication**

No matter how good parents are at filtering cultural influences, most children will eventually encounter our society's distorted view of sex. So even as we work to protect our children, we need to prepare them for world they live in. That means being open and willing to talk with our children about sex and sexual issues.

When my son and I talked about the bride picture, I didn't feel like I needed to go into great detail about sex. I acknowledged that my son's interest in a beautiful woman was normal and part of God's design, but also cautioned that Satan wants men and boys to be preoccupied with a woman's beauty. We went on to talk about how he will sometimes see things that are inappropriate and he needs to choose what he will allow into his mind. I wanted him to know that it's okay to acknowledge a woman's beauty, but he needs to be very careful with where his mind goes next.

The way sexual curiosity is handled at an early age will help determine whether a child will trust adults during the teen years. Avoiding the topic or criticizing your child's inquisitiveness is more apt to build a wall than a bridge. But if you've established a pattern of open communication, the

more involved conversations about sexual issues will happen more naturally and comfortably for you and your teenager.

If you've discovered that your child has been looking at inappropriate sexual material, do your best not to shame him but to help him see how Satan uses this material to warp his understanding of one of God's great gifts to us. Explain that pornography distorts a person's view of women and cripples a person's spiritual life by creating isolation and shame. Pray together and ask for God's forgiveness and strength. Then, help your child think through ways to handle future temptation.

Even if your child has never seen a pornographic image, you can set the stage for helping her see it for what it is by promoting a view of sexuality built on Scriptural principles. Celebrate what's good about your daughter's femaleness or your son's maleness. Help your child develop healthy friendships with members of the opposite sex. Model a marriage based on mutual love and respect. Show your child that you are there to help her sort out the complicated messages the world sends about sex and she will likely listen to what you have to say.

### **Protective Prayers**

It is critical to monitor influences and establish honest grounds of communication, but of even greater importance is the need to pray for the safekeeping of our children's hearts and minds. James 5:16 says, "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful." Only God can keep my boys from noticing images that will be harmful to them. As a college student I went on a missions trip to Europe. Despite the prevalence of sexual imagery in the countries we visited, I didn't notice any of the billboards of topless women or the nude sunbathers at the beach. I believe that was due to the power of my parent's prayers.

There is no magic wand to wave over our children to protect them from pornography's lure, but parents can offer them the benefits of a life that is pure. It requires sacrifice, diligence, and discipline. It can sometimes feel like a losing battle, but parents can take comfort in Galatians 6:9 which urges us to never give up trying to do what's right.

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