

Bishops

Pornography: policy and guidelines

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A distinction is often drawn between art, erotica and pornography but it is not easy to define these terms. Art and erotica might depict naked women and men in various poses but “these are not designed to promote lust”. With pornography, these pictures are intended to arouse sexual excitement and the material is usually degrading to the people concerned, and would often be considered obscene or immoral. Where one draws the line between what is acceptable and what is offensive is essentially a personal moral choice.

While we understand that issues like pornography are personal moral issues, we also feel that pornography needs to be understood within the context of human sexual development and psychological well-being. This document is an attempt to frame the school’s position on this issue from a moral, psycho-sexual and educational perspective.

The school’s moral standpoint:

The school’s moral position on pornography is consistent with our *Statement on Spirituality* and the Anglican Christian ethos of the school. As such:

1. We uphold the sacredness of marriage and the importance of the family unit. We disapprove of all behaviours that contribute to the break down of families and the disintegration of committed relationships. In this context we believe that pornography impedes the formation of intimate relationships and is thus harmful.
2. We believe that any sexual activity that is predatory and unwelcome, any pattern of sexual behaviour that seeks to impose upon a weaker person the will of a stronger person, exploiting sex, and any sexual acts that degrade another person are wrong.
3. We believe that promiscuous sexual behaviour is dehumanising to both partners and is therefore wrong. We affirm that sex is a gift of God meant to be shared in a relationship of ultimate commitment.

4. We believe that pornography de-humanises and de-personalises sex. We also believe that pornography takes sex out of the context of a committed relationship. As such we are opposed to pornography.

It is illegal for children under 18 years of age to purchase pornography and to access pornographic images on the internet. The school actively encourages boys to follow the law of the land and will take steps to actively enforce these laws on our campus.

Healthy sexual development:

Pornography should be dealt with not only as a moral issue but also within the context of a boys' healthy sexual and psychological development. As such it is important to identify the sexual developmental tasks that a teenage boy should have achieved by the time he reaches adolescence.

According to Murray (2003), by the age of thirteen, a boy should:

- Have an understanding of sexuality as a natural part of life.
- View their sexual feelings as legitimate and normal.
- Understand that sex is pleasurable as well as a way to procreate.
- Realise that sexual acts can be separated from reproductive acts.
- Know how male and female bodies grow and differ.
- Know about contraception and ways of preventing pregnancy and diseases.
- Know about changes they can expect in their bodies before puberty, such as wet dreams.
- Know about sexually transmitted diseases and infections.

It is also important to realise that as a teenager, a boy will be awakening to his own sexual impulses and drives. As such he will experience sexual desire, have a natural curiosity in the male and female body, be seeking ways to express his sex drive, and will be searching for information about sex. Any action that shames a boy or makes him feel bad or guilty about his sexual curiosity is harmful to his sexual development. In this context it is worth noting that it is not unusual for boys to look at pornography. Most teenagers have seen explicit pornographic material before leaving high school.

Is viewing pornography psychologically damaging?

Unfortunately, the research available has not yet resolved this debate and may never do so. Some research indicates that adolescents who use pornography become casual and even callous about sex, that they develop chauvinistic and objectifying attitudes about people and unrealistic expectations about what men and women look like and what they do. There is no shortage of research that suggests that looking at pornography regularly and over a prolonged period can be harmful (Murray, 2003).

Other experts say that viewing pornography has no known negative effects on children of any age and quote research to support their view (Richardson and Schuster, 2002). As Biddulph (1997) points out, pornography (in the absence of other suitable educational material) can have an educational role, and boys' curiosity is healthy and natural. Boys want to see what women look like. They want to see what goes where, and how. In this sense, some experts maintain that pornography certainly seems to fill a need. It can open a door to satisfying sexual experiences for teens and provide an opportunity for sexual experimentation and expression in a "safe" environment (Richardson and Schuster, 2002). Although it has been known to stir up the desire to search out sex of the non-solo variety, some teenagers report they have also found it to be a tool for maintaining abstinence (Richardson and Schuster, 2002). The excitement of pornography, unlike sexual experiences with others, comes without any risk of STIs or pregnancy, a lower level of anxiety and no chance of breaking someone's heart (Richardson and Schuster, 2002). It is, however, noteworthy that even though some researchers suggest that pornography is not always harmful, it is very difficult to find respectable research that suggests that pornography has a positive and healthy effect on individuals.

For most boys looking at pornography will not become a problem. Some boys, however, by virtue of their psychological make-up and family circumstances, may be at risk for developing psychopathology as a result of exposure to pornography. Within this context, boys who grow up in a family where making good intimate, affectionate relationships has been put in place early on, are generally not at risk even if exposed to pornographic images (Murray, 2003). The evidence, however, suggests that a pre-occupation with pornography occurs where relationships are already difficult. As such obsessions with pornography can be seen as a symptom of an internal emotional difficulty.

In some boys pornography can begin to act in the same addictive manner as a drug might. In explaining the psycho-dynamics of a pornography addiction some writers maintain that the appeal of pornography is that it is fantasy which provides an escape into oblivion. As such, boys who are withdrawn, lonely or who find the world painful and difficult, may find comfort and escape in the fantasy world of pornography.

For boys who are withdrawn and lonely – as indeed is generally the case with older men who become obsessed with sexually explicit images – pornography provides an escape into oblivion. When dealing with such a boy it is important not to add to what can be a vicious circle. The boy feels bad about himself, so he uses pornography to make himself feel better. An angry parent or teacher who is disgusted at what they find will only make him feel worse. Talking in a non-judgmental and shame-free environment while helping him understand what lies behind his use of pornography may be psychologically more helpful (Murray, 2003).

Advice to parents:

On the issue of pornography, the school gives parents the following advice:

1. Provide information about sex.

Richardson and Schuster (2002) suggest that if parents really want to make an impression and minimise the role of pornography in their son's sexual education, they should get him in touch with a competing perspective on sexual pleasure. A good book on sex will give your son some of the excitement and titillation he is looking for and the how-to-information he needs along with reminders about responsibility and contraception in the context of a healthy perspective on sexuality and relationships.

2. Chatrooms on the internet.

Richardson and Schuster, (2002) suggest that you do not discourage your son from entering chatrooms. They can be a great source of fun, support, and information. But it is important to set the following boundaries:

- Make sure your son understands that a person who tells them he's fifteen may actually be a fifty-year-old who says what teenagers like to hear in order to entice and trap them.
- Encourage your son to see that a conversation which is inappropriate if done verbally face-to-face is the same if done online.
- Warn your son that he should never give information to a stranger which may identify where he lives. That if he becomes nervous that an interaction he has had will compromise him he should tell you.

3. The internet and the viewing of sexually explicit sites.

If your son has access to the internet and a shred of curiosity about sex, sooner or later he will find his way to a porn site. Within this context it is important to realize that the internet can be used to:

- Learn about everything from sexual health to sexual oddities.
- Read stories about people's wild sexual adventures.
- Look at pornographic pictures and video clips.
- Have sexual conversations with strangers in chat rooms.
- Send sexy or romantic messages to others.

As you probably know, if you want to prevent your son from accessing sexually explicit material on the internet, you can get a filter. Filters come built-in to the most popular Internet service providers and need only to be switched on to start screening out sex-related material. They can also be

purchased separately and installed. Most filters work by denying access to websites that contain certain key words, like sex. The problem with filters is that they are notoriously over-inclusive. A filter will largely block your son's ability to access pornography on the internet, but it will also prevent him from getting into some valuable sites as well.

Richardson and Schuster (2002) make the point that the children most likely to search for and view a pornographic site on the internet are boys between the ages of fifteen and seventeen (about one in four of whom are reported to do this in the USA). Significantly it is also this group that are most likely to use the web to learn about sex and other sensitive topics that they feel uncomfortable discussing with parents (about one in four of them do this, too). So if you block pornography, you will block their online learning about abstinence, safer sex, and many other health issues.

One way or another, many boys seem to access pornographic sites. Rather than trying to protect your son from material and ideas he is bound to come across, consider pouring your energy into helping make him a critical consumer of material on the internet. This means:

- Keeping an eye on his surfing (and TV watching, movie going, and music listening) and inviting him to discuss with you what it all means.
- Asking him how realistic he finds the depiction of women on a particular site.
- Telling him what you think and why. If you are opposed to these sites, explain why, and make an argument for his avoiding them if you feel he should. If you feel it is fine for him to go to them, you might want to make sure that he understands the difference between fantasy and reality.
- Explain to your son that because computers offer 24-hour access to pornography, pornography can seriously interfere with your life if you begin to use it often when you go onto the computer. Warn your son to be careful as sex online can easily become compulsive.

If you want to know whether he is following your advice, you can enter the history of your child's browser and find the names of the recent sites he has viewed (unless he has deleted them). Checking the browser history has a lot in common with reading a diary; both are seductive shortcuts around building a functional connection with your son, and both can render the privacy of the medium (one of its main assets for encouraging discovery) moot. If you decide to check the browser history it is suggested that you tell him when you first get the computer so that he has been duly warned. An alternative way to fulfill your curiosity about your child's online habits is to use the hard but direct way – ask him what he is doing.

4. Prohibition and banning pornographic material.

Biddulph (1997) maintains that responding to the issue of pornography with prohibition doesn't work. Boys will see these images in magazines being passed around among friends or on the Internet. What is needed is close enough monitoring by parents so that you are able to prevent really objectionable material circulating amongst boys, while at the same time not shaming the boys for being interested or curious.

It is too heavy-handed to ban everything but really offensive hard core pornography (Murray, 2003) but it is not unreasonable to discuss your personal moral decisions and opinions with your son.

5. Discussing pornography with your teenage son.

We suggest that at some stage you should have a conversation about pornography with your son. Keep the following points in mind when you do so:

- Tell him you know that he has probably seen pornography and that a fascination with the naked human body is normal and that it is normal to seek information about sex.
- Encourage him to think about the difference between pornography, erotica and artistic pictures of naked men and women. In the process make him aware that he needs to consciously set his own boundaries on these issues and learn to censor what he reads and looks at.
- Ask him how realistic he thinks those depictions of men, women, and sexuality are.
- Tell him what you think is left out or distorted (for example, that most women do not have breasts that size or that most men's penises are not that large).
- Discuss the problems that pornography can cause in a relationship. Locker (2003) reports that pornography can damage relationships in the following ways:
 - It can create jealousy and unrealistic expectations.
 - It may decrease desire for your partner.
 - It costs money that belongs to both of you.
 - It takes away from time that you would have spent with your partner.
 - It creates an atmosphere of secrecy and lies.
- Encourage your son to think about the messages the pictures send, why they are sold, what is portrayed and whether or not they are respectful of men and women. Fathers or mothers may well help their sons find better erotica to look at and read.

School rules pertaining to pornography:

While we understand that it is normal for teenage boys to seek information about sex and to have a curiosity about the naked human body, we also feel the need to set limits with regard to what is acceptable in the context of a school. As such the following limits have been set:

- The use of the school's computer network for sourcing, copying, distributing, emailing and/or storing sexually explicit material and/or naked images is prohibited.
- The possession, selling and/or distribution of sexually explicit material and naked images at school are prohibited.
- The public display of naked and/or sexually explicit images in Houses, common rooms, on the covers of books and files, on screensavers or as computer wall-paper is not permitted.
- Storing sexually explicit and/or images and video clips on a laptop computer which is brought to school is prohibited.

Consequences of contravening the school's rules:

In the first instance, a boy found (by a member of the academic staff or the IT support staff) to be contravening the school's rules on pornography should be referred to his House Director, who should discuss the matter with him. The principles outlined above in the section on "talking to your teenage son about pornography" should serve as a guideline for this discussion.

If the House Director feels that a boy has an abnormal preoccupation with pornography, he should inform the boy's parents and refer the boy to the Bishops Support Unit or the Chaplain.

If the boy is referred to the BSU, a thorough assessment should be made of the boy, his level of social functioning and emotional state. If necessary the boy should be referred for further assessment and treatment to a suitably qualified psychologist. This should be done in consultation with the boy and his parents.

Boys who are found to be distributing or selling sexually explicit material may be punished by their House Director or, in more serious cases or in the case of repeat offenders, referred to the Disciplinary Committee.

The school's educational responsibility:

While we believe that sex education and discussions about pornography are primarily the responsibility of parents, we do acknowledge our need to address these issues in our curriculum. As such the issue of pornography will be dealt with in Life Orientation and Divinity lessons as well as in Biology classes. This education should be consistent with the contents of this document.

Conclusion:

While it is normal for boys to be curious about sex, to seek out information about sex and to want to look at naked images, it is not normal or healthy to spend huge amounts of time accessing pornographic material, learning about sex exclusively from pornography, seeking status through pornography or using pornography as a substitute for relationships or to make oneself feel better.

We affirm that it is not legal or moral for teenage boys to access pornography but we do believe that it is an issue that needs to be spoken about with boys and debated in a non-judgmental, non-critical, shame-free environment.

By adopting this approach to dealing with pornography in our school, we believe that we will empower boys to make their own decisions about what is good for them as adults, give them the knowledge and skills they need to censor material for themselves and promote their healthy psychological and sexual development.

References:

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Richardson, J and Schuster, M. (2002). *Everything you ever wanted to know about Sex*. Three Rivers Press, New York.