

Sexual Imagery on the Internet

We want to help our kids develop healthy perspectives about sex, and not let the media be their only source of information. On the Internet, even innocent searches can lead to sexual imagery or pornographic content. So, it's important to talk early and often to make sure your kids get the messages you care most about communicating.

- **Figure out what you want your kid to know.**

Identify your own personal concerns: What are you most worried about with respect to sexual imagery on the Internet? Why? How might the Internet interfere with your goals for your child's healthy sexual development? What alternative messages do you want to make sure they receive?

It may be awkward, but it's important to talk to your kid about:

- your key concerns regarding his/her exposure to age-inappropriate sexual images & messages
- why you have these concerns
- what you hope for your son/daughter with respect to intimate relationships, now & for the future

At the same time, you can encourage your kids to view media messages critically. Point out that sex often gets everyone's attention, so in the media sex is often used to sell something. It is important that your children understand that scripted sex is not reality. Pornography is extreme and not representative of the vast landscape of human sexuality; plus it can convey an exploitive and degrading perspective.

- **Pay attention to your tone.**

It is important to remember that how you talk to your teen regarding this subject is just as important as what you discuss. Your tone and body language will communicate as much as your words! Think of two or three adjectives that describe how you hope you'll come across to your child when talking about sexuality. Then, keep those words in the front of your mind as you enter the conversation. Humiliating, shaming, or using scare tactics on your child regarding their sexual curiosity is both damaging and counterproductive. Your child's interest and exploration of sex and their own sexuality is both natural and normal. By making your son or daughter feel ashamed, you will lose the opportunity to help him or her navigate future challenges and develop his or her own values.

- **Take that first (difficult) step.**

A great way to start the conversation is by simply asking your child if any of their friends have had conversations with their parents about pornography or sexual imagery on the Internet. You can say, "I know it can be awkward to talk about at first, but there are some really important things I want you to know." If you are nervous, write down what you want to say or practice when no one is around. Remember that no matter how the first conversation goes, this isn't meant to be a one-time discussion; you can (and should!) revisit or continue the conversation later if you forgot to include something or want to reemphasize a particular point. You've already fought half the battle just by taking on the conversation. Just by starting a conversation, you have communicated to your child that this is on your mind and that you're clued-in, aware, and concerned.

If you or your teen comes across any material that sexually exploits minors, you do have a duty to report it. You can report it to your local authorities or contact the CyberTipline for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. You can contact the center 24 hours a day at 1-800-THE-LOST or report an incident online at www.cybertipline.com.