



The SMART Plan Guide for Parents

Helping Kids Who
Have Been Exposed
to Pornography





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Introduction

If you discover your child has already viewed pornography, *the way you respond can make a big difference*. It's worth the effort to help keep your kids safe online by planning for an occurrence that has become all too common.

You can be prepared with the SMART Plan!

What helps kids report porn exposure?

When I asked dozens of parents to "beta-test" my book [*Good Pictures Bad Pictures: Porn-Proofing Today's Young Kids*](#), they often reported finding out that *their kids had already viewed pornography* (but had never told their parents).

Many other parents have made this discovery as they began to open up the conversation. Here's a comment from a father who attended a class taught by therapist Forest Benedict, MA, LMFT, SATP-C:

"On Forest's recommendation, we bought the book *Good Pictures Bad Pictures*, read it with our kids, and learned that both our kids (our daughter at 9 and our son at 7), had both already viewed pornographic images. This allowed us to have a discussion we would not have even thought to have! Thank you!"

How you find out makes a difference

There are two different discovery scenarios which evoke strong but different emotions from parents:

1. You find out your child has been viewing porn in secret, or
2. Your child accidentally views pornography and tells you (either voluntarily or when you ask or begin talking to them about it).

Be SMART!

How you respond when you find out your child has viewed pornography makes a difference! Be SMART!

- Stay calm
- Make a plan
- Assist your kids to sort out confusing feelings
- Regularly check in with your kids
- Train your entire family



Each of these SMART steps holds essential keys to porn-proofing your child, and I will **cover each in depth**. But first I'd like to share with you a friend's discovery story that is becoming quite common.

Caught off guard

One morning, my friend Tricia called me on the phone. She was sobbing and could hardly talk. All I could understand was that she needed me to come now. I rushed over and knocked on the door, then rang the doorbell. No answer. Finally, I let myself into her home and followed the sobbing sounds into her master bathroom.

There I found my friend beyond upset. I hugged her and, when she finally calmed down enough to talk, she told me **she had found pornography links on her child's iPad**. Thankfully, she was SMART. She calmed down, got educated and made a plan with her husband to assist their kids and train the entire family to reject pornography.

Parenting has always been the hardest job in the world, but then internet porn came along and made it even harder! I hope to **make your job easier** by offering clarity and solutions for helping a child who has been exposed to or even developed a habit of viewing pornography.

SMART Parents Stay Calm

The SMART Plan: 5 Tips for Parents

- **Stay calm**
- **M**ake a plan
- **A**ssist your kids to sort out confusing feelings
- **R**egularly check in with your kids
- **T**rain your entire family

STAY CALM

You've just found internet searches for porn on a mobile device your child uses. Or maybe on the family computer. Or maybe your child is that rare bird who tells you soon after an unwanted exposure happens.

Of course, you feel anything but calm. Especially if you see some of the graphic and illicit images they've just been exposed to. (Or you find out their cousin was the one who exposed them.) Before you react, STOP and take several deep breaths. Keep your cool (until you can freak out in private).

Two Tips for Keeping Your Cool

After discovering a child's exposure to porn, try to:

1. Delay reacting
2. Take time to deal with your own emotions first

Delay Reacting

It's understandable that parents are devastated when they find their child has been looking at pornography. Even if the child came across it accidentally (as a victim of the predatory porn industry), you may feel guilty because you couldn't protect them. Or angry. Or betrayed. Or all of the above.



Again, try to remain calm. If your kids reveal a past exposure to pornography, this is a good opportunity to find how much they've seen, read, or listened to. Shaming them will only fuel secrecy and increase the power of porn over them. Freaking out will make them feel unsafe.

If you need to cry or punch your pillow, do it in private. Or find some beautiful, sandy beach and meditate. Whatever it takes.

Why? To help your kids feel safe. Jeffrey J. Ford, MS, LMFT and author of the online article [Creating a Safe Place to Talk about Dangerous Things](#), advises:

*"Showing your son or daughter that what they share with you isn't going to **send you over the emotional edge** creates a lot of safety and encourages them to share more."*

Additionally, Ford cautions parents to be careful how they label people with pornography addictions, and shares this story he heard from a teenager:

"Whenever the subject of pornography comes up, my parents talk about how sick and wrong people are who look at it! Well, I look at it, so they will not love me if I tell them."



Ford explains that scolding a child and forbidding them to ever look at it again may be counterproductive. If kids are in a habit of viewing pornography, just stopping may not be possible. One young man that Ford worked with said,

"I had already tried to stop and I couldn't do it. How do they expect me to just turn it off? So I just stopped talking about it with them, because I didn't want to disappoint them anymore."

This is the danger you run by reacting with emotion and imposing threats. You may cause your child to work harder at hiding his or her problem.

Deal with Your Own Emotions Before You Deal with Your Child

Take the time you need to sort out your feelings. If you've discovered porn on a device your child uses, there's no reason you have to confront your child immediately.

Just breathe.

Talk to your spouse or a close family member or friend. Or get in your car and talk to yourself! Many of us process our feelings better when we can hear ourselves talk.

If a child tells you about a porn exposure, **thank them and praise them** for coming and telling you. Many children find this very difficult and confusing—it may be a big deal for them to confide in you.

If you walk in on a child viewing porn on a computer or device, here's a possible response (ideally said with a calm tone of voice...OK, I know I'm asking a lot here!):



"I see what you're doing. Please turn it off (and give me the device). I need some time to think about this. I want you to know that I love you, and we are going to work through this together."

Try to remember two facts:

- The *porn* is the enemy. You can hate the porn.
- You love your child. You and your child are on the **same team**.

Next SMART Step: Make a Plan

Once you've processed the shock and calmed yourself, you'll be ready for the next SMART task: **Make a Plan**. Every successful battle requires a plan.

The porn industry is a foe that should not be underestimated.

With a plan, you'll be able to better listen and gather crucial information from your child, as well as persuade them that their future happiness lies in their ability to reject pornography of all kinds. **No child deserves to face the porn industry alone!**

Here's a note I recently received from a parent who used *Good Pictures Bad Pictures*:

"I know it is important to teach our children when they are young. We are a family who... monitors Internet access very carefully. I thought we were safe, but last



year we discovered that some pornography had slipped by into our home. Seeing it made me want to throw up and cry at the same time.

"I am so thankful for your book so that I can prepare my younger children for if they are ever placed in that kind of situation. Before our experience I didn't want to bring it up with my kids and I wouldn't have known what to say anyway. Just 'pornography's bad, don't look at it.' Because of your book, we had a wonderful discussion. THANK YOU!"

SMART Parents Make a Plan

The SMART Plan

- Stay calm
- **Make a plan**
- Assist your child to sort out their feelings
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MAKE A PLAN

Before you talk with your child about their exposure to pornography, make a plan about what you want to accomplish. What are your ultimate goals? Some of them might be:

- To continue building a **close relationship** with your child.
- To provide a **safe environment** for them to tell you what they saw and ask questions.
- To come up with some **mutual solutions** for keeping your child safe.

Jeffrey J. Ford, a Marriage and Family Licensed Therapist who specializes in pornography addiction, explain that "much of the time initial disclosure begins the process of getting the whole story, and is rarely the whole story!" I know of one young man who initially said he had looked at porn only five times. His mom was relieved, but later found out that he had been viewing porn regularly for years.

Consider ways to get your child to open up and answer the following questions.

- How much pornography have they seen?
- How often have they viewed it?
- How did they find it? Did someone else show it to them?
- Which devices have they used to view it?
- What types of pornography have they viewed?
- Did they masturbate when they were viewing it? (This brings it to a higher level of involvement. Masturbating to pornography builds and solidifies a neurological pathway in the brain.)

Realize, you may not get all of these questions answered in one session. And you probably shouldn't even try. Be patient and you'll ultimately end up getting more information as your child feels safe trusting you with their answers.



One Father's Story

The authors of *So Sexy So Soon; The New Sexualized Childhood and What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids*, Diane E. Levin, Ph.D., and Jean Kilbourne, Ed.D., describe a situation where an eight and a half year old boy is exposed to pornography and tells his dad about it.



The boy instinctively knows he should not have seen what he saw and, although he has a good relationship with his dad who has answered questions about sex since the boy was five, he worries that his dad will be mad at him.

The dad asks him what he saw and then explains that, "[S]ome grown-ups like to look at pictures of bodies with no clothes and sex, but it's not something...mom or I like to do, and it's not something for children to see, and I don't think grown-ups should have things like that on the Internet that children can find."

In this way, the dad is expressing his values that he believes pornography is wrong. The dad then asks what his son could have done when his friend offered to show him the "sexy pictures."

This is the kind of "give and take" conversations that Levin and Kilbourne recommend. *Not jumping in and imposing limits or punishments but forming a mutual plan with the child.*

Punishment or Opportunity?

In this story, the parents of the perpetrator friend find out that he's been viewing pornography and react by punishing him and taking away all his "screen time" for a month. The authors explain:

"By focusing only on setting limits and giving punishments, [his friend's] parents miss a crucial opportunity to help [their son] deal with the pornography he saw and to influence the lessons he is learning. Their response also teaches [their son] that it's not safe to talk to his parents about sexual issues."

It may be that that in the long run it's more helpful to focus on the reasons your child was looking at pornography, instead of doling out a punishment.

As you are planning your response to your child's porn exposure, think about:

- The information you want to discover
- How you are going to deal with the source of the pornography exposure (talk to the perpetrator's parents, advise the school, tighten filters etc.)
- How you are going to involve your child in mutual solutions ("How can we help you to protect yourself from seeing these harmful and upsetting pictures?")

In the next section, we'll talk about how you can **assist your child to sort out their confusing feelings** about the pornography they have seen. It's not only upsetting, but it's very confusing for kids when they view the kind of hard-core pornography that is so available on the internet. They need their parents' help to figure it out.



Porn is Tricky! SMART Parents Assist Kids to Understand Feelings

The SMART Plan

- Stay calm
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ASSIST YOUR CHILD TO SORT OUT CONFUSING FEELINGS

Porn is very confusing to kids! Think about this scenario: **You teach your child to be kind to others**, not hit, share their toys and treat their friends and siblings with respect. Then they go online and **view adults** engaged in sex, where the woman (usually) is **beaten, gagged, and disrespected** in the most disgusting ways.

Wouldn't that be **confusing**?

Porn is Tricky!

Pornography is tricky because it evokes two conflicting feelings at the same time. Kids may feel

1. a **pleasurable physical response** at the same time they feel
2. repulsed, horrified and **upset emotionally**.

NOTE: According to Mark B. Kastleman, author of *The Drug of the New Millennium*, combining sex with violence produces a bigger rush of dopamine in the brain, which only adds to the addictive nature of porn. That's why pornography has become so violent.



Eventually, if a child is left to themselves to figure it all out, they may be enticed to seek out even more porn, despite and maybe even because of its shocking nature. In order to keep kids safe online, we need to help them understand their feelings.

3 Steps to Helping Kids Sort Out Their Feelings

Jeffrey J. Ford, a licensed marriage and family therapist, [produced a video](#) in which he discusses three steps you can take to help your child after he or she has seen pornography.

1. **Ask: How did your body feel?** Ford advises parents to recognize that pornography arouses sexual feelings, which *physically* feel good. Acknowledging that sexual arousal feels good will avoid shaming your child about having normal sexual feelings.
2. **Ask: How did you feel emotionally?** Kids often say they feel sick to their stomach or "yukky" after seeing pornography. This is confusing. How can my body feel good but my emotions feel so bad at the same time? You can explain to them that pornography is tricky because it creates two different feelings at the same time.



3. Explain that there is an appropriate time to experience sexual feelings. Teach them that both their bodies and their emotions can feel good when they grow up and find someone they love and trust. Sexual feelings are good and normal and designed to bring two people together and keep them together in a committed and loving relationship like marriage.

Helping kids **sort out and understand their feelings** about the explicit images they've seen is **critical in empowering them to reject pornography**.

Depending on the type of pornography your child has seen, you may also want to reaffirm that real sex is **not about hurting another person**, but it's about showing kindness and affection to someone they love and are committed to.

SMART Parents Regularly Check-In with Kids about Internet Safety

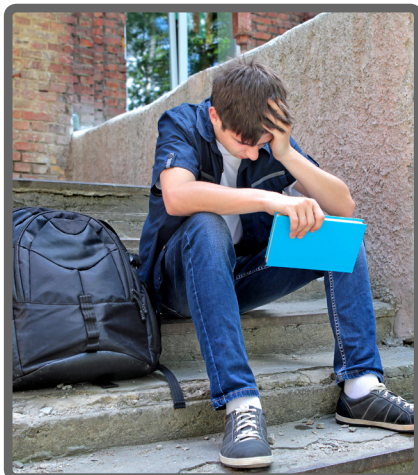
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REGULARLY CHECK-IN WITH YOUR KIDS

Wouldn't it be awesome if you could have ONE talk about the harmful effects of porn and be done with it? But that could actually make things worse.

- **Kids need additional age-appropriate information** about online safety as they mature and find themselves in new and different social and media situations.
- **Kids need continual encouragement to reject porn** when their peers may be making other choices.
- **Kids need to be reminded that you are open to talking with them** about the online and social media challenges they face.
- **Kids may feel confused and overwhelmed by a one-time, never-mentioned again porn talk.** Confused kids may seek out answers from their peers or search online if they feel you're not willing to answer their questions as they come up. Too little info can be a dangerous thing as illustrated in the following story.



The Dangers of a One and Only Porn Talk

Jeffrey J. Ford, MS, LMFT and author of the online article [Creating a Safe Place to Talk About Dangerous Things](#), encourages parents not to overwhelm kids with one big porn or sex talk, but to make these conversations an ongoing part of your parenting. He shared this telling experience to show the danger of the one and only talk:

One young man shared that his father took him on a long walk when he was twelve years old and that when the walk ended he never heard anything about sex or pornography again. He told me "I was in shock! My dad talked for 2 hours about things I had never heard of before."

The result was that the boy took all of the confusing information his father gave him and did two things:

- 1. He asked his friends about it. He shared that this confused him more than before because it was clear that many of his friends were as ignorant as he was.*
- 2. He went to the internet and looked things up.*

This boy's [internet] inquiry began innocently enough, but that day it ended in an exposure to pornography that created a hunger that developed into a full-fledged addiction.

Four Tips to Encourage Regular Conversations

No one can learn everything all at once, so here are four things you can do to incrementally talk to kids about pornography and keep the conversation going:

- 1. Be open.** Communicate the message that **you are open to answer any questions** your kids may have about pornography and that **you want them to ask you**.
- 2. Make yourself the expert in your kids' eyes on the topics of sex and the dangers of pornography.** Explain to your kids that **the internet is not a safe place to ask questions about sex**. If you've read [Good Pictures Bad Pictures](#) with them, they'll understand how pornography can trap them into an addiction.
- 3. Find natural ways to check-in** on a regular basis. Maybe you could begin by mentioning something *you* saw ("Today I was watching a show/video and I turned it off because...") and then ask if they have been recently exposed to anything inappropriate or pornographic. The more you talk, the easier it will become. For ideas, download the **Big 5 Toolkit for Talking to Kids About Pornography** from the Protect Young Minds [Resources](#) page.
- 4. Plan regular Family Media Safety Nights** to discuss various topics related to pornography, addiction and internet safety. (Read the story below to see why these can be so important!) **Make them short and serve their favorite treats!**



An Eye-Opening Talk with Teens

I once visited a friend who asked me to share a presentation with her family which I had just given at a national summit. Her two teenage boys were intelligent, open and honest and we had a very **eye-opening** conversation about the world they live in and how they were coping.

My point is this: Because we set up a **specific time to talk about the dangers of pornography**, these boys candidly shared experiences and observations that their parents might never have heard otherwise.

Kids need constant encouragement and additional information to help defend themselves against an extremely predatory porn industry. What could you do to make discussing media choices and internet safety a regular and empowering part of your parenting?



TRAIN YOUR ENTIRE FAMILY

The SMART Plan

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TRAIN YOUR FAMILY

Rejecting pornography is easier when the entire family gets involved and committed to online safety. One of my favorite illustrations from [Good Pictures Bad Pictures: Porn-Proofing Today's Young Kids](#) shows a family cheering and rooting to help their kids defend themselves against pornography. The final step in the SMART Plan to deal with exposure to pornography involves TRAINING the entire family to reject pornography. Here are three tips to help keep your family safe online.

Teach Healthy Responses for Negative Emotions

Curiosity may lead a child to look for porn, but many experts believe that an addiction is created when kids use porn to distract themselves from their negative emotions, such as when they're BLAST:

- Bored
- Lonely
- Angry
- Stressed/Sad
- Tired

Try this conversation starter when you've got your kids in the car or they're busy doing something like coloring or playing with Legos: **"What can you do to feel better when you are bored (lonely, angry, stressed, sad or tired)?"**

An easy way to help kids deal with difficult emotions is to create **Emotional Care Tags**. This awesome activity empowers kids to respond to negative emotions in helpful and healthy ways. Find an explainer video, template and more great info in this Protect Young Minds post: [Feelings 101: A Simple Exercise to Build Emotional Wellness in Kids](#).



Explaining that *everyone* has these negative feelings and that they are *normal* helps kids to accept and "sit with" their emotions instead of trying to snuff them out with an addictive substance or behavior.

As you listen without judgment, you can help your child effectively process their feelings. I believe that rates of addiction of all kinds would plummet if everyone learned to deal with their negative feelings in healthy ways.

Create a Family Media Mission Statement

It makes a big difference if your family agrees on the types of media you support and want to consume. Mindless media consumption leads to viewing whatever is on or seems popular. Take a stand! Teach your kids by example to deliberately choose media that will help them and not hurt them.



Develop Family Media Standards

This is where you talk about appropriate and inappropriate content. Why define your standards? Kids may initially be distressed or repulsed by pornography, but without specific reasons to avoid it, that initial distress can quickly be overcome by curiosity and peer pressure.

If you give your kids clear reasons why they should avoid viewing pornography, you're helping them develop their "thinking brain." That's the pre-frontal cortex that is still developing (and not fully developed until the early 20's!). A child whose parents have clearly and specifically communicated how porn can be harmful has a stronger defense against the allure of sexual images.

In the end, this is the best and probably only way to keep kids safe online. Here are a few potential examples to get your started:

- **"Our family does not watch or vote for media that objectifies women or men.** People are more than their bodies and deserve to be treated with respect. Repeated viewing of media that exploits people for their bodies can lead us to see people as objects instead of human beings with feelings."
- **"Our family does not watch or vote for media that is sexually arousing.** Sexual arousal needs to be controlled and used for developing a loving, committed relationship like marriage"
- **"Our family does not watch or vote for media that glorifies violence.** Watching extreme and repeated violence can desensitize us to the pain people feel when they get hurt and decrease our ability to empathize with others."
- **"Our family talks about the media we see.** We decode the underlying messages and decide if we want to accept them or not. We ask ourselves, Is the hero a good person who conquers evil in the end? What can we learn from the mistakes the hero and other characters make?"



In the end, with the wide availability of internet access, our kids are going to be the ones who make critical decisions about what they will and will not watch. That's why it's so important to help them install an *internal* filter in their own brain. With your direction and guidance, they will be equipped to make smart choices to protect their brains from pornography.

Download *Our Family Media Standards* from our [Resources](#) page on Protect Young Minds.

Digital Protection

I often get asked which filters I recommend. First, let me say that I believe that using filters (both for Wi-Fi and loaded onto specific devices) shows children that their parents are sincere about protecting them from digital dangers. I believe in using parental controls for the same reason. Actions speak louder than words and all that.



Having said that, I also believe that filters are more effective when kids are on board with using them. In other words, "Hey kids we're installing this filter to protect our entire family, including us parents." If kids see filters as a fence to jump over, they get very creative and tech savvy in order to subvert them!

Filters are more effective for younger children because they simply block content. However, accountability software like Bark and Covenant Eyes which produce reports detailing the sites family members have visited are better for mentoring teens.

Note: Today's filters can only "filter" a small part of the internet. More and more of our internet access is through apps and filters can't filter the content within an app. Moreover, once inside the app, kids can use in-app browsers to go wherever they want on the internet.

Covenant Eyes and others are developing filters that recognize what actually shows on the screen. They use AI (artificial intelligence) technology to learn what pornography looks like and then either blur it out, block it or send a report to a parent or accountability partner.

Conclusion

They say it takes a village, but I say it takes a SMART plan to help kids defend themselves against pornography. Folded into your day-to-day parenting, these steps will become just a normal part of the conversation. And think of the rewards of helping your kids safely navigate the internet!

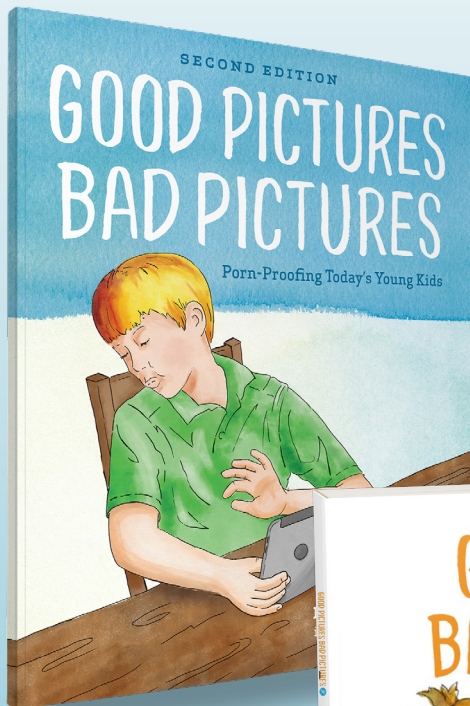
Until we get more social awareness and better regulation of the internet, kids will continue being exposed and pulled into porn. SMART parents will proactively and compassionately deal with a child's exposure and/or use of pornography by calmly following a SMART plan.

Whether your child has been already exposed to pornography or not, it's helpful for them to understand how pornography affects their brain and can become a real addiction. For more help, check out our best-selling [*Good Pictures Bad Pictures*](#) books.

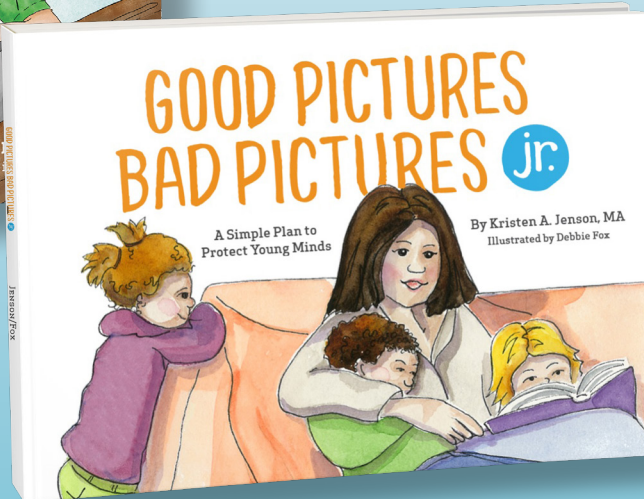


protecting our most vulnerable

POWERFUL TOOLS TO RAISE
PORN-PROOF KIDS



#1
**BEST
SELLERS**



As a psychologist and a mother of four, I can't recommend this book highly enough.

Pornography is a fast-track to depression, anxiety, and unhealthy relationships between males and females. Parents need to understand that their kids are being exposed to porn at a younger age than they realize...your kids will rarely tell you what they saw. We need to GET AHEAD OF THE CURVE by reading this book to them and discussing what they need to do if they stumble across porn.

MARY, AMAZON REVIEW
OF GOOD PICTURES BAD
PICTURES: PORN-PROOFING
TODAY'S YOUNG KIDS

Find out more at **protect
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