



No More Secrets: Talking With Children And Young Adults About **PORNOGRAPHY**

Josh,¹ a popular 15-year-old high school sophomore, has a 3.87 GPA, and is kind, gentle, and helpful. He is respectful to his parents and a natural leader in school and at home with his two younger siblings. Josh is also addicted to Internet pornography. He views sexually explicit images daily, masturbates four to six times a day, and was first exposed to pornography by a friend's older brother at the age of 9.

Although fictional, this story represents a typical pattern experienced by people who have been caught in the web of Internet pornography. This scenario, which is becoming more common around the world,² also raises some valid and poignant questions. How should educators react when pornography has

been accessed on the school's computers? What should happen when a teacher learns that one or more students are struggling with the desire to view pornography and are earnestly praying that God will remove that burden from their lives? How do we balance compassion for fellow humans who struggle with sin while still applying biblical references such as 2 Corinthians 12:21 and Galatians 5:19³ in a modern setting? The Bible warns of strong consequences for those who do not repent from "impurity" and "sexual sins" and condemns sexual "immorality" and "impurity." Pornography, although not mentioned specifically in the Bible, isn't of much use to God—but a pure heart is! It is a recurring theme throughout the Scriptures. David's plea "Create in me a clean heart, O God" [Psalm 51:10, NIV]; Jesus'

blessing upon the "pure in heart" [Matthew 5:8, NIV]; and Paul's encouragement to think about "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable" [Philippians 4:8, NIV] give us an indication of what is important to God, and what we must compassionately cultivate and protect in the lives of our students and school personnel.

Patterns, Risk Factors, and Consequences

Whenever this topic is discussed, inevitably the question arises, "What is pornography, anyway?" For this article, *pornography* will be defined as sexually explicit text, pictures, videos,

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Box 1. Ensuring Student Safety Online

and audio materials designed, produced, and distributed for the purpose of sexual enticement, excitement, and gratification.⁴

Not all people who use the Internet view pornography, and not all people who view pornography are addicted, but the number of people who are addicted is increasing.⁵ Many individuals have private access to the Internet and can access pornography without fear of being discovered or recognized by others.⁶ Unfettered access is becoming more prevalent since so many devices connect to the Internet, including school-provided iPads, cell phones with “smart” technology, gaming consoles, tablets, iPods, laptops, and desktop computers. [See Box 1.]

Every school should install software that prevents access to objectionable Websites using the school’s Internet connection⁷ and enables administrators to track the Internet browser history of everyone accessing the school’s computers. However, this will limit access on only a limited number of the above-mentioned devices, since some of them can create their own wireless Internet connection or even enable other devices to connect to the Internet.

Camera-equipped and Internet-enabled devices are capable of creating pornography (including child pornography) and through texting, e-mail attachments, and various forms of social media, the user can disseminate these images to others, making the “manufacture” and “distribution” of pornography easier, faster, and much more widespread. One aspect of creating pornography is commonly referred to as “sexting”—the sending and receiving of photos, images, videos, text messages, and e-mails between mobile devices. In the United States, when minors take pictures of themselves in sexually explicit poses and then text those pictures to their friends or post them on the Internet, they can be held liable for both the manufacture and distribution of child pornography. The charges are just as serious if the photos, images, videos, e-mails, or text messages are shared between a minor and an adult. If any of these pictures, images, or videos are taken on school property, or with school-owned devices, this could open the school to liability and certainly to parent and constituent distress.⁸

Many adolescents, particularly males, use

Pornography can be accessed in a variety of ways: online, movies, print (books and magazines), videos/DVDs, etc. The most prevalent way of viewing pornography in 2016 is on a mobile device via the Internet, where it can be streamed, downloaded, and saved to a computer or burned to a CD or DVD.* When children and young adults access pornography online, they will likely be exposed to pedophiles, sexual predators, and others intent on doing harm. Predators also target vulnerable populations through social-media forums, several of which have been linked to crimes against children and young adults.

• **Crosswalk’s Nine Most Dangerous Apps for Kids** provides a list of popular but risky apps about which parents and teachers should be aware: <http://www.crosswalk.com/family/parenting/kids/9-most-dangerous-apps-for-kids.html>.

• **Teaching Digital Citizenship** shares tips for talking with children and young adults about what is appropriate to share online, sexting, how not to be a victim, how to identify an online predator, and much more: <http://www.netsmartz.org/Parents>. A similar link is available for educators: <http://www.netsmartz.org>.

* “Internet Pornography by the Numbers: A Significant Threat to Society”: <http://www.webroot.com/us/en/home/resources/tips/digital-family-life/internet-pornography-by-the-numbers>.

Box 2. Tips for Preventing Online Victimization[†]

• **Be Aware!** Know that ALL children are at risk for being a victim of an online predator or someone intent on doing harm. Tell children and young adults to seek help if someone in an online communication makes them feel uncomfortable or afraid. Be aware of the people in your child’s life (coaches, pastors, teachers, or Pathfinder leaders and other volunteers).

• **Know the symptoms.** Watch for signs of withdrawal or isolation from others; check for inappropriate materials—photos on the computer, unfamiliar telephone numbers, strange texts, etc.; notice any gifts, money, or mail from unfamiliar sources being sent to your child.

• **Talk about safe online behavior.** Initiate conversations with children and young adults about their online behavior. Suggested questions: Who do you communicate with online? What could happen if you were to meet these individuals in real life? Has anyone offered you gifts? What type of information do you share online?

• **Know what to do next.** Save the evidence (e-mails or instant message conversations), contact local law enforcement and file a report, and make a report (in the United States) to the CyberTipline[®] at www.cybertipline.com or 1-800-THE-LOST[®].

† Adapted from <http://www.netsmartz.org/ChildrenAsVictims>.

pornographic Internet material,⁹ although research suggests that females comprise about 40 percent of the total consumers.¹⁰ Pornography can be accessed from any device with Internet access, and by anyone old enough to click Websites and read, view photos, images, or movies. According to the Internet Filter Review, which provides data about users' Internet searches, the average age of a child's first exposure to pornography is 11, and nearly 50 percent of Internet users have accessed pornography.¹¹ Conversations with young people about the dangers of pornography should, therefore, begin around age 8, and certainly by age 11. [See Box 2.]

Explanations about the dangers of pornography should be given in a clear and comprehensible manner. We need to be diligent about holding these discussions with our students and children. Pornography does not inform users about healthy sex and sexuality. Instead, it portrays sex in an unrealistic manner, and makes uncommon, and often bizarre, sexual acts seem commonplace. Many survivors of sex trafficking report that pornography viewing by perpetrators and victims—typically under “duress, coercion, blackmail, or enticement”¹²—is commonplace in performing sex acts.

Pornography is a business endeavor designed to make money, which also involves significant criminal activity, as demonstrated by its affiliation with organized crime, gang activity, and the sex-trafficking trade.¹³ It is illegal for children to view pornography,¹⁴ and it is unhealthy for their developing sexuality. These reasons, combined with biblical mandates regarding lust and immorality, make pornography something that should be avoided.

Prevention

Children ages 11 to 17 are among the fastest-growing group of consumers of Internet pornography.¹⁵ A correlation has also been found between “right-wing authoritarian tendencies” and developing and maintaining a cybersex addiction by both Christian and non-Christian males.¹⁶ Abell¹⁷ and his colleagues found that Christians who self-reported higher levels of religiosity experienced more problems with Internet pornography. This is partly due to the perception that viewing pornography is not as bad a sin as actually having sex. Viewing pornography, especially for conservative Christian youth, is considered the lesser of two evils, which allows them to

preserve some semblance of sexual purity.

Being raised in an authoritarian family has also been shown to increase the risk of Internet pornography addiction.¹⁸ Socially isolated people who lack close friends with whom they can confide their weakness toward pornography¹⁹ are also vulnerable. Christians are often expected to embrace a higher moral standard than others in their social circles, which deepens the level of secrecy and shame surrounding their addiction.²⁰

For these reasons, it is important to talk to school-age children about pornography in appropriate ways. Failing to explain why pornography is detrimental opens the door to alternative avenues of information about sexuality. Educators and parents must work together to communicate with students about the seriousness of this problem.

Minors are not capable of cognitively processing sexually explicit material, and have difficulty differentiating between sexual fantasy and reality. Without wholesome gender models and appropriate sex education, children and even young adults are unable to distinguish between what is appropriate in normal, healthy sexual behavior and what is inappropriate—unrealistic expectations, exaggerated body parts, overstated performance, violence, assault, exploitation, etc.—and may assume that what they see is a normal part of a relationship. Viewing pornography before their sexual identity is fully formed makes young people more likely to en-

gage in sexual behaviors at inappropriate times and places (such as at school, in public places), or before they are mature enough.

It is therefore important to talk to our students, as early as 8 years old and certainly by 11, about the dangers of pornography. One way to do this is to warn them that viewing pornography is not only illegal, but also ill-advised and harmful. We are not silent about discussing other dangers with our children (talking to strangers, running with scissors, playing football, driving too fast, and so on), but for some reason many of us are silent when it comes to pornography. When someone views pornography, even accidentally by clicking a pop-up advertisement, this produces intrigue, excitement, a sense of danger, and of course, sexual arousal. Without knowing why pornography is harmful, it would be difficult for anyone to resist the temptation, especially students whose impulse control is not fully formed.

Another practical way to discuss pornography with school-age children is to couple it with other sexual and health topics, and include parents in the decision to do this. In order for students to develop positive and fulfilling relationships, they must be able to engage in straightforward discussions about the dangers of pornography and better evaluate how it affects their lives.²¹ It is imperative that teachers and education personnel gain knowledge of and comfort with discussing



the experiences of a person addicted to pornography so as to better prepare themselves to offer suggestions.²² It is also vital to work together with parents so that a unified message can be shared. More ideas about how to discuss this are provided in the “Personal and Institutional Action” section below.

Christians and Pornography

Because Internet pornography addiction is a growing problem among Christians, it must be dealt with in church schools.²³ Christians appear to have some specific vulnerabilities in the area of Internet pornography addiction, in contrast to other people.²⁴ There is typically an inverse relationship between addictions and Christianity, which seems to be conspicuously absent in regard to Internet pornography addiction.²⁵ Christian families are typically less educated about healthy and unhealthy sexuality and boundaries.²⁶ Let’s face it—if anyone wants to learn how to do anything these days, Google or Bing is the place to go: changing the oil in your car, riding a wave board, or finding the nearest grocery store. If parents do not speak to their children about sex, pornography, and masturbation, they may learn about it from their friends or the Internet.²⁷ If we as parents and teachers fail to talk to young people about pornography and healthy sexuality, we are inviting them to Google how to have sex, or to find the definitions of the various sexual terms that they are hearing at school—even at an Adventist school. Poised to “answer” these questions are hundreds of thousands of pornographic Websites accessible from hand-held, personal, Internet-ready devices.

The strict prohibitive rules with which some Christian parents raise their children can foster shame and guilt surrounding sexual thoughts and feelings, which serves to lay the groundwork for sexual addictions²⁸ unless parents and teachers also share the rationale for abstinence. Research has found a disconnect between religious convictions and sexual practices, with some Christians strictly adhering to certain religious doctrines but at the same time spending 20 or more hours per week accessing Internet pornography.²⁹

Personal and Institutional Action

Based on years of experience counseling individuals with pornography addiction,

teaching a graduate-level addiction therapy class, and years researching addictions, addictive behaviors, and people’s reactions to addictions, I have developed some helpful tips for teachers to use when planning a conversation with students about his or her use of pornography. These can be modified and shared with parents.

- **Be Proactive.** Install monitoring software with Internet access on all electronic devices

School personnel, as well as students, should be held accountable for their online behavior. Children and young adults on school campuses must be protected from adult users of pornography—teachers, administrators, other school personnel, and even parents or volunteers who may attempt to use school computers to access pornographic Websites, view (stream), or download pornographic images, movies, or print. All schools should implement acceptable-use agreements that protect not only students who use school technology resources, but also school personnel. This includes not only having all users sign a contract regarding how they will use school computers and Internet resources, but also installing blocking programs on teachers’ computers—those assigned by the school as well as personal computers brought into the building.

Employee Handbook Policies

Every school must have policies in place to address how to deal with a faculty member, school staff member, parent, or volunteer who accesses pornography, is in possession of pornographic material, or engages in activities that involve the use of pornography—taking photos, distributing images through text messages and e-mail, engaging in pornographic acts on school property, or using school equipment. These policies should include:

- Statements of acceptable practices (acceptable-use policies) that reflect the school’s mission and the commitment to protecting children and young adults within the school community.
- Lists of unacceptable practices such as accessing pornography, possessing pornographic materials on school property, engaging in pornographic acts with minors, creating child pornography, and victimizing a child (pedophiles and sexual predators).
- A statement that background checks will be conducted and updated regularly for all employees.
- A warning that crimes against children will result in immediate termination and reporting of the incident to local law enforcement.
- Any additional means by which the school may choose to work with the individual: requiring counseling, monitoring computer usage, limiting or denying access to computers, or immediate suspension.
- Required training and workshops on how to recognize and prevent inappropriate behavior, both in students and school personnel. See “Making a Difference—Preventing and Dealing With Child Abuse” by Arthur F. Blinci: <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae201375040410.pdf>.

** Compiled from a variety of sources.

(home devices as well as school-owned). This requires users to obtain the school administrator’s (or parent’s) permission to access the Internet, restricts the use of objectionable search terms, and determines what kinds of sites will be accessible. Some of the more common software includes SpectorSoft, WebWatcher, Tattletale, and Net Nanny. For more information about Internet safety

education, refer to the recent JOURNAL article by Annette Melgosa and Rudy Scott, which can be accessed at <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae201375032606.pdf>.

• **Stay Calm.** Human beings are naturally curious. Allow space in your school or classroom or home for open conversations about pornography and its dangers. Losing control (ranting and raving, condemning and shaming the child) over a subject such as this can be damaging because it increases shame and secrecy, two essential ingredients to developing and strengthening an addiction. The Book of Proverbs admonishes us to remain calm: “Fools give full vent to their rage, but the wise bring calm in the end” (Proverbs 29:11, NIV). When students approach you with curiosity, prayerfully seek to answer them with calm composure.

• **Interest in Sex Is Normal.** Although pornography is dangerous to the individual and especially to minors, sexual urges are normal, and just because someone views pornography doesn't necessarily mean he or she is a pervert, is dangerous around other children, will commit adultery or have premarital sex, or should be banished from all social contact. Sometimes persons viewing pornography just need someone to whom they can confide, and someone to hold them accountable to stop a behavior they likely want to stop as well. Sometimes they just need someone to trust, and who trusts them. We are reminded in Proverbs 11:13 that trustworthiness is to be cultivated as we relate with those who share their struggles with us in confidence.

• **Be Patient.** Applying the lesson of the parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18, if we want others to be patient with us when we make mistakes, we need to be patient with others. Those who have ever tried to stop doing something habitual, compulsive, or an addiction will know how hard this can be. This is no different for children, who may have an even more difficult time stopping a bad habit because of the immature impulse control center of their brains. Stopping an addiction is always a process, never a single event. Although total abstinence may be the goal, it's likely the person may regress into old patterns of behavior. Be patient, check in, communicate, and hold the person accountable without using shame and guilt. (See Box 3.)

• **Listen, Don't Judge.** The Bible ad-

monishes Christians not to judge others, and Luke 6:37 seems particularly relevant to how those who stumble should be treated: “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven” (NIV).

Young people who compulsively consume pornography already know what others think of them. They judge themselves far more harshly than others ever could, so it's best to just listen. Counseling professionals say that a supportive, listening ear goes farther to helping someone overcome an obstacle than controlling, overbearing, and judgmental attacks on their character. The school should create a safe, nonjudgmental environment in which students are encouraged to speak openly about what bothers them. Usually, people have more desire to change when they feel that others understand them and will support them during the process.

• **Know When/Where to Refer.** Leaders in the community and in the church should be familiar with professionals who can help individuals facing sexual and other issues. Ideally, school leaders would have a list of trusted professional counselors in the community to share with students and their parents as decisions are made about future treatment.

Conclusion

As with many topics in today's culture, when children want to know something, they go to the Internet. The Internet is largely unregulated and is not always a friendly or helpful place. Adults need to create safe places where children and young adults can get the help they need to understand what they see on the Internet. If they're coming to talk to you about pornography or even if they have been caught looking at pornography, they are likely already full of shame and guilt.

Resources

In addition to the ideas listed within the article, below is a list of resources that will help educators learn how to talk about Internet pornography addiction.

Books

- Maltz, Wendy and Larry Maltz. *The Porn Trap*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008.
- Struthers, William. *Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2009.
- Paul, Pamela. *Pornified: How Pornography Is Transforming Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families*. New York: Times Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2005.

World Wide Web

- *Focus on the Family Advice for Parents of Teen Porn Addicts*: http://www.focusonthefamily.com/parenting/sexuality/when_children_use_pornography/advice_for_parents_of_teenage_porn_addicts.aspx
- *Internet Pornography Statistics Overview*: <http://internet-filter-review.toptenreviews.com/internet-pornography-statistics-overview.html>
- *Adventist Recovery Ministries (ARMin)*, a Ministry of the Health Department of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America: <http://www.adventistrecovery.org>
- *Sex Addicts Anonymous*, a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength, and hope with one another so that they can overcome their sexual addiction and help others recover from sexual addiction or dependency: <https://saa-recovery.org/>

Reinforcing those feelings is hardly ever productive. Instead, as teachers and administrators, let's have an honest and open discussion with children and young adults about why Internet pornography and other sexually explicit material are dangerous. The sidebar on page 39 provides some helpful resources for discussing this topic. ✍

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. A pseudonym.
2. "Internet Safety 101: Pornography Statistics": <http://www.internetsafety101.org/pornographystatistics.htm>; Covenant Eyes: <http://www.covenanteyes.com/pornstats/>. Unless otherwise noted, all Websites in the endnotes were accessed in February 2016.
3. 2 Corinthians 12:21 and Galatians 5:19. Bible texts in this article marked NIV are from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.
4. John M. Haney, "Teenagers and Pornography Addiction: Treating the Silent Epidemic." In Gary R.

Walz, Jeanne Bleuer, and Richard K. Yep, eds., *Vistas: Compelling Perspectives on Counseling* (Alexandria, Va.: American Counseling Association, 2006), pp. 49-52; Kingston et al., "The Importance of Individual Differences in Pornography Use: Theoretical Perspectives and Implications for Treating Sexual Offenders," *Journal of Sex Research* 46:2-3 (March 2009):216-232.

5. Michelle Ayres and Shelley Haddock, "Therapists' Approaches in Working With Heterosexual Couples Struggling With Male Partners' Online Sexual Behavior," *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity* 16:1 (February 2009):55-78; Gabriel Cavaglion, "Narratives of Self-help of Cyberporn Dependents," *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity* 15:3 (August 2008):195-216; Alex Kwee, Amy Dominguez, and Donald Ferrell, "Sexual Addiction and Christian College Men: Conceptual, Assessment, and Treatment Challenges," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 26:1 (March 2007):3-13; Wendy Maltz, "Out of the Shadows," *Psychotherapy Networker* 33 (2009):26-35.

6. Cooper et al., "Online Sexual Compulsivity: Getting Tangled in the Net," *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity* 6:2 (1999):79-104.

7. Annette Melgosa and Rudy Scott, "School Internet Safety: More Than 'Block It to Stop It,'" *The Journal of Adventist Education* 75:3 (February/March 2013):26-31. <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae201375032606.pdf>.

8. The term "sexting" [a combination of "sex" and "texting"] refers to images and texts sent between cell phones; however, the definition is no longer limited to mobile devices. Sexting carries legal consequences in several states: See Dena T. Saco et al., "Sexting: Youth Practices and Legal Implications" (Berkman Center for Internet & Society, Harvard University, 2010), p. 3. http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.law.harvard.edu/files/Sacco_Argudin_Maguire_Tallon_Sexting_Jun2010.pdf. Accessed on May 4, 2016.

9. Gert M. Hald, "Gender Differences in Pornography Consumption Among Young Heterosexual Danish Adults," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 35:5 (October 2006):577-585; Jochen Peter and Patti Valkenburg, "Processes Underlying the Effects of Adolescents' Use of Sexually Explicit Internet Material: The Role of Perceived Realism," *Communication Research* 37:3 (April 2010):375-399.

10. Haney, "Teenagers and Pornography Addiction: Treating the Silent Epidemic," op. cit.

11. Internet Filter Review, "Internet Pornography Statistics": <http://www.internet-filter-review.toptenreviews.com/internet-pornography-statistics.html>.

12. Saco et al., "Sexting," op. cit.

13. Ian O'Donnell and Claire Milner, *Child Pornography: Crime, Computers, and Society* (Portland, Ore.: Willan Publishing, 2007); Michelle Lillie, "The Connection Between Sex Trafficking and Pornography": <http://humantraffickingsearch.net/wp/the-connection-between-sex-trafficking-and-pornography/>.

14. Most countries have laws against producing, possessing, distributing, receiving, or possessing with the intent to distribute pornography—specifically pornography that involves minors (those under the age of 18). Repeated visits to child

pornography Websites suggest a pattern of behavior and can be used as evidence in a court of law. Adults allowing children to view pornography (whether of consenting adults engaged in pornographic acts or of minors engaged in the same) can be liable for negligence and child endangerment. For more information, see: The United States Department of Justice, "Citizen's Guide to U.S. Federal Law on Child Pornography," <https://www.justice.gov/criminal-ceos/citizens-guide-us-federal-law-child-pornography>. More than 115 countries now engage in training from the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children on how to find and prosecute predators: <http://www.icmec.org/train/law-enforcement/>.

15. Natasha Petty Levert, "A Comparison of Christian and Non-Christian Males, Authoritarianism, and Their Relationship to Internet Pornography Addiction/Compulsion," *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity* 14:2 (May 2007):145-166.

16. Ibid.

17. Jesse Abell, Timothy Steenbergh, and Michael Boivin, "Cyberporn in the Context of Religiosity," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 34:2 (June 2006):165-171.

18. Levert, "A Comparison of Christian and Non-Christian Males, Authoritarianism, and Their Relationship to Internet Pornography Addiction/Compulsion," op. cit.

19. Mark Laaser and Louis Gregoire, "Pastors and Cybersex Addiction," *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* 18:3 (August 2003):395-404.

20. Paul Cannon and Carol Cannon, "Stranger in the House: Living With a Sexual Addict," *Vibrant Life* 94:5 (September/October 1994):22, 23.

21. David Delmonico and Patrick Carnes, "Virtual Sex Addiction: When Cybersex Becomes the Drug of Choice," *Cyberpsychology & Behavior* 2:5 (February 1999):457-463.

22. Ibid.; Martha Turner, "Uncovering and Treating Sex Addiction in Couples Therapy," *Journal of Family Psychotherapy* 20:2-3 (July 2009):283-302.

23. Mark White and Thomas Kimball, "Attributes of Christian Couples With a Sexual Addiction to Internet Pornography," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 28:4 (December 2009):350-359.

24. Ibid.

25. Abell et al., "Cyberporn in the Context of Religiosity," op. cit.

26. Those who struggle with Internet addiction are often victims of some form of trauma that has violated and disrupted their emotional, physical, sexual, or spiritual development. This trauma results in their inability to recognize normal boundaries and increases their willingness to participate in risky behaviors. See Laaser and Gregoire, "Pastors and Cybersex Addiction," op. cit.

27. Stephen James and David Thomas, *Wild Things: The Art of Nurturing Boys* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), pp. 316, 317.

28. Haney, "Teenagers and Pornography Addiction: Treating the Silent Epidemic," op. cit.

29. Ibid.