

# Protecting Minors and Their Families

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*Ministry Leaders Guidebook No. 5*

Jessica was 14 and on dial-up when she started using pornography.<sup>1</sup> Crystal was 10 when she found her brother's porn magazine.<sup>2</sup> Both were good girls—model church leaders, in fact—and yet they found themselves deep in addiction that lasted well into adulthood.

Even among church kids, these stories are the rule, not the exception. A 2016 study by the Barna Group found that, among practicing Christians age 13-24, 41% of boys and 13% of girls look at porn regularly.<sup>3</sup> If your youth group is composed of ten boys and ten girls, that means it's statistically likely that four of the boys and one girl seek out porn at least occasionally. Even more of them will come across it accidentally. And the rates are even higher for unchurched teens.

It is particularly important to remember that these are minors. These are people of a vulnerable age with developing brains. In the eyes of the law, you have particular legal responsibilities and precautions to take while working with them. As such, this Guidebook will primarily use the term “minors” to describe anyone under the age of 18 who you work with directly—an unusual term for Covenant Eyes to use in our writing, but an important one to remind you of legal responsibilities (we'll go into some depth in the final chapter).

These statistics and legal requirements show that it is vital for your church to be prepared to help the families in your ministry. Some of your work will be preventative: prepared families can reduce the risk of pornography becoming an issue. Some of it will be in recovery, helping repentant (and unrepentant) minors find healing.

It will not be an easy road to become a church where porn users can find safety and healing. That's why Covenant Eyes has created a series of Ministry Leader Guidebooks covering a breadth of topics on pornography, including helping female porn users and counseling wives who have discovered that their husband uses porn. Similarly, this book is designed to provide a high-level overview of the impacts of porn on developing minds and offer action steps to educate your families and train your leaders.

After reading this and our other Guidebooks, you might begin to realize that the issue is big. You might start to realize that you alone don't have the time or tools

to help your people. That's why we're here with dedicated, church-serving staff, resources like this Guidebook, and quality software. Since 2000, we at Covenant Eyes have been "all-in" on helping people break free from digital pornography for good, or never start watching in the first place.

If at any point while reading this Guidebook you need a lifeline, please contact us at **church@covenanteyes.com**.

# Chapter 1

## Why Minors Watch Porn

It's easy to make assumptions about minors and their pornography use: that “good kids” whose parents are involved in church are invulnerable; that their porn use was a harmless accident from stumbling across it while doing homework and it stopped quickly; that it's only the boys in your congregation, so talking about porn in your small group for teen boys will prevent it from becoming a problem. The reality is, of course, much more varied. Minors find porn in a number of ways and seek it out for a number of reasons.

### Basic Stats About Porn Use

The first thing to understand as you work with minors is this: **the vast majority of minors in your church or ministry will have seen pornography by the time they turn 18.** A 2008 study found that 93% of boys and 62% of girls had been exposed to pornography by age 18. Moreover, 63% of boys and 23% of girls had spent at least 30 minutes consecutively watching porn.<sup>4</sup> Remember, this survey was conducted among college students in 2008; the first iPhone® came out in 2007. This was long before the days when every teen had a smartphone in his or her pocket.

Later studies confirm these rates of early exposure. A 2020 study of women who watch porn, conducted by Covenant Eyes and Crystal Renaud Day, found that 83% had been exposed to porn before age 18—and 16% had been exposed before age 7. Additionally, 58% started actively using porn before they turned 18. That same survey found that 88% of these women seeking freedom from porn attend church regularly.

A 2016 survey of male youths in a Catholic high school deepens this. It found that 70% of their male students viewed porn more than once a week, with 61% viewing porn in their bedroom. Additionally, 48% cite boredom as a contributing factor.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the most comprehensive data we have about minors and porn use comes from the 2016 survey *The Porn Phenomenon*. This study sought not only to find the basic stats of exposure but to analyze the attitudes toward pornography. Among teens age 13-17, 13% of teens talked about porn in a positive or lighthearted way. A further 40% were accepting. These teens assumed that their friends looked at porn at least occasionally. Only 11% of teens talked about porn as a bad thing. Moreover, 46% of teens said that half or more of their friends regularly view porn.<sup>6</sup>

## Porn and the Developing Brain

It is vitally important to have even a basic understanding of porn's impact on the brain as we help people find lasting freedom. Too many people assume that porn (or, in fact, any bad habit) is easy to quit, or that the Gospel is a magical band-aid to heal the wounded brain. In reality, we neurochemically bond with whatever we use for sexual gratification; it's part of being "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139). In God's design, these chemicals mean a man and woman bond in physical intimacy through marriage for life. In our sin-broken world, it means that young kids may be bonding to porn before their bodies are mature.

Here are just a few of the chemicals in play:

- **Dopamine** helps the brain remember what is interesting and how to respond to it. It focuses the mind on a specific task while others are ignored, saying, "Hey, do this now!" It provides a neurological reward that feels good and assists in cravings for more of the activity.
- **Norepinephrine** is a neurotransmitter often associated with stress and the fight-or-flight response, helping people to be more alert. It also acts as a hormone for sexual arousal and sexual memory, and it helps us burn emotional experiences in our minds. Whether it's a wonderful sexual experience with our spouse or a provocative sexual image, the information is stored for easy recall with the help of norepinephrine.
- **Oxytocin and vasopressin** also encourage the feelings of bonding and are released during sexual activity and climax. Their release during porn

viewing and masturbation works to cement a person's attachment to this behavior.

When a person views pornography habitually, these chemicals serve to bond them to variety. This can be particularly devastating to minors. Dr. Sharon Copper explains that pornography is neurologically more damaging to minors than to adults for at least two reasons.<sup>7</sup>

**1. Children have an abundance of “mirror neurons” in their brains.**

Mirror neurons convince us that when we see something, whether an unboxing video or pornography, we are actually experiencing it. For example, when a male watches pornography, his mirror neurons activate, eventually triggering an erection because his body now believes it is experiencing sex.<sup>8</sup> With the abundance of mirror neurons in minors, researchers believe this makes pornography more “real” to them.

**2. Children have an immature prefrontal cortex.** This is the area of the brain that controls judgment, controls impulses, and regulates emotion. This region of the brain isn't mature until young adulthood. Because minors have such a weak prefrontal cortex, they lack the “executive control” to stop the flow of emotions and sensations that come from watching porn. One mom reported that her 11-year-old son told her, “Mom, I just couldn't stop clicking.”<sup>9</sup>

This neurological implication is even more distressing when we understand how teens view porn. According to a 2016 survey, 53% of teens talked about porn in an accepting or even encouraging way; only 1 in 10 believed it is a bad thing.<sup>10</sup> The same survey found that 51% of teen and young adult women porn users had sent a sext.<sup>11</sup> In other words, teens just acknowledge that most of them use pornography, and they're engaging in risky behaviors as a result.

## **Porn and Trauma**

There is a growing field of research on the impact of trauma on long-term physical and mental well-being. Findings reported by Bessel Van Der Kolk in *The Body Keeps the Score* show that children with poor parental connections who experience trauma (abuse, accidents, etc.) are more likely to experience issues like sleep disturbances, headaches, attention disorders, and more.<sup>12</sup> One study in particular evaluated 84 girls who had been abused by a family member and compared their



development to 82 girls of the same race, social status, and family compositions with no history of abuse. Those who had been abused were more likely to experience issues like cognitive deficits, depression, obesity, and self-mutilation. They matured sexually a year and a half earlier and were more likely to drop out of high school. Moreover, they were less likely to have friendships of either gender: “they can’t trust; they hate themselves, and their biology is against them, leading them either to overreact or numb out.”<sup>13</sup>

Researchers are beginning to draw connections between unwanted sexual behaviors (such as pornography and acting out) to early childhood trauma, including sexual abuse. For example, licensed counselor Jay Stringer reports in his book *Unwanted* that among respondents to a survey, “the sexual-abuse scores of the most significant pornography users were eight points higher compared to those who did not view pornography at all.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, porn users were more likely to be victims of abuse than non-porn users. In *Making Advances*, Marnie Ferree et al. reports findings from an early study by Patrick Carnes: among female sex and love addicts, 97% experienced emotional abuse, 81% experienced sexual abuse, and 72% experienced physical abuse. In other words, early trauma is strongly correlated with sex and love addiction in adulthood, including pornography use.<sup>15</sup>

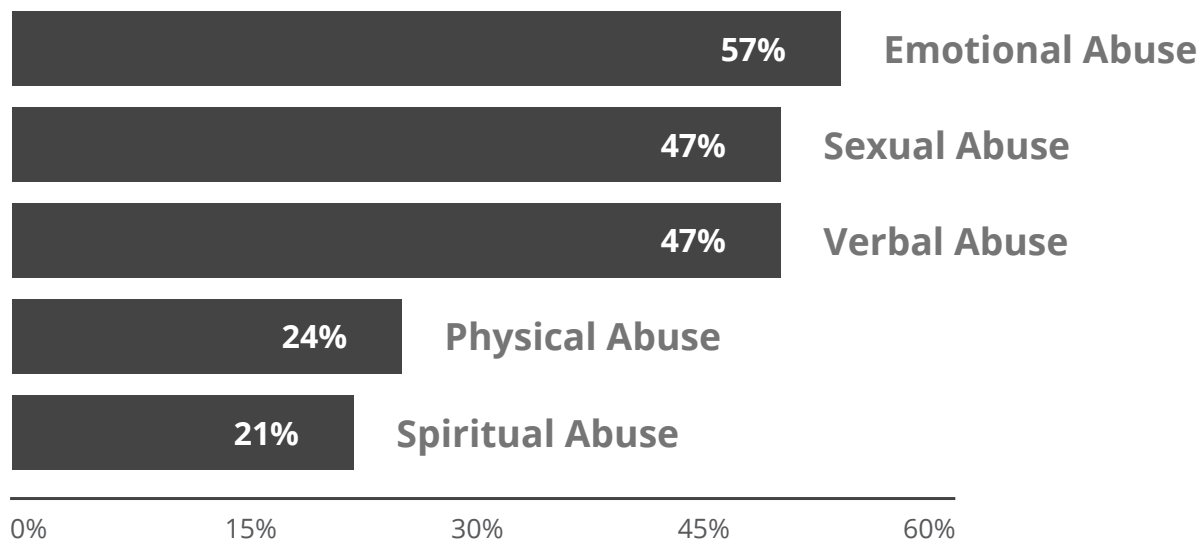
In the survey of female porn users conducted by Covenant Eyes and Crystal Renaud Day, a full 83% had been exposed to pornography before they turned 18. Of that 83%:

- 32% found it around the house
- 28% stumbled across it accidentally online
- 18% were exposed by someone around the same age
- 16% deliberately sought it out
- 5% were shown it by an authority figure (e.g. a youth pastor or babysitter)
- 1% were first exposed by a romantic partner

The remainder of respondents provided a variety of more specific responses. Most of the responses fell into a pre-listed category (TV exposure sex scenes in commercial movies, which could count as “around the house,” were frequent responses).

Some of them were horrifying, such as the respondent who said she wanted to know what happened when she was molested, or the others who said they were shown it by an abuser.

The survey also asked how many participants had experienced abusive behaviors. Participants were allowed to select multiple forms of abuse:



**Only 23%—less than one in four—said they hadn’t experienced any abuse.**

Stringer’s study, published in his book *Unwanted*, similarly found that 50% of porn users were introduced to it by a peer and 32% were introduced by someone older, with more sexual experience; Stringer labels this a form of sexual abuse.<sup>16</sup> Overall, his research found that those who were sexually abused were significantly more likely to watch pornography than those who were not.<sup>17</sup>

Now obviously, not all porn-watching minors are victims of abuse. However, these findings are still worth mentioning for three reasons.

One, it is vitally important to protect your minors from the risk of abuse. We’ll briefly discuss legal obligations in chapter 4.

Two, a child’s relationship with his or her parents is strongly correlated to the ability to recover from trauma, as reported by Van Der Kolk. (We’ll get into this in more depth in the next chapter.) If you are counseling a minor or working with their



parents, keep this potential trauma in mind. Use this knowledge to ground yourself in compassion as you work with them. Some children are just willful and rebellious, yes; but this rebellion may stem from an abusive situation or a less-than-ideal parenting style or some other core issue that is preventing them from growing up happy and healthy. Remember, even good parents leave scars.

Three, there is more research on the impacts of trauma than of pornography on children, and the two may have correlations. Both pornography and sexual abuse hijack the child's sex drive before they are sexually mature. As such, having even a high-level overview of the impacts of trauma can be helpful as you learn more about minors and porn use.

## Next Steps

For more information about the impact of pornography on minors, download the free ebook *Confident*, available to you free as part of the Safe Home Sunday kit. Request your copy at [\*\*https://learn.covenanteyes.com/safe-home-sunday/\*\*](https://learn.covenanteyes.com/safe-home-sunday/).

# Chapter 2

## The Importance of Parenting in Recovery

Family relationships are a primary means God uses to perfect us and challenge us to become everything we are created to be. The Catholic Church even calls the family a “domestic church” because families are the smallest group of the faithful gathered together.<sup>18</sup>

This also means parents are the front line in protecting their children from porn and a whole host of other issues. Few people understand that it’s not just about *what* parents teach; it’s about **how they interact with their children in general**. Parenting style has an incredible impact on keeping minors from falling into addiction or even driving them into it.

### Parenting Styles

Before diving more deeply into how parenting may influence addiction, it’s helpful to understand different parenting styles. In the 1960s, psychologist Diana Baumrind identified two essential qualities for raising healthy children: “parental demandingness” and “parental responsiveness.” Using these two qualities, she and her team developed a grid for understanding parenting styles:

- **Authoritarian** parents demand a lot from their children, but they are not very warm. Some are abusive, but many are not—they are simply rigid and harsh.

- **Neglectful** parents give their children neither structure nor support. They simply aren't present at all.
- **Permissive** parents are very warm and responsive to their children, but they demand very few things. These parents might be called "pushovers," allowing their child to follow every whim and impulse.
- **Authoritative** parents place high demands on their children, but they are also responsive and often explain the rationale for firm decisions. They don't indulge their children, but love and affirm them with warmth and tenderness.<sup>19</sup>

|         |                | Structure     |               |
|---------|----------------|---------------|---------------|
|         |                | Demanding     | Not Demanding |
| Support | Responsive     | Authoritative | Passive       |
|         | Not Responsive | Authoritarian | Neglectful    |

For our purposes, Authoritarian and Neglectful parents often have similar impacts on their children's pornography use. Matching more updated terminology, we will call these "Detached" parents.

## Detached Parents and Addiction

Part of a parent's role is to help the child learn his or her place in relation to others. Van Der Kolk writes, "We get our first lessons in self-care from the way that we are cared *for*."<sup>20</sup> In most families, this starts in infancy. When a baby cries, the mother feeds it or changes its diaper. This teaches babies two things: first, that when there is an intense feeling like hunger, there is also a solution; and second, that when they are experiencing something out of their control, their parents are there to help. Contrast this with the polar opposite. Van Der Kolk says, "Children with

histories of abuse and neglect learn that their terror, pleading, and crying do not register with their caregiver. Nothing they can do or say stops the beating or brings attention and help. In effect, they're being conditioned to give up when they face challenges later in life." <sup>21</sup>

Now, most parents you encounter probably won't fall in that extreme. They'll be "good enough" parents<sup>22</sup> who don't always respond perfectly but still raise their children to create generally healthy attachments. Still, many Christian parents lean towards detached parenting styles. Authoritarian parents especially appear in more conservative denominations with legalistic tendencies. These parents often avoid uncomfortable topics, like what healthy sexuality looks like, while still punishing sin. In other words, they focus entirely on behaviors without demonstrating the joy and intimacy of walking with Christ.

In *Connected: How Strong Family Relationships Lead to Internet-Safe Kids*, Melissa Foley writes:

"If we only express love when our son makes a goal in a lacrosse game or our daughter earns the first chair in band, he or she can interpret our response as loving them more because of their actions. Conditional love is either "love if" or "love because of." Conditional love is mostly subconscious on our part as parents but has the potential to be a destructive force in our children's hearts." <sup>23</sup>

When a child with authoritarian or neglectful parents stumbles across porn, they may not feel comfortable telling their parents the first time it happens. They may fear being punished or losing the parent's seemingly limited love and affection. They may even simply not think to talk to their parents about it because their parents avoid the topic of sex. And when the parent discovers the pornography use, they will likely say something in anger to the effect of "Don't ever let me catch you again," which conveys two things: (1) the child cannot talk to their parent about their struggles; and (2) the child needs to do a better job of hiding their behavior. In other words, the child is being driven deeper into shame instead of joyfully

following in the footsteps of Jesus. Indeed, as Rachel Joy Welcher puts it, “many [of her students] were living in shame, afraid to talk about their God-given sexuality in anything above a whisper.” <sup>24</sup>

In his work with people with sexual brokenness (including porn), Jay Stringer found that in childhood:

- 50% did not have their mothers talk to them about sex at all.
- 60% did not have their fathers talk to them about sex at all.
- 8% had genuinely helpful conversations with their mothers about sex.
- 5% had genuinely helpful conversations with their fathers about sex.<sup>25</sup>

In fact, he found that “47% of men and women did not have someone they could talk to when something difficult happened in their childhood.” <sup>26</sup> That may include sexual struggles... but it also includes seemingly preferential treatment of one sibling over another or a general lack of engagement.

In the end, detached parenting intensifies lust. As Stringer writes:

“Disengagement plants the seeds of lust because the child, who is made to experience tenderness and delight, recognizes that familial love is not something that can be depended on. [...] They are faced with the choice to live with hunger inside the home or search outside it to ensure connection and sustenance. The madness that most people find, however, is that the solutions we pursue apart from God and community leave us more alone than we were at the beginning.” <sup>27</sup>

## Permissive Parenting

The pendulum can swing the other way, towards overly-engaged parenting, to a similar result. These are the parents who focus on being their child’s friend without necessarily providing a rules structure. In this style of parenting, the relationship

is sometimes so close that the child becomes the parent's confidante. This is particularly prevalent in broken and difficult marriages where spouses no longer confide in each other, but instead, one spouse brings their emotional life to the child—and even looks to the child instead of the spouse or friends for emotional fulfillment. Stringer says:

“On the one hand, the child has powerful access to conversations and intimacy that his or her siblings and the other parent are not privy to. The privilege of being your parent's idol is remarkable and allows you to take unlimited draws of power and delight from the bank of this relationship. The cost of membership, though, is that your parent tends to determine what your life ought to look like. You may agree to their vision of your life for a time, but the moment you want something different, conflict ensues.”<sup>28</sup>

In particular, in adolescence the emotionally-enmeshed child may seek freedom through “prodigal behavior that gives a false but satisfactory experience of freedom, such as pornography.”<sup>29</sup> Stringer found that 45% of respondents to his survey on unwanted sexual behaviors had mothers confide in them their frustrations with their lives and spouses, and 24% had their fathers confide in them.<sup>30</sup>

## Healthy Parenting and Porn-Free Children

The good news is, healthy parents, or even “good enough” parents, go a long way toward raising healthy kids who never learn to rely on pornography or other self-soothing behaviors in the first place. These are the authoritative parents, who seek connection with their kids while also providing the crucial rules, structure, and discipline to train them well. Van Der Kolk writes, “With ‘good enough’ caregivers, children learn that broken connections can be repaired. The critical issue is whether they can incorporate a feeling of being viscerally safe with their parents or other caregivers.”<sup>31</sup> He reports on a study of children hospitalized with severe burns: “the development of PTSD could be predicted by how safe they felt with their



mothers. The security of their attachment to their mothers predicted the amount of morphine that was required to control their pain—the more secure the attachment, the less painkiller was needed.”<sup>32</sup>

Many Christian parents fail at this level of connection. They are good at establishing rules based on biblical values, but less so at connecting with their children to make them feel safe. If this describes the parents in your ministry, your task is to guide parents into strengthening (or possibly building and repairing) those connections with their children.

A well-connected family means parents should find time to give their children their undivided attention—no devices, and at their level. It means parents should be safe people for children to exhibit strong emotions. For example, there is a world of difference between “Shh, don’t cry, I’m here for you” and “Shh, boys don’t cry, so stop crying.” The former conveys that the child’s feelings are important and that the child can come to the parent for all their hurts (after all, if a child doesn’t feel comfortable coming to their parents for a scraped knee, how will they feel comfortable sharing about sexual struggles?). The latter conveys that the child needs to hide from their parents.

This will be a difficult pattern for many parents to change. Rightly or wrongly, American culture has taught men in particular to hide their feelings, and yet we know from Ecclesiastes 3:4 that there is, in fact, a time for tears. Good parenting will help children find that balance—and when parents are a safe space for their children to feel those feelings, their child will be more likely to come to them in times of struggle and temptation.

One way to encourage parents to repair damaged family connections is for parents to model repentance to their children. This may happen proactively. For example, in a conversation with their kids about their hope that their children will come to them with struggles like pornography, encourage parents to say, “When you come to me, I might get it wrong. I might react out of anger. But remember, I love you and I want what’s best for you. After I calm down, I promise to come back and help you through whatever it is you’re going through.” It is important for them to then follow through and apologize for wrong reactions to repair those connections that may be broken.

Similarly, if a parent has never talked to their children specifically about pornography, encourage them to give their children a consequence-free period of confession of at least a week when they start the conversation. Remind parents to avoid accusations that their child is lying, even if they know for a fact that the child has been watching pornography. This sort of accusation will drive a deeper wedge between the parent and child. Instead, the parent should try to build connections: how they felt when they were the child's age, or possibly even limited disclosure of their own struggles with pornography. In the Covenant Eyes ebook *Confident*, Luke Gilkerson reminds parents that "this conversation is not ultimately about porn; it is about you getting to know your child." <sup>33</sup>

## Next Steps

One of the key ways to encourage parents to protect their children is through Covenant Eyes Screen Accountability™. This software monitors and reports on what appears on a child's screen. Encourage parents to not only use it to watch for porn, but to look for other positive trends to talk about. Maybe they appear to spend a lot of time on a particular gaming site, or maybe they watch a lot of cartoons on YouTube. These can be points of positive connections for parents. Learn more about this software at **[www.covenanteyes.com](http://www.covenanteyes.com)**. You can also get a free consultation on how to encourage your church to use this software and other free tools to protect their families by contacting us at **[church@covenanteyes.com](mailto:church@covenanteyes.com)**. Be sure to ask for a free copy of the ebook *Connected*, which goes into more depth on the importance of parenting style on protecting minors from pornography temptations.

# Chapter 3

## Running Church-Wide Initiatives

Now that you understand the dangers of pornography on young minds and the importance of parenting in preventing addiction and long-term negative impacts from trauma, your next step is to support the parents and guardians in your ministry in protecting the minors in your care.

This may sound difficult, especially if you minister in a context where minors are present, or if you have received pushback for trying to address difficult topics like pornography in the past. Pastors often tell the Covenant Eyes team that the biggest barrier to addressing pornography in their church is the congregation. Still, one of your responsibilities is to protect and prepare your flock for the wolves of the world, including pornography.

### **Sermons and Messages**

One of the best places to begin addressing sensitive topics like pornography and parenting is in the Sunday sermon. If you're not ready to do a topical series on pornography and sexual sin specifically, consider one on parenting and sin's legacy. For example, Exodus 20:5 speaks of God extending the consequences of someone's sin for three or four generations, while Ezekiel 18:20 still holds each person responsible for their own sins. Consider the implications of these dual truths in light of the lasting consequences of generational trauma: a parent's sins and severe mistakes can have repercussions that echo down through the generations. From a more positive perspective, verses like Deuteronomy 6:7 hint at the importance of

ongoing conversations between parents and their children when it comes to their spiritual, emotional, and, yes, sexual health.

If you focus on expository teaching, look for opportunities to help your members apply what they are learning from scripture to their lives. Consider doing a deep dive into passages about sexual sin and the impact parents have on their children. While we have few demonstrations of parent-child interactions in the Bible, the consequences of detached parenting are still displayed in the Old Testament. Jacob—the patriarch who was the namesake of the nation of Israel—functionally ignored the rape of his daughter, leaving it to her brothers to avenge her, and showed favoritism to Joseph to harmful effect (Genesis 34, 37). Generations later, King David repeated the pattern when his daughter Tamar was raped; David was “furious,” but did nothing to give his daughter the justice she deserved (2 Samuel 13:21). Conversely, King Saul seemed to have a solid relationship with his son Jonathan, except when disagreeing about David. Despite his father’s frequent disobedience to God, Jonathan was, in modern terms, one of the most well-adjusted and godly people in the Bible (1 Samuel 19 is just one example). Even preaching verse-by-verse through passages like these, you can point both to God and the modern-day applications of parenting and pornography use.

Be sure to regularly incorporate pornography use as an example of modern sins. When you do, make sure you address the breadth of use: that women use it; that young children are exposed to it much sooner than parents expect; that the person you least expect to use it may be struggling deeply. It’s easy to inadvertently drive people more deeply into secrecy and shame by treating them as if they could in no way be struggling with pornography. Your goal is to make it safe to struggle publicly, because it is only when secret shame is brought to the light that true recovery can begin.

Finally, if you are a youth minister, consider doing a special series on pornography, but be careful to not fall into the trap of promising married sex as a reward for good behavior. Focus instead on the joy of walking with Christ, regardless of what life has in store for them. Teach the minors in your program how to handle the God-given desires for intimacy and sex in a world where they may remain single and celibate for most or all of their lives. In addition, do not make young women

guardians of men's purity. Yes, they should dress modestly, and they particularly should not deliberately dress in a way to incite lust, but the world is full of immodest people and images, and young men (and women) need to learn to surrender their lustful desires to God instead of acting like Adam in the garden, blaming "that woman you gave me" (Genesis 3:12, paraphrased).

## **Running Special Events**

Covenant Eyes offers training to run Safe Home Sunday in churches. This weekend is dedicated to addressing the risks your families face with internet-enabled devices and includes educational materials, such as age-appropriate conversation guides and ebooks to distribute to parents. You can also download a free PowerPoint presentation to host a Parent Internet Safety Night.

Special events like this can be incredibly helpful in your ministry, especially if you tend to avoid topical teaching on Sunday mornings. Setting aside an evening or weekend specifically to deal with a specific topic like pornography can help introduce the topic to your members in a safe way and provide a space for them to ask questions. If children are usually in the service with the adults, you can also provide childcare for a special event as a one-time offering without disrupting your normal flow.

As part of this event, it would be beneficial to have real testimonies from your members about their own pornography use. Often, when one person shares his or her shame publicly, others will be encouraged to come forward as well. Be careful about working with minors regarding their stories about pornography, though; they are more vulnerable and prone to manipulation and abuse after disclosing porn use. Instead of sharing the stories of minors in your ministry, it may be better for adults in recovery to share when they became addicted as part of their testimonies. Chances are good that the first exposure came when they were minors, and they are more likely to talk about childhood experiences objectively.

We also recommend coming prepared with a list of organizations and ministries dedicated to providing shame-free and confidential ways to reach out for help. For example, Focus on the Family offers a free helpline—a key resource for parents seeking help for their children. In addition, although one of the easiest entries into

discussing pornography in general is addressing the need for parents to protect their children, be prepared for adults to come to you, asking for help. Many organizations offer free online community support. We recommend **[www.bravehearts.org](http://www.bravehearts.org)** for men and **[www.sherecovery.com](http://www.sherecovery.com)** for women.

## Supporting Single Parents or Guardians

Because of the importance of the parent-child connection, minors from single-parent homes (whether from divorce, death, teenage pregnancy, or any number of other reasons) *may* be more susceptible to pornography and predatory behaviors. This is, of course, no guarantee, just as healthy two-parent families do not guarantee freedom. However, single parents or guardians may have to work harder to build that connection, especially since they carry the responsibility of earning the family's income, doing home maintenance, and acting as the primary caregiver to their children on their own.

As you contemplate ways to support the families in your ministry, consider ways you and your congregation can step in to help single parents in particular. Think beyond “free babysitting.” This is a helpful service for the parent, but if it’s the only service your church provides to single parents, it may only enhance any sense of emotional disconnection within the child, as if they’re a burden you’re taking off the parent’s hands. Consider ways you can help offload the burden a second parent would normally carry, such as providing meals or offering free housecleaning services once a week. Encourage the single parent to use this time to focus on their relationship with their child.

### Next Steps

If you are interested in running a Safe Home Sunday weekend or need personalized help addressing pornography use, especially among minors, we’d love to work with you directly to create a specialized plan to meet your needs. Contact us at **[church@covenanteyes.com](mailto:church@covenanteyes.com)** to schedule a free consultation.



# Chapter 4

## Policies to Protect Minors

This book will not address the specifics of counseling minors, a task that should in most cases be handled in partnership with the minor's parents or guardians. Rather, this final chapter will focus on the risks and legal obligations of working with them. Nationally and locally, there are legal requirements regarding the protection of minors, and your insurance may also have specific policy requirements.

It is worth noting that Covenant Eyes does not provide official legal advice, especially regarding child abuse situations. We strongly suggest that you work with local law enforcement agents or attorneys to generate a policy. In this chapter we will, however, walk you through some situations to consider when creating a policy.

### Why Policies Matter

Even before we get into specific situations, it's worth reminding ourselves of why policies are of not just legal but spiritual importance.

First, **policies promote integrity and accountability**. The policy should be 100% objective, and that nobody is above this policy. It is owned by your ministry's governing body, not an individual (even the lead pastor), and it should be publicly accessible by all members (and members should be reminded of its existence periodically at business meetings). An elder is to be above reproach (1 Timothy 3:2), and policies are just one way to support this.

Additionally, **policies point us to a higher authority**. Romans 13:1-7 reminds us that we are to submit to the government; they are appointed by God, even

when we disagree with them on specific outcomes. Obviously, if there is a distinct scriptural reason to disobey, we should; the Bible itself holds up examples like the midwives Shiphrah and Puah in Exodus 1 and Daniel in Daniel 6 for following God's law over the local laws. However, these cases are rare, and your default posture should be to obey the legal requirements because in doing so, you are obeying God's authority.

Finally, **well-written policies support the dual principles of justice and mercy.**

Too many times, when instances of sexual sins are disclosed (leadership-level pornography use or sexual abuse, for example), the church's immediate reaction is to protect its reputation. Sometimes that means sweeping the incident under the rug. At other times, they accept a sincere-sounding apology with no further repercussions. However, the perpetrator may be relying on the church's bent toward forgiveness and mercy to keep them out of trouble. In other words, you're allowing them to continue in their sin, and you are potentially denying justice to any victims as well. A well-written policy will seek grace for the perpetrator through their spiritual and psychological healing and will ensure that justice is offered for any potential victims.

## Policy Considerations

We will not provide a comprehensive guide to creating ministry policies. Those decisions would be better made in conjunction with your local law enforcement agency and insurance provider. However, we do want to briefly touch on some situations to consider as you revise existing policies or create new ones.

**Church Internet Use Policy:** As you begin to address sexual topics in your church or ministry, one of the best ways to start is to lead by example. Establish an internet use policy for staff in particular. For example, consider enforcing that all staff and leadership-level volunteers use Covenant Eyes to both hold them accountable for what they do on their devices and give them personal experience of how the technology works so they can talk about it practically with members.

Although you likely cannot enforce accountability software for everyone who uses your WiFi network, especially if you have a public network, this policy should clearly define inappropriate behavior and consequences for misuse. This may be as brief

as an incident report for accidental exposure, or extreme restrictions of privileges, or even removing the person from a leadership position or church membership.

**Incidents and Escalation:** There may come a time when you learn of an incident involving a minor in your ministry. Broadly, this may involve something that happened at your ministry site, such as one minor watching pornography on your ministry's property, or it may involve a minor confessing something and asking for help.

Your policy should include a process for escalation to leadership, or when necessary, outside authorities. In particular, volunteers should escalate incidents like pornography consumption, physical abuse, questions about sexuality, and suicide ideation to an official staff member (usually the youth director). This process of escalation is crucial: an untrained volunteer may only make the situation worse.

Once the situation has been escalated, the trained person should work with the parents to determine specific next steps. They may also help answer questions the parent may be asking, such as where and how the incident occurred and whether anyone else was involved, but remember, your goal is to help the parents gain clarity, not create a policy where you potentially re-traumatize a child with difficult questions.

It's worth noting that for minors who voluntarily disclose a struggle with pornography or another issue that involves escalation, especially older students, you will want to balance their increased autonomy and personal trust with process requirements and parental interactions. Give them some agency on when to inform the parents but make it clear that they do need to communicate with the parents, and that you will be at their side when it happens.

**Minors and Abuse:** Even in churches, sometimes adults take advantage of minors, to particularly devastating effect. As Stringer learned, 33% of adults with unwanted sexual behaviors (including pornography) had been touched inappropriately by another child, and 21% had been touched inappropriately by adults. As he said, "Childhood sexual abuse was one of the biggest drivers of unwanted sexual behavior in adulthood. Sexual abuse set men and women up for a *lifetime* of sexual

madness.”<sup>34</sup> Worse, this abuse is often inflicted by trusted adults—in other words, the person you least want to believe to be guilty.

Your policies should be guided by legal responsibilities. In many states, clergy are mandatory reporters of child abuse, and even if not, it is likely wise to act as though you are one. It is not your job to determine the guilt of the accused, but it *is* your job to work with the legal system so that *they* can determine the truth of the matter.

Ideally, your policy regarding work with children will be proactive, making it hard for potential abusers to access children.<sup>35</sup> Here are just a few considerations:

- Enforce background checks for volunteers, but do not stop there. Abusers are good liars, and they may not have a criminal background, or they may have come from a church that did not follow legal requirements for abuse.
- Create strong boundaries that stop far before abuse is possible. Include rules like no tickling, side-hugs only, and strict rules regarding when it is acceptable for a minor to be alone with an unrelated adult. These boundaries may seem harsh, but they will deter child abusers from looking for easy victims at your ministry.
- While not a policy per se, you may also want to train your staff to look for high-risk (e.g. socially isolated) minors. They are often easy victims for predators, who may try to step in to fill the gap for connection. Keep an eye out for any adults who seem to be singling them out for attention. If their intentions are pure, they will understand when you encourage them to stop trying to bond with the minor directly and instead help the minor form bonds with their peers or parents.

For further details on your responsibilities in handling and preventing abuse in your ministry, we highly recommend the book *Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused*, available from churchcares.com.

## Staff Training

It is not enough to create a policy. Policies do no good if nobody knows where or how to use them. Attorney Gregory Love, for example, works with many churches who claim to have policies but don’t have them written down. In one instance, only one member knew that a policy existed, and it had been only lightly adapted from a different church’s policy.<sup>36</sup>

As you create or modify your policies, incorporate a regular review schedule and training. For example, you may decide that every volunteer who works with minors must pass an annual 10-question policy quiz or attend a mandatory training every six months. Consider conducting practice drills as well, much as you would a fire or tornado drill. Set a benchmark for success. Minimally, this should include all staff and volunteers knowing how to access the policy. By the grace of God, they will never need it; but it is far better to never need it than to need it and not have it.

## Next Steps

For a more general overview of the importance of policies to protect your church, download the free ebook *The Prepared Ministry* from <https://learn.covenanteyes.com/ready-ministry-guide/>.

Policies are best supported when your staff understands why pornography use is such a big issue. Covenant Eyes offers a training called **Porn Education for Ministry Staff**. This brief video-based course is designed to quickly give your entire leadership team an overview of multiple aspects of porn and help you articulate expectations regarding your staff and porn use. You can learn more and enroll at <https://www.covenanteyes.com/resources-for-pastors/>, or contact us by email at [church@covenanteyes.com](mailto:church@covenanteyes.com).

# Conclusion

## Do Something

What you have learned in this book is just the start of the knowledge you need to keep the minors in your congregation safe and protected from pornography. Right now, you may be feeling overwhelmed, especially when it comes to risks and legal obligations on protecting minors.

But there is hope! In *The Porn Phenomenon*, Covenant Eyes and the Barna Group worked together to do a special study of Covenant Eyes users. Overall, teens and young adults surveyed who used Covenant Eyes were much more likely to understand pornography as harmful compared to the rest of the population. For example, 85% were likely to say porn is very bad for society, compared to about 20% of the general population.<sup>37</sup> In other words, parents who hold their children accountable for their actions online are successful in passing along their values.

On top of this, the Barna study also found that porn-using teens are also among the most likely to say they'd rather not use porn at all (22%).<sup>38</sup>

This means that you have a unique opportunity. There may be minors in your youth programs who are watching pornography, but they may also be wrestling with the cognitive dissonance between their spiritual and moral training and their porn use. You have the opportunity to help guide them back away from pornography and towards a healing and redeeming faith in Jesus.

Remember, even small changes are better than nothing. Keep praying to move forward in wisdom, and remember, you don't have to do everything alone. Covenant Eyes is here for you, and you undoubtedly have plenty of people in your ministry and community who would also happily step in to help ensure the safety of the minors you serve. Together, we can protect and raise the next generation to love Jesus without the sinful distraction of pornography.



# Recommended Resources

For the last decade, Covenant Eyes has been gathering and producing a number of resources dealing with all aspects of pornography, from prevention to neuroscience to recovery. The following resources are hand-picked as some of our most helpful for you as a ministry leader. Be sure to check out our blog and other ebooks at **covenanteyes.com**. Some of the resources below were mentioned in the Guidebook. Others are simply included to make leaders aware of what resources are available.

## **Resources for Parents**

### **Equipped: Raising Godly Digital Natives**

Equipped uses the image of the home to guide parents in how to teach their children about their God-given identity, the importance of sexual identity, how to understand sexual shame, and how to engage media with discernment. This ebook makes it possible to have engaged, healthy and informed conversations about online threats.

*<http://info.covenanteyes.com/equipped-raising-godly-digital-natives-ebook>*

### **Confident: Helping Parents Navigate Online Exposure**

When a parent discovers their child or teenager has been looking at pornography, it can be alarming, hurtful, and even frightening. This book will provide the parents in your ministry with information about minors and pornography use, a four-step process for discussing pornography with a child or teen, and age-appropriate scripts to talk about pornography in the light of biblical sexuality.

*<https://www.covenanteyes.com/when-your-child-is-looking-at-porn/>*

## **Connected: How Strong Family Relationships Lead to Internet-Safe Kids**

*Connected* is a proactive resource that explores how a strong family connection can protect children and teens from the dangers of hidden pornography use. It contains real-life stories and practical tips for maintaining or re-establishing connection in a family. *Connected* will strengthen a parent's relationship with God, their spouse, and their children, so their family can live free of pornography.

<https://learn.covenanteyes.com/connected/>

## **Further Pastoral Resources**

### **The Prepared Ministry: Policies that Heal and Protect from Porn**

This deeply practical Guidebook outlines four key behaviors of organizations that are successful in helping their staff and people defend themselves against pornography. It's a 15-minute read that could change how you lead your organization.

[learn.covenanteyes.com/ready-ministry-guide/](https://learn.covenanteyes.com/ready-ministry-guide/)

### **Men and Porn: Why They Watch and How to Help**

You know the stats. A lot of men look at porn. Christian men. Non-Christian men. Rich men. Poor men. But, Ministry Leader, do you know why? Have you ever looked deeper than, "Hey, you must have a lust problem," and dug into the hearts of the men you talk to? This book will teach you the top 7 reasons men are attracted to porn, and give you action steps to help you counsel them well.

[learn.covenanteyes.com/hooked-ministry-guide/](https://learn.covenanteyes.com/hooked-ministry-guide/)

### **Female Porn Users: Why They Watch and How to Help**

For far too long, many have presumed pornography to be exclusively a "man's issue." In reality, women make up 30% of all pornography users. Porn and masturbation are not just men's problems. They're human problems. This ebook will teach you the top 4 reasons women are attracted to porn, the lies women

believe about their porn use, and action steps to help you counsel women who are struggling.

*<https://learn.covenanteyes.com/ashamed-ministry-guide/>*

## **Counseling Wives: Helping Them Heal After Their Husband's Porn Use**

When counseling a porn-using husband, pastors often forget that the wife is experiencing her own trauma and also needs healing. Worse, some pastors may outright damage her by telling her to “just forgive” her husband or even blame her for his porn use. Wives need to see God’s heart of justice and compassion for them. Helping a wife in her recovery is a Gospel issue.

*<https://learn.covenanteyes.com/counseling-wives/>*

# Endnotes

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<sup>16</sup> Stringer, p. 76-78.

<sup>17</sup> Stringer, p. 67.

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