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how to talk with your teenage boy

...about porn

Gone are the days of dog-eared *Playboys* under the mattress. The internet exposes young people to pornography of unprecedented extremes. *Marnia Robinson* and *Gary Wilson* speak directly to young teens in an article that can support you in your discussion with your son... It's a discussion not to miss.

This article is addressed to guys in their early teens. It was written with the kind assistance of a half-dozen adult men who innocently began using porn and became addicted. All of them wish that someone had found a way to explain the risks to them when they were your age.

Suppose you're really hungry, but it's almost time to leave for your basketball game. What are you going to do?

Answer: you're going to listen to either the old part of your brain or the new part. The old brain is saying, 'You're hungry, go eat.' But the new brain is

saying, 'Sure you're hungry, but it would be smarter to eat after the game so you don't throw up'.

The old part is the part you share with all animals. It evolved about 100 million years ago as mammals appeared. It urges you to do things *without thinking*, like eat—and finds anything

to do with sex very interesting. (Notice that the eyes are directly connected to the old brain.) The new part of the brain evolved much later. It helps you to solve problems, play music and invent things. It *thinks* and helps you choose your best *strategy*.

The old brain gives you urges or feelings. The new brain helps you figure out what to do with urges and feelings. If a much bigger kid calls you a 'loser', you may have an *urge* to punch him, but your new brain might say, 'That's a bad idea.'

We need both parts of the brain, because the old brain isn't very smart sometimes. For example, it doesn't know the difference between a picture of food and real food. Imagine you were hungry and had nothing to eat. Would you want to thumb through a food magazine with photos of yummy-looking desserts? No. Your stomach would growl, you would drool and you would feel hungrier than ever. Your old brain is powerful enough to make your body react as if those pictures were real food, even though your new brain knows you can't eat pictures. In fact, your new brain would probably say, 'Hey! Drop the magazine and go find some real food.'

Why does your old brain react so powerfully to pictures of food? Because for millions of years your ancestors lived where food was scarce. They had no refrigerators, and food spoiled quickly. There were no groceries or restaurants, so if you wanted to eat, you had to hunt. The old brain in *your* head is designed for the conditions your ancestors faced.

The result is that your old brain reacts powerfully to anything that it associates with the presence of food. So, if you were a hunter like your ancestors, your old brain would react to animal droppings, hoof prints or any shape that *looked* like it might be your next meal.

This is why a commercial with pictures of fries, or the sound of an ice-cream truck, can cause a powerful physical reaction in you. When your old brain decides you are hungry, it urges you to stop playing and become more alert and focused on what it thinks is important. It wants you to give your full attention to getting some food so you don't starve.

From hunting food to naked women

As you leave childhood, your old brain expands its focus to a new task. It urges you to get excited about girls. It hopes that someday you will pass on copies of yourself in the form of babies. As odd as it may seem, this is the number one job for the old brain.

Your old brain prepares you for this future task by making you 'hungry' for anything that is related to sex. In fact, your old brain thinks sex is way more interesting than eating. That's why sexual feelings can be much more intense than hunger.

When you stumble upon something connected with making babies—like a website with naked women on it, or some other picture associated with sex—your old brain takes over. It releases chemicals into your body that make you feel like true happiness is just around the corner. It is like the feeling you get when you're about to open your birthday presents. This feeling is the old brain's

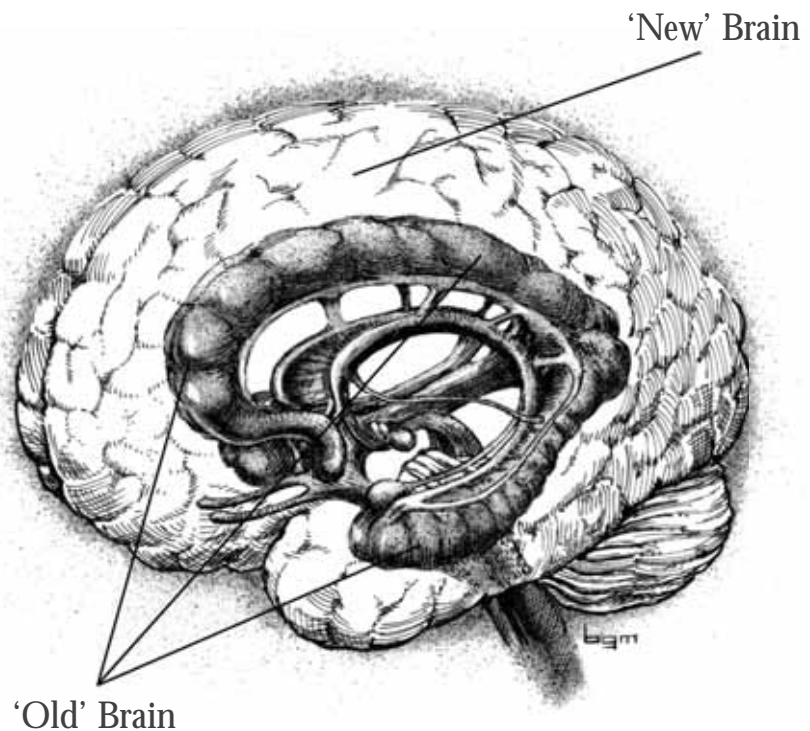
way of giving you a big 'yes!' for focusing on sex. As one man said, 'When I saw my first picture of a naked woman I thought, "This is just wonderful!"'


So why could porn be a problem? There are several reasons in the next part of this article. Give them some thought. If possible, talk them over with an adult whom you trust. Use the new part of your brain to decide whether viewing porn is a good idea for you.

Here are some reasons why porn can be a problem. They may help you figure out if you want it in your life:

Pornography is not reality

A picture of a naked woman is like a picture of food. It can create a powerful physical reaction, but it is not a real woman. Even so, your *old* brain will urge you to focus lots of attention on such a picture, to find it fascinating and even to hunt for others like it. Remember, your old brain can't tell the difference between images and physical reality. It





the porn and violence link

By Jesse Atkinson

In 2003, a study by The Australia Institute revealed alarming information on Australian teens' exposure to violent and hard-core pornography on the internet. And it wasn't just the figures that were alarming. The report, entitled *Youth and Pornography in Australia*, said that frequent exposure to violent pornography could have long-term harmful effects on young people.

The survey showed that 84 per cent of boys and 60 per cent of girls aged 16 and 17 have accidentally accessed sex sites on the internet. And, two in five boys—38 per cent—admit to having deliberately searched the internet for pornography.

Findings suggest that exposure to pornography, especially violent pornography, may lead to increased tolerance for and participation in sexual aggression, particularly among those boys and young men who deliberately and regularly view such materials. In addition, younger children could be disturbed by exposure to such images.

'This isn't just about *Playboy* on a computer screen, or even *Hustler*,' said Dr Clive Hamilton, executive director of the Australia Institute in Canberra, which commissioned the study. 'Material that would be given an X classification or refused classification if it were on video, is easy to get on the internet by children.'

In 2003, the Child At Risk Assessment Unit at Canberra Hospital reported a dramatic increase in the number of children sexually harming other children from around three cases per year in the

early 1990s to about 70 per year in 2003. Ninety per cent of the 101 children seen by the unit in the three years prior had regularly been exposed to sexually explicit imagery on the internet, and researchers at the unit suggested that exposure to pornography informs these children's sexually abusive behaviour.

In the four years since the Australia Institute report and the findings by the Canberra Hospital, these figures have undoubtedly increased, as more teenagers and children have access to the internet and therefore are more likely to be exposed to hard-core pornography and other violent material.

The internet has also become a place where teenagers can easily access information and advice on websites that promote topics such as eating disorders, suicide, drug use and even the manufacture of weapons. There is also the issue of potential harm from sites such as MySpace and online chat rooms.

On August 9, 2007 Prime Minister Howard announced that all Australian families will have access to free internet filter systems under a \$190 million Government crackdown.

The filtering technology is already being used overseas and experts predict it will lead to a dramatic reduction in offensive content seen by children. The Government initiative is the latest move by authorities to protect children using the web. However, it may take years for the full rollout of the technology.

lumps anything connected to sex into one category, the 'Yes!' category, because it wants you to make lots of babies someday.

Let's return to your distant ancestors. Imagine that you are a young caveman. Suppose you glimpse a naked woman swimming in a lake. You would probably find her thrilling. Your excitement would motivate you to learn how to flirt with her, to find out what things impress her, and, if she didn't like you, to figure out ways to meet new females. In short, you would be motivated to learn how to find and connect with a real female, a mate—someone your old brain hopes will become the mother of your babies.

These days, however, this plan isn't working very well. There is a new factor present that young cavemen didn't have to deal with. Today guys have computers and the potential to view lots of highly exciting, sexually-explicit pictures and videos. Pictures are not real girls. Videos do not help you get to know real girls.

As you may have learned, explicit pornographic pictures can trigger not only intense sexual feelings, but also lead to frustration—just like pictures of food can make your hunger worse. However, pornography also encourages you to seek instant relief—either alone in front of your computer, or with buddies who are also using porn. Porn doesn't motivate you to learn the skills you need to attract a mate. It doesn't encourage you to learn what girls like, or what they like about you, or find the courage to meet with real girls.

Your new brain knows that connections with real people are far

healthier than sitting alone with your computer, but your old brain is hard to ignore—especially once you make porn a habit.

Porn is not educational

It is normal to want to learn more about sex. However, porn videos cannot teach you about normal sex between people who love each other. The people in porn videos are actors who often do things more outrageous than Lord Voldemort in the *Harry Potter* stories. Porn actors pretend to enjoy themselves, even when they don't like each other, or they are in pain, or they are feeling cruel—or mistreated. When the camera stops rolling, they take their pay and walk away from each other.

Sex with someone you love and trust is entirely different. It is a respectful exchange of sensual touch, and a way of expressing your affection for your mate. It is a chance to be playful and get to know another person deeply. Many traditions teach that sex is beautiful and sacred. Porn is neither.

In fact, porn is increasingly violent, often with themes of people abusing each other. Porn makers purposely make the videos violent. Why? Because the old brain likes to feel superior to others. It finds such images exciting. The more strongly you react to an image, the more often you return to the website where you found it—unless you use your new brain to stop.

If you get your sex education from porn videos, there is a very real chance that you will find it difficult to interact with real girls in a healthy way later on.

Youth Culture

For example, porn could confuse you and make you think women like to be treated badly. (They don't.)

Because porn fires up your old brain (and turns down the volume of your new brain), it can also cause you to focus too much on how a girl *looks*, rather than who she is. Large breasts unfortunately do not mean that someone is fun to be around, or kind, or sincere. Big boobs are attractive to your old brain because they look like they can feed babies really well.

Porn is like 'junk food'

Your old brain is powerful, but not very clever. For example, it likes chocolate cake better than a balanced meal. Why? It evolved millions of years ago when food was scarce. High-calorie foods with lots of sugar and fat were rare, but a good source of energy.

The old brain hasn't noticed that we are now surrounded by cookies, chips, ice-cream and so forth. It still thinks you need every bit of high-calorie food to survive. In other words, it urges you to choose junk food when it sees it. If you want to have a strong, healthy body, you have to listen to your new brain. It can figure out what you need to eat for good health.

Watching porn is like being served chocolate cake over and over without ever getting the healthy part of your dinner. Cake tastes great at first, but too much makes you feel bad. It causes a sugar-high, followed by a drop in energy. While your body is recovering you don't feel so great. In fact, you may be cranky, unfriendly, or unable to concentrate. You may act like a jerk instead of like your usual, cheerful self.

Porn sets off a cycle similar to that of too much sugary food. There is an initial rush of excitement. Yet afterward you may feel tired, jumpy or irritable. This behaviour repels others, but won't bother your computer at all. See why it becomes easier and easier to spend time at your computer?

Both junk food and porn sex (where you use porn to bring yourself to an orgasm) can become obsessions, because your old brain only knows how to say 'Yes!' to them. It still thinks you are

living millions of years ago. It hasn't caught up with the fact that high-calorie food and sexual stimulation are readily available—and not good for anyone in large quantities. Fortunately, your new brain can understand the reality.

Porn use can be addictive

Just like chocolate cake, porn sex is potentially addictive. You simply can't stuff yourself with cake or use porn to excite yourself to climax without an uncomfortable recovery period afterward. In fact, you may find that you feel moody, defensive or anti-social for days after ejaculation.

This period of discomfort is risky. You may be tempted to do something you normally wouldn't do just to try to feel good again. For example, you may find yourself back at your computer, looking at porn. That will offer instant relief—but it won't last.

This cycle of highs and lows is the 'addictive cycle'. Gamblers know it, drug users know it, porn users know it and those who binge on junk food know it. In other words, junk food and porn can affect your brain just like drugs. They can make your urges, like hunger and sexual frustration, worse over all—even though both *seem* to promise instant relief. This is how addicts become addicts. They are desperately looking for relief because they feel bad during the recovery, or withdrawal, period.

In short, viewing porn is like jumping on a bike with no brakes. If you're already hooked, you will have to use your new brain as the brakes—and ignore your old brain. It may take you some time to restore your balance, but you could save yourself a lifetime of lonely obsession.

Porn sex is powerful

Feelings of sexual arousal are intense because your old brain doesn't want your new brain to interfere with your old brain's mission. Your old brain won't much care if you find a new porn website and then don't make it to sports practice, forget to walk your dog, or skip your homework. It wants you to make sexual arousal your top priority. It's thinking only one thing: 'If I can keep

this guy focused on sex, then someday he will make lots of babies!'

Your old brain is just doing its biological job. It has mistaken porn sex for real sex, but you don't have to make the same error. Use your new brain to figure it out. If you have a chance to view porn, consider some of these responses:

'I think I'll skip the porn:

- because I want to learn about real girls and close relationships.'
- because I want to be full of energy, not moody, depressed or anti-social.'
- because I know that porn can make sexual frustration worse.'
- because I want to get a life.'

■
*Gary Wilson and Marnia Robinson are married and live in Oregon. He teaches anatomy and physiology. She is a former corporate lawyer. Together they have given workshops in Canada, Australia and the USA, and their articles have appeared in various magazines. They collaborated on the book, **Peace Between the Sheets**, which addresses the parallels between the neurochemistry of sex and ancient principles about careful management of sexual energy. They also manage www.reuniting.info, and produce a free monthly newsletter, **Reuniting**. They would like to thank two teens, Gary's son and Marnia's nephew, for their helpful advice in shaping this article.*

Resources for parents:

Mean Genes: from Sex to Money to Food - Taming Our Primal Instincts by Terry Burnham and Jay Phelan, New York: Penguin Putnam Inc.(2000) Scholarly, entertaining look at the reward circuitry of the brain and its unsuspected effects on our lives.

Unauthorized Freud: Doubters Confront a Legend, Frederick Crews (Ed.), Viking Adult (1998) Scholarly collection of essays revealing that Freud falsified the case studies 'proving' that sexual repression was the source of most evils.

'Burgers on the Brain' – an article from *New Scientist*, vol 177 issue 2380. Date: 1 February 2003, by Diane Martindale. Reprinted here: www.organicconsumers.org/foodsafety/fastfood032103.cfm#burgers

See also the work of Princeton University professor, Bart Hoebel, describing how neural systems can reinforce eating and mating behaviours: www.weblamp.princeton.edu/~psych/psychology/research/hoebel/case.php

Said Hoebel when interviewed for the 'Burgers on the Brain' article: 'Highly palatable foods and highly potent sexual stimuli are the only stimuli capable of activating the dopamine system with anywhere near the potency of addictive drugs.'