

Teen's porn habit stresses mom

Keep the lines of communication open in a non-judgmental way

BY MICHELE KAMBOLIS, VANCOUVER SUN FEBRUARY 20, 2012



This week, a mother reaches out for help dealing with her teenage son's porn-watching compulsion.

THIS WEEK'S PARENT TRAP

I know that boys will be boys, but I'm getting fed up with my 16-year old's exhaustive Internet pornography habits. About a year ago was the first time I had to repair viruses on my computer and it's happened twice more since. I have tried disciplining, lecturing, parental-control software and site-blocking, but he still manages to find his way. To make matters worse, he purchased a phone with Internet access (which I've confiscated) and I've recently found out that he has full, uncensored access to the Internet at his private school, a policy which, despite my voiced concerns to the headmaster, remains unchanged. I worry that he has an obsession with this type of material and that his exposure to it may have damaged his outlook towards women; I feel that the sheer lengths he goes through to disobey me and put my personal information at risk demonstrates this. Is this normal for a teenager to go to such lengths - and how can I get the school to change their policy on Internet use?

Stressing Out, Burnaby

MICHELE KAMBOLIS SAYS

Adolescent curiosity about sexuality is normal, healthy. And nothing new. For generations, teens have been sneaking National Geographic magazines, then Sears catalogues, and now laptops and cellphones into private areas for their "exploration." Today's technologically-savvy teens have access to more than 420 million adult Web pages, a fact that's extra frightening for parents because it's so difficult to control and monitor.

Unfortunately, it's also hard to draw a clear line in terms of "normal" or healthy pornography usage. Sexual health experts debate whether extreme porn use is truly an "addiction" or rather a "compulsion." It's all semantics from my point of view. Either way, there's no doubt that for some teens, porn consumption can get them into trouble: Imagine maxedout credit cards, lost sleep, neglected homework and the sheer mental effort it takes to sneak around.

In more serious cases, the obsession can become extreme, anxiety producing and cause teens to question whether they're able to develop future healthy sexual relationships. In the sanctity of the therapy office, teens admit to sexual obsessions so out of control, they suffer emotional side effects of shame, anxiety and an extreme fear of being "found out."

No one wants their friends to know that they'd pass up the girl in art class for a Manga character.

Other teens are so flippant about their porn use, one wonders if there's a single thought outside of the serotonin, endorphins and pleasure producing dopamine rush they're enjoying.

Your son is navigating a complicated sexual landscape in a time when both boys and girls are exposed to pornography in a way that goes far beyond what any past generation has experienced. Whether we like it or not, the norms have vastly changed. But fear not, your son's healthy sexual development really is possible, even in a technological minefield.

First, running interference with the school's approach to Internet access will only alienate your son at a time when your influence is dependant upon the strength of your relationship with him. While Internet protection software is a must for any household with youth, trying to control every environment your son might find himself in will tie you up in knots.

Second, non-judgmental conversations can go a long way toward opening up the lines of communication and hopefully taking away some of the sneakiness and privacy struggles surrounding this issue in your home, not to mention the viruses. While you might think your teen would rather run naked through the streets than talk with you about sex (or porn), the surprising truth is most really want to learn about sex from their parents, according to study after study.

As with any other compulsion that might throw your son's life out of balance, feel free to step up and place limits if necessary. If he continues to hack into your computer or neglect his school work, you'll need to remind him that having his best interests at heart sometimes requires you to take firm action.

At the same time, be clear and consistent about what the consequences will be.

Do your best to rule out other more serious concerns that may be interfering with his ability to self-regulate, beyond the normal sexual surge that comes with being a teen. Anxiety, obsessive-compulsive symptoms and other clinical problems can come into play, albeit rarely.

Finally, keep in mind that far from being carried away by porn, studies on the topic show that most teens have the ability to distinguish between pornographic fantasies and real sexual relationships, tending to view it critically and integrate it into healthy emotional lives.

Conversations about the difference between "acted out" sex and real sex are worth having, to help keep his expectations real and open when the time comes to have sex himself.

In the end, the surest way to protect your teen is to be his ally, use reasonable protective factors and try not to panic.

Special to The Sun

NEXT WEEK'S PARENT TRAP

I am the married father of two teenage girls, aged 16 and 18. While this territory obviously comes with myriad problems, I've got a bit of an unusual case on my hands and I'm not sure how to handle it.

A few Fridays ago some colleagues and I went out for drinks to a sports bar near the office where I ran into a good girlfriend of my eldest. We exchanged friendly hellos and carried on with our respective company - or so I thought. On my way to the bathroom I noticed a newer colleague of mine speaking with and leaning in towards this girl - he was clearly hitting on her.

I don't know much about this colleague just yet or the extent of what's going on between the two, but this is not their first time meeting and he admitted to lying to her about his age. I should also mention, the guy is married with two little kids at home.

The whole thing makes me really uncomfortable and I don't know if I should say something to my daughter about it or if this is one of those things that's just not any of dad's business? I'm hesitant to tell my wife as well.

It just feels really awkward with this colleague now at work and I feel like I'm being evasive on something I really wish I knew nothing about.

Dad With A Secret, Vancouver.

YOUR TWO CENTS

Share your advice on this dilemma or ask your own parenting question at vancouver.sun.com/parenttraps, or email it confidentially to mkambolis@me.com.

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