

What follows are the questions I was asked and examples of my responses.

### **1) What's your reaction to this case?**

The case raises a lot of questions. It raises questions around the boy's intent, his motivation,(e.g, was it a version of the new locker room bragging rights only now videos/postings are used instead of locker room discussions, or was his intent to harm and degrade the girl or to profit in some way from posting it. Or was he mimicking pornography or other hyper-sexualized media that he had seen)

It also raises questions about the charges. I don't have the expertise or insight of the professionals involved in the charging nor do I have details about this case beyond the press release and news. Clearly what the 14 year-old boy did was harmful and fit with the letters of the laws.

I do, however, see a distinction between the accountability and violations of an adult who sexually abuses a child and further exploits them by pornographically documenting it and distributing it, from peers having consensual sex and one of them documenting it and posting it.

There is a clear and harmful violation in that the 15 year-old girl was not informed of the documentation and did not consent to the filming or to the posting of the documentation. Further, we do not know what role alcohol played in her "consent" to the sex acts or in his behaviors. He was not as trustworthy as she thought.

He likely was clueless that he was technically producing child pornography

He may or may not have not thought through the harm he was and would be doing to her and to himself

His actions also fit with Self/peer exploitation - what many understand as sexting.

Both are photographing/taping sexually explicit images and posting via Internet or other electronic device.

The Canadian Centre for Child Protection, [www.protectchildren.ca](http://www.protectchildren.ca) has excellent resources on this topic

This and other similar cases raise a lot of questions as to how we should respond to young people do this. When should it be a criminal justice/legal response, when should it be educational along with other restorative or social justice actions to help them take responsibility for their behavior and to help those victimized?

Again, harm was done.

## **2. Why do you think we're seeing more cases like this?**

- Part of the reason is because they can –the advancements in technology and its easy availability make it possible. This includes cell phones with camera's, Internet, Social Networking sites.
- There is a “See it, do it, post it mindset” in this ‘youtube’ era. It is not just young people who feel compelled when they see good looking food or something they like or find interesting to take a picture and post it for friends or the world to see.
- As Dr. David Walsh says when we talks about youth brain development, it is easy for adults to look at an often responsible youth who made a not so responsible choice and ask, “What were you thinking?” In reality we now know youthful brains are still under development until early to mid 20's. This particularly affects the center for impulse control and future thinking regarding long term consequences.
- When you add the reality that we all live in a hyper-sexualized,pornified society where Internet and related social networking means a loss of privacy and blurring of boundaries, sex and sexual interactions for some become a viewer sport or another desperate way to be seen or noticed. This is true for adults as well as youth.

## **3. How does online porn affect young people's views on sex?**

- Whether we like it or not, Internet pornography has become the main sex ed for many boys and girls
- Internet pornography influences how they may think boys/girls are supposed to act like, what they are think they are supposed to like and be comfortable with or aroused by, what sex is or how to behave sexually and what language is expected for gender and sex.
- Research shows the content is far more about violence, aggression and degradation than sex. In fact in Bridges, et al's study shows less than 10% of the acts in top accessed porn videos could be coded as positive sexual acts; most were acts of violence or aggression.
- Given the nature of the content, viewers become aroused to far more deviant or body punishing sex than to acts of intimacy or caring connections.
- Given the ease of access, now most homes and technological devices are SOB's (Sexually Oriented Businesses)
- Yesterday's porn is today's mainstream media.
- While one Swedish study indicates there is no impact from youth's exposure there are meta-analysis of other studies that show a wide range of harmful effects. Not everyone who is

exposed is affected in the same way. The impact will vary depending on the initial age of exposure, how much exposure to what time of content and other risks and protective factors a child has.

- It's important to separate *sexually explicit materials* from *sexually exploitive materials*. I put pornography in the sexually exploitive materials - materials that make the degradation, body punishing or painful if not violent acts seem as if they are sexy and desirable. The problem is not depiction of sex or sexually explicit materials in and of themselves. The problem is the fusion and confusion of sex with violence and treatment women and children as sexual things for men's use. Sex and women and children are depicted as commodities. Women's pleasure doesn't matter in porn, it shows unrealistic expectations for males and females and sets the stage for more novelty – deviant acts, the new the different - to be craved and expected.

- For children and youth who are exposed early, intentionally or not, they can't unsee what they've seen. The images can stick in their brain and the mixed feelings they have (e.g, aroused, yet offended, put off or scared) can lead to curiosity to see more rather than to avoiding it.

- With sexually harmful acts perceived or framed as normal – almost expected – it can be very confusing for children and teens who are trying to figure out what is expected of them and what is “normal.”

- Studies also show there is a second hand effect from porn. Just as second hand smoke made it clear that smoking wasn't simply an individual rights issue, the reality is with pornography bleeding over into the hyper-sexualized media, and the ease of reach of Internet pornography, children/youth who don't consume it are still affected by the language, behaviors and expectations of those who do; hence, the second hand effect.

#### **4. What role do parents play in situations like this? (Are they to blame?)**

- It would help parents a lot if there wasn't so much to block against. Part of prevention is having those who are profiting from this held more accountable for its impact and to do what they can to protect unsuspecting viewers from potential harm.

- Parents can be informed: today's porn is not yesterday's porn (content/reach) and children youth can get access whether specifically looking for it or not.

- Many have said, this is the greatest social experiment ever. Young people have never had this ease of access to this type of material at this young of age. This alone should encourage us to be talking about it and studying it.

- All adults, not just individual parents, have a level of sexual neglect when we allow pornography to be the main sex educator of our youth.

- Parents, and other caring adults, have a critical role to play in educating boys and girls about sex including talking about the pink elephant – pornography. Pornography is everywhere. We don't want to further shame about curiosity about sex which is natural and perfectly normal. However, with hyper-sexualized images and pornography everywhere, we need to help our children navigate the sexually toxic environment.
- Parents can be a source of healthy, positive, realistic and respectful sexuality education for children and teens.
- Keep in mind, porn does not provide realistic roles of men/women, nor is it at all realistic as to what most men/women look like or what women want or what they respond sexually to. Further the types of degrading and body punishing sex and often racist acts are not what we want children or youth to learn to be aroused by and respond to.
- Parent can help by talking about our values and expectations and why we have concerns about the possible impact of porn.

***My Story with my son:***

*When my son was 11 years old, I explained that studies show boys see their first pornography at around his age. He rolled his eyes. In his mind that was the type of thing I may study for work but was not what he was into or interested in. I explained interest in sex is natural and that I wanted him to know if he had questions he could ask me or other adults he knows to get the information he needs. I didn't want him to get his information from pornography because it isn't realistic and is far more about violence than sex.*

*I also said that even if he wasn't into it his friends may be and he needed to know how to respond when they watched or expected him to watch.*

*That weekend he went to a friend's house for a sleepover. By all accounts he and a couple other boys slept through it when a boy downloaded pornography, that the parents hosting the party had no idea was so easily available through their accounts. The boy whose house it was woke to see what his guest was watching and was upset at him for having done that. I'd like to say my son came home and talked to me about this but I didn't hear about it until the parents called to say what had happened and to apologize. When they called the parents of the party guests they learned not all parents have the same perspective about 11 year olds watching porn. The mother of the boy who downloaded it asked "what's the big deal?" And further stated, "boys will be boys, it's just sex." And then added the often used conversation stopper, "What's your problem any way?"*

*In future talks with my son, he continued to say he was not a guy who was interested at all in porn. Even with that reality, he found it hard to admit that to other boys who clearly questioned his masculinity. It's hard to speak up against such expectations.*

## **5. How should parents talk to their teens about porn... and sex in general?**

Ideally, sex is an on-going matter of fact topic of discussion rather than one or two big, uncomfortable conversations. Conversations can start from birth as we help our little ones understand all the names for all the parts of their body and continue as they ask questions, their bodies change (puberty) and we help them understand the changes happening in their bodies. The news in real life and on television helps provide ample “teachable moments” to use as prompts for discussions and to find out what they are thinking.

Parents have the right, arguably the responsibility, to limit access to pornography just as they have the right if not responsibility to limit access to other harmful materials such as guns in the house or drugs including alcohol that can cause harm to young people.

We are increasingly hearing stories from parents whose young children found porn accidentally when searching for something else. For some it's on and off and the rare ones may even tell his or her parents what they found. However, many don't talk about it and find that while their first response wasn't positive, they think about it and then find themselves searching for more. One such story was of a 9 year old who accidentally found porn and then his behavior changed dramatically. He went from eagerly getting outside to play as soon as he could after school to coming home and shutting himself in his room to search for more such images. His mother had no idea of his exposure or the impact it was having, she only noted the change in his behavior. His mother is well informed, highly educated and perfectly comfortable with the discussions but wasn't thinking such exposure could happen so young.

Ideally, an environment is established where discussions and topics such as this are discussed regularly long before our children hear about it from others; that way they know it is not off limits and that it's okay to ask questions about it.

For some parents, part of what is challenging about this news story is that they find it tough to face that some youth choose to be sexually active at ages as young as 14 or 15 or are at parties where there is alcohol and sex. For others they are forced, tricked or manipulated into it and many parents are uncomfortable with discussions about sexual abuse and sexual violence with both their sons and daughters.

Again, it is important to me to differentiate between helpful or benign sexually explicit material from sexually exploitive/harmful pornography. The first category provides some sense of body affirmation, caring connections/relationships, respectful interactions and mutual pleasure.

Example of conversations prompts:

What do you know about \_(case/news report/incident at school)?

Did you know that more and more children/teens are seeing pornography at younger ages?

What do you think about that?

What do your friends think?

I just read this study or article that says \_\_\_\_; what do you think?

Come back lines are always easier when we've had a chance to think ahead about what would we do or say if...help your children or teens think through what they would do or say when friends are watching or expecting them to watch pornography, or when friends send images that are not appropriate/harmful/offensive.

It's easy to feel like you need to go along in order to show you're hip/cool/with it/sexually comfortable. Adults and youth alike are likely to be faced with belittling responses like "What's your problem?" "What's wrong with you?" "Don't you like sex?" by simply saying they are not into porn and don't choose to watch it or saying I don't accept or forward this kind of picture.

Most people back off when they realize your response is firm and that you aren't shaming them for their choice nor will you be shamed for yours. I've always told my kids they can blame me, "You know my mom, she works to prevent sexual abuse and sexual violence. Listening to her talk about it all the time, makes it so I just don't see anything positive about looking at this."

Other things that may help are:

"Yeah, I am a guy and I'm not into porn, just the way I am and I'm okay with it."

It just doesn't work for me to see women being treated like that

I'm curious about sex and everything, but just not into that.

**Possible resources** Canadian Center for Child Protection: *Self/Peer Exploitation*

[www.stoppornculture.org;](http://www.stoppornculture.org;)

[www.healthysex.com;](http://www.healthysex.com;)

[www.cordeliaanderson.com;](http://www.cordeliaanderson.com;)