DIOCESE OF MANCHESTER

Protecting Your Family from Electronic Pornography

These days, most of us rely on computers and electronic devices on a regular basis. Children and teens are using these devices as much, if not more than, their parents. Knowing this, most parents are justifiably concerned about the possibility of their children being accidentally exposed to inappropriate material and pornography while online. Many parents feel at a loss to fully protect their children because often young people know more about technology than adults. However, we cannot use this as an excuse to ignore the potential dangers to our children. To the contrary, it is the responsibility of every caring adult to learn all they can about this topic so as to protect young people from the risks that technology presents.

That is not to say that technology is bad. In fact, most of us would be hard-pressed to get through a day without our computer or cell phone. Not only are these items practically necessities in the 21st century, they can also be wonderful sources of information and fun! Children and teens cannot remember a time when computers, hand-held devices, and video games did not exist, and these high tech tools are not going to go away. Therefore, we need to strike a balance between having access to these technologies and keeping children safe from the inherent dangers.

When the topic of electronic pornography is raised, most people immediately think of computers. One might assume that having a good block or filtering device on your home computer will guarantee that your child will not be able to access or be exposed to inappropriate material. In reality, technology is changing so rapidly these days that pornography is now accessible through many other electronic venues such as Smartphones, video games, mp3 players, and other handheld devices. Any electronic device that can connect to the internet can be a potential avenue to pornographic material.

We must constantly change our approach to child safety as technology changes. The sad truth is that the organizations and people who promote pornography want your child to see it. Parents and concerned adults must work together and do all they can to oppose pornography and protect children.

Although not an all-inclusive list, the topics below highlight some positive steps that you as a parent or concerned adult can take in order to decrease the chances of your child being accidentally exposed to electronic pornography.

1. **Talk with your children about tech-safety**

Let your children know that just as with anything else, there are pros and cons to technology. Make sure your children know that there are safety rules to follow when using computers and other electronic gadgets. Just as we teach children not to associate with strangers in public, they need to be taught from a young age that they are not allowed to communicate with any strangers who contact them via email, chats, text messaging, while playing online video games, and so forth, even if those strangers seem friendly or claim to be their peers.

Be clear about what websites your children are allowed to view and which technology-related activities they are allowed to participate in. This will, of course, be at the parent's discretion and will vary according to a child's age.

Consider in advance:

- Is your child allowed to post pictures or videos online? If so, where?
- At what age will your child be allowed to have a cell phone, and what services (texting, video, internet, photo sharing) will be enabled on the phone?
- Will your child be allowed to use or own a laptop, and if so, at what age? Where can it be used and at what times of day?
- Can your child participate in social media, such as Facebook? Will he or she be required to "friend" you?
- Will you allow internet-enabled TV or streaming video services in your home, and if so, what restrictions will be in place?
- Is your child allowed to play online or internet-connected games that include chatting and if so, can your child use restricted or unrestricted chat features? What games is your child allowed to play and for how long?

It is much easier to establish rules about these topics in advance, rather than to try to backtrack after a privilege has been afforded. Once you have determined the rules for your household, consider posting them in a prominent place, such as near your family computer. You may want to consider having your child sign a contract agreeing to abide by the rules, with consequences spelled out if rules are not followed.

Even if you take every possible precaution in your own home, once your child leaves for a friend's house or even school or the public library, the same rules and safeguards may not be in effect. Therefore, it is important to make sure that your child knows that he should come to you if he encounters anything that makes him feel uncomfortable, whether at home or elsewhere. Review your family's rules frequently and make sure that your child understands that these rules apply away from home as well. Do not hesitate to speak with other parents to determine if their rules are consistent with yours. Ensure that there is adequate supervision when your child visits others' homes. If uncertain, encourage your child's friends to come to your home instead.

2. **Educate yourself**

Spend time with your children visiting the websites they enjoy and playing their favorite video or computer games together. Learn how to send text messages, and familiarize yourself with the abbreviated "chat" language that is currently in use. There are many free resources available to you that will help you learn how to use all the current gadgets, from taking a class at your local computer store to watching instructional videos on sites such as www.commonsensemedia.org* or reading tips and blogs on www.faithandsafety.org, a site designed by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

Taking an interest in your children's technology-related pastimes will help you to learn more about what they are doing, may improve your own understanding of technology, and will help you to determine what you view as acceptable and unacceptable. You might even find a fun new game that you and your children can enjoy playing together!

3. **Monitor your children's use of the internet, video games, cell phones, ipods, television, and other technology**

Monitoring your children's use of technology is not easy but it is worth the time and effort. Computers, video games, and the like should not be used as babysitters. Unfortunately, even seemingly innocent websites may have links to illicit content through clickable icons or advertisements. Most video game systems now have the capacity for internet access or unrestricted chatting with strangers who can send unsolicited messages and website links. Most mp3 players, cell phones, and e-readers have the capability to download and play videos. Any device that can be connected to the internet has the potential for access to pornographic material.

Keep your computers (including laptops and tablets) and video game consoles in public places in the home, such as a kitchen or family room, rather than in a child's room. For younger children, consider restricting computer and video game use to one hour per day or to weekends-only. This is more difficult with older children who probably need to use computers for homework, but with this age group, you may want to establish a "computer curfew," at which time the device must be turned off for the evening.

Establish rules about cell phone use; for example, you may want your "tween" to carry a cell phone for safety purposes, but is he allowed to use it to text friends? Is your teenager allowed to access the internet via his cell phone? If so, you will need to monitor online activity on the phone as well. As with computers, establishing a cell phone shut-off time can be very helpful to all involved.

Check the history menu on computers and laptops regularly in order to monitor what websites your child is visiting. If the history menu is blank, this is a red flag because it means that the history has been purposely erased. This should prompt a conversation.

Learn your child's passwords and make it clear that you will occasionally check her email, social networking, and other accounts in order to ensure that she is behaving responsibly. If you come across personal information or inappropriate photographs that your teen has posted online, explain what it is about the posts that concerns you and have her delete them.

Install blocks or filtering software on all devices

There are some simple safeguards available on all newer internet-enabled devices that take just a few minutes to set up. First, password-protect each device so that only the

adults in the home have the ability to change security settings. Then set the parental controls to a child-safe level which blocks questionable content. You should also enable pop-up blockers on computers and laptops, which help to prevent inappropriate material from popping up unexpectedly.

Set the search engines (e.g., Google) on your internet-enabled devices to a "safe search" level which filters out inappropriate images and websites when a search is conducted. You can find instructions here: https://faithandsafety.org/safe-web-browsing.

For additional safety, you may wish to purchase and install filtering or tracking software. Filtering software can be installed on your computer in order to filter out questionable content, language, and websites. Tracking products allow a parent to monitor a child's activity when online. Many internet providers now provide these products, or they can be purchased in any electronics department.

In addition to computers, laptops and Smartphones, most gaming consoles, televisions, cable TV providers, streaming media boxes, and DVD and Blu-ray players also have built-in parental control options. These controls allow you to block gaming activities (such as chat features) or television channels/ratings that you deem inappropriate; some even allow you to limit usage. The instructions are provided with your game system, television, or cable guide and are easy to follow.

Keep in mind that no filter or block is fool-proof. However, taking these steps does reduce the chance that your child will be accidentally exposed to pornography and other inappropriate content.

4. **Ask questions *before* purchasing electronic products and services**

Technology is constantly changing and it may seem impossible to understand the capabilities of each and every new device. Therefore, it is very important to ask safety-related questions *before* you purchase an item. The salesperson should be knowledgeable about the device or service and will be able to answer your questions about its capabilities. Some product manufacturers and stores have consumer safety guides which provide detailed information and guidance regarding choosing child-safe products, so be sure to ask if a guide is available.

When purchasing a new electronic product or service, here are some questions you may want to ask the salesperson before making a decision:

- Is the device internet enabled? If so, is it possible to block internet capacity or restrict internet access to family-friendly sites?
- Does the device have the ability to send and receive text messages, photographs, or videos? If so, is it possible to block or restrict these features?
- Is this product (such as a video game or gaming system) rated as appropriate for children? If rated Teen or Mature, why? Can settings be changed to block access to certain types of material?

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- Is it possible to restrict use to certain times of the day?
- Does this product have Parental Controls? How do I use them? Is there support to help me set the controls if I don't understand the instructions?
- Are there other options available that are more family-friendly?

5. Spend time together as a family

You may have noticed that many of the examples and tips provided thus far are based upon good communication, healthy family relationships, and consistent parental involvement. The outcome to strengthening your relationship with your children is that they will feel more comfortable discussing these matters with you and coming to you if a problem arises.

Set a good example for your children by praying and worshipping together as a family, eating meals together, and getting involved in activities that are not technology-related. Most children prefer to spend time away from technology when the time is spent with their parents. If you enjoy spending time on the computer or using other high-tech devices, share these interests with your child and model appropriate use.

Send a clear and consistent message to your children that you oppose pornography by refraining from accessing questionable internet sites, television shows, and other media. When opportunities arise to discuss issues relating to pornography and other forms of exploitation, seize the chance and allow your child to hear you clearly expressing your values and opinions.

6. Lobby the technology industry for better products and services

Do not hesitate to contact companies or service providers and voice your opinion about their products. If you come across a family-friendly product or service, praise the company and tell others about it. If you are unhappy about a product or service, complain and warn others against it.

* This website is not endorsed by the Diocese of Manchester