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How Pornography Harms Children: The Advocate's Role

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Easy access to online pornography and the potential harm of consistent exposure raise concerns about children's health and well-being. The Internet has made children's access to pornography a more significant issue. Children and youth who use email or surf the Internet are at risk for unwanted exposure to pornography.¹

Although blocking and filtering software can prevent access, unwanted and intentional exposure is always possible.² In 2005, a study of youth aged 10-17 found 42% reported wanted and unwanted exposure to online pornography in the past

year.³ Continued exposure to pornography can have negative effects on children and youth.

Lawyers who represent children and youth should be aware of the possibility of such exposure and prepared to advocate for them.

How Pornography Harms Children Normalizes Sexual Harm

Research shows that “media has a tremendous capacity to teach.”⁴ Excessive media use, particularly where the content is violent, gender-stereotyped, and/or sexually explicit, skews children’s world view, increases high-risk behaviors, and alters their capacity for successful and sustained human relationships.⁵

Dr. Sharon Cooper, a forensic pediatrician and faculty member at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine, maintains that “imagery definitely affects children” and that children receive unhealthy sexual images from adult pornography.⁶ According to Dr. Cooper, pornography normalizes sexual harm by portraying a lack of emotional relationship between consensual partners, unprotected sexual contact, and, in some instances, violence and rape.⁷

Dr. Cooper argues that children and youth are more vulnerable to pornographic images than adults because of mirror neurons in the brain, which convince people that they are actually experiencing what they see.⁸ Mirror neurons play an important role in how children learn. Children learn in large part by imitation, with mirror neurons involved in the process of observing what other people do and imitating those behaviors.⁹ Pornography may have stronger effects among children and youth than other forms of media because it shows a much higher degree of sexual explicitness.¹⁰

Promotes Aggression towards Women

Pornography is arguably more sexist and hostile towards women than other sexual images in the media.¹¹ The aggression and violence towards women found in much of today's popular pornography can teach boys and young men that it is socially acceptable, and even desirable, to behave aggressively towards and demean women.

Pornography also portrays people and sexual relationships that do not accurately reflect how real people look and act and behave in intimate relationships. Unrealistic expectations of intimate partners may impede youths' ability to build and maintain healthy relationships.

Shapes Negative Attitudes and Behaviors towards Women

Studies on sexual content and violence in the media indicate that youth accept, learn from, and may emulate behaviors portrayed in the media as normative, attractive, and without risk.¹² This is particularly concerning in light of the amount of pornographic materials that portray violence towards women. Past studies of the content of pornography concluded that the typical sexual script focuses on the sexual desires and prowess of men.¹³ A 2010 study of 50 popular pornographic films suggests that popular pornography contains high levels of physical and verbal aggression.¹⁴ The study found that only 10.2% of pornographic scenes did not contain an aggressive act.¹⁵ Physical aggression occurred in 88.2% of scenes and verbal aggression in 48.7%.¹⁶ Men committed 70.3% of all aggressive acts and 94.4% of aggression was directed towards women.¹⁷

A 2009 analysis of studies on pornography and violence towards women reveals a significant relationship between pornography consumption and attitudes supporting violence towards women.¹⁸ The relationship is much stronger for violent as compared to nonviolent pornography.¹⁹ A 2001-2004 survey of middle and high school youth found 76% of boys who reported committing some form of sexual harassment also reported use of sexually explicit media.²⁰

A 2006 to 2008 survey of youth aged 10-15 found that youth who reported exposure to pornographic materials were 6.5 times more likely to report sexually aggressive behavior.²¹ Youth who reported exposure to nonviolent material were more than three times as likely to report sexually aggressive behavior, while youth who reported exposure to violent material were 24 times more likely to report sexually aggressive behavior.²²

Affects Healthy Intimate Relationships

Establishing romantic and sexual relationships is a central developmental task for youth and young adults.²³ Exposure to sexual content can compromise their ability to establish and maintain healthy intimate relationships. Sexual socialization theory suggests frequent exposure to consistent themes about gender and sexual behavior can affect a young person's developing sense of what is expected sexually for men and women and may also affect later behavior.²⁴ As mentioned earlier, for example, studies show a significant correlation between the use of pornography and aggressive attitudes and behaviors towards women.²⁵

Sexual content on television often sends messages about sexuality that are distorted, stereotypical, and potentially harmful.²⁶ Frequent viewing of sexually oriented TV content like soap operas, music videos, and prime time programs is associated with greater acceptance of common sexual

stereotypes and dysfunctional beliefs about relationships.²⁷ A 2006 survey of high school youth aged 14-18 found regular media use was associated with support of sexual stereotypes and that youth who reported watching television for companionship were more likely to agree that sex is recreationally oriented, men are sex-driven, and women are sexual objects.²⁸ Media images also offer information about sexual relationships without addressing the risks and responsibilities of sex, such as pregnancy and STIs.²⁹

If television can have such negative effects on children and youth, pornography, with its more violent and graphic images, can have an even greater impact. Research shows that young adults who are repeatedly exposed to pornography may have lower levels of trust in intimate partners and may lose hope of finding sexual exclusivity with a partner.³⁰

Can Lead to Addiction

Addiction is a risk for children and youth who continually access pornographic materials. In simple terms, addiction involves an activity that was once enjoyable and eventually evolves into a necessity.³¹ Addiction is an extension of reward-based learning that can physically alter the brain and affect later behavior.³² It is traditionally characterized by an uncontrollable urge, often resulting in loss of control, preoccupation with use, and continued use despite problems caused by the behavior.³³ The medical field has recognized

that pornography consumption can be problematic. The recently updated DSM-V includes the diagnosis Hypersexual Disorder, which includes the compulsive use of pornography.³⁴

Children and teens are capable of developing compulsive sexual behaviors, which can lead to sexual addiction.³⁵ A research article published in 2000 found an increasing number of children and youth seeing mental health professionals for issues related to online sexual activities.³⁶ The time a child or youth spends online may indicate a disorder when it results in clinically significant impairment or distress.³⁷ Failure to resist the urge to view pornographic images, despite the negative effects the behavior has on social or recreational functioning, is a sign of impairment.³⁸

Medical literature supports the premise that a person with one addiction is likely to have another.³⁹ Youth are more likely than adults to be diagnosed with more than one mental health issue, including sexual acting out, substance abuse, and other disorders.⁴⁰ Personality disorders, mood and anxiety disorders, and substance abuse and dependence are associated with sexual compulsivity.⁴¹ People recovering from drug addiction are at risk for sexual addiction, as they may “engage in substitute behaviors that serve similar pleasurable functions.”⁴² Physical, sexual, family, and social trauma can also lead to the development of sexual addiction or

compulsivity.⁴³ A history of sexual behavior problems is another potential indicator for online sexual addiction.⁴⁴

Sexual addiction for children and youth “likely sets up a life-long struggle” in which the youth’s focus, biological reward system, and behavior are interwoven with “themes of sexual pleasure.”⁴⁵ Lack of impulse control (a consequence of addiction) may lead those addicted to pornography and/or other online sexual activities to engage with sexually inappropriate or deviant material.⁴⁶ Addiction can also impact other areas of a person’s life. For example, excessive use of the Internet for nonacademic purposes has been linked to poor academic performance.⁴⁷

What Can Lawyers Do?

Lawyers who represent children and youth can take several steps when a client has been exposed to pornography or faces potential exposure.

Be aware that exposure to pornography is a possibility.

Know how consistent exposure to pornography can harm children and youth and how exposure may manifest itself. If a male client has behaved aggressively towards his girlfriend or a client seems to have unhealthy attitudes about intimate relationships, this may be a sign that the client has been

overexposed to pornography. Unhealthy attitudes about intimate relationships include viewing oneself or one's partner as a sexual object and ignoring the risks of unprotected sexual contact, such as STIs and unwanted pregnancy.

Know the risk factors for pornography addiction or compulsive pornography use.

These include mood and anxiety disorders, substance abuse, and other mental health issues. Be more vigilant about the possibility of exposure in cases in which these factors are present.

Avoid labeling and dismissing clients who act aggressively towards and/or have unrealistic expectations of their intimate partners as "sexual offenders" or "problem children."

Labeling youth does not help them and may irrevocably damage the attorney-client relationship. This could impair your ability to effectively advocate for the client. Instead, be aware that these undesirable behaviors and attitudes may stem partly from the influence of media, including pornography, and perceived societal expectations.

Be prepared to address the question of pornography exposure with the client and provide the client appropriate information about healthy expectations and behaviors in intimate relationships.

Avoid adopting an accusatory or judgmental tone when bringing up this topic with the client. The client may become defensive if he believes he is being judged. If the client has been exposed, he may feel embarrassed or ashamed and may also fear that he will get in trouble.

Remember that even small children can be exposed to pornography and use age-appropriate language when asking the client about potential exposure to pornography and other sexually explicit media. Depending on the strength of the attorney-client relationship, it may help to ask someone else the client trusts, such as a parent, foster parent, social worker, etc., to speak to the client about this subject. Take time to talk to the client's parents, foster parents, social workers, teachers, and other adults in the client's life about possible exposure to pornography.

Be aware of local and community resources for youth with sexually

aggressive or problem behaviors that do not involve juvenile detention.

Advocate for your clients' participation in those programs. Also be aware of available treatment centers and resources for youth who are at risk for or who are struggling with addiction. Some mental health professionals may be certified in the treatment of sex/pornography addiction. The International Institute for Trauma and Addiction Professionals (IITAP), for example, offers a certification program for sex addiction therapy. IITAP and the Sexual Recovery Institute have lists of treatment specialists and other resources available on their websites.

Conclusion

Exposure to pornography harms children and youth by normalizing sexual violence, creating unrealistic expectations for intimate partners and relationships, and increasing the risk of addiction. Lawyers who represent children and youth should be aware that exposure to pornography may be at the root of some of their clients' undesirable behaviors and should take care not to label their clients as "problem children" or "sexual offenders." Children's lawyers should know the risk factors and signs of exposure and be prepared to advocate for and address these needs.

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Endnotes

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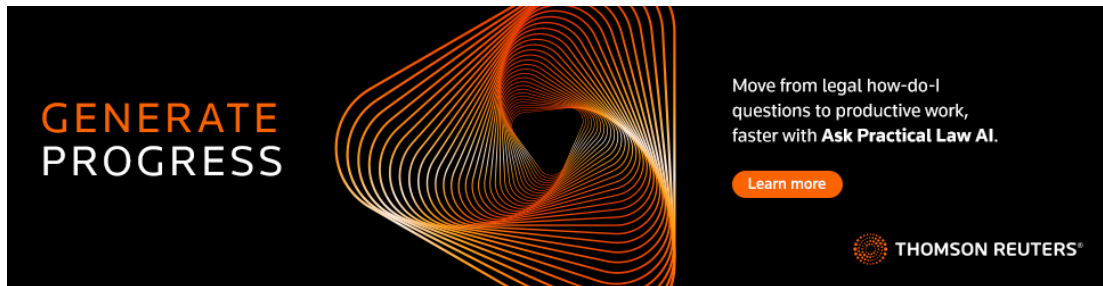
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