



The #1 Mistake Parents Make when warning ADHD Kids about Porn

Adapted from article by: Kristen A. Jenson, MA, 2/25/25
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A concerned mom wrote to us about her 11-year-old son who seems compelled to do or look up anything his mom says is dangerous. She is convinced that he will go and look up “pornography” if she has the conversation with him.

A mother sitting down talking with her young son.
I get it! Many sincere parents have expressed the same concerns to me.

In fact, the #1 mistake parents make is letting fear prevent them from initiating these conversations with their ADHD or otherwise neurodivergent kids.

I always recommend taking a step back to consider the following:

1. Knowledge leads to more informed parenting. Any child who attends a public school, or even a private school, or is involved in sports or any other activity with kids in the community, may have already been exposed to pornography—especially by age 11. But you won't know, unless you talk with your child about it.

2. Neurodiverse kids need more training in digital defense skills, not less. Many experts believe that due to higher impulsivity and executive center dysfunction, kids with ADHD, as with kids on the autism spectrum, have a higher risk for:

- substance abuse,
- porn addiction, and
- risky behavior, including risky sex.

One study showed that adults with problematic pornography use and hypersexuality were more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD, especially if they had other factors such as high stress, anxiety, and depression.

3. ADHD kids need a practiced plan to reject porn. Because they're more impulsive and lack planning skills, they're less likely to be able to understand what they should do if they come across pornography.

According to the preeminent ADHD researcher Dr. Russell Barkley, individuals with ADHD must actively practice executive function skills to strengthen them. He explains:

"To develop strong executive function skills, individuals need to repeatedly practice self-monitoring, self-stopping, seeing the future, saying the future, feeling the future, and playing with the future so as to effectively 'plan and go' toward that future."

This is why simply telling an ADHD child what to do isn't enough. By mentally rehearsing their response, they can be better prepared. Encourage them to visualize a scenario:

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- Imagine they're using a device and an inappropriate image pops up.
- What's the first thing they do?
- What happens next?

By practicing this mental imagery, your child will be more likely to follow through rather than acting impulsively.

4. Neurodiverse kids process information differently. Autistic individuals tend to take things at face value and it can be difficult for them to determine what is real and what is not. What they think is a real online relationship may only be subterfuge, making them more vulnerable to predators. Similarly, ADHD kids, due to impulsivity, may engage in risky online interactions without fully considering the consequences. So parents are wise to be concerned.

5. No kid deserves to face the porn industry alone. Most kids will see porn at some point. Which is the better situation? To see porn after you have talked with your child about it or to see it before your guidance and warning so they're completely caught off guard?

6. Help your child develop an INTERNAL filter. It takes time and training, but the only filter that can work in every situation is your child's internal filter. Your child needs to develop a disposition to reject pornography and understand why they will be happier when they do.

My best advice for parents of ADHD kids

Don't make the mistake of avoiding these protective conversations.

7 Tips for Talking with ADHD Kids About Porn

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1) Time your talks. Plan to begin the talks about rejecting pornography when your child has the most control and focus—maybe earlier in the day rather than in the evening.

2) Be strategic. Plan something fun and distracting to do right after your talk. This will give your child time for their impulsivity to fade and time to let their "thinking" brain gain more control over their impulses.

3) Employ risk-taking and adventure. Author and sociologist Jonathon Haidt makes the point that kids need unsupervised play that involves some risk. As a society, we've made our kids' physical play almost too safe (and largely ignored their digital safety). Some kids crave thrill-seeking more than others. If your child needs adventure, find ways to satisfy that need so they don't seek thrills in more dangerous ways online.

4) Teach brain science. Teach them about their thinking brain and their feeling brain by reading Good Pictures Bad Pictures: Porn-Proofing Today's Young Kids. (For younger kids, ages 3-7, make sure to start with Good Pictures Bad Pictures Jr.) You can use this "two brain" concept for other parenting situations, as well. One parent we know helped their child who was on the autism spectrum to gain more emotional control by thinking about which brain was in control when he was having a meltdown.

5) Develop digital defense skills. Go through our Brain Defense: Digital Safety family curriculum with him in 10 shorter lessons, instead of the 5 longer lessons. This curriculum is taught by older teen peers and they cover a wide range of digital safety issues. Your child will hear these fun, positive teens say that it's a bad idea to look at porn and this will powerfully augment the messaging he is receiving from you.

6) Set up layers of device safety. Make sure all of your devices in your home are locked down as much as possible. Here are key steps to take:

- Use filtering on your Wifi. Routers such as Gryphon and Orbi have parental controls built in. The Bark Home device is another great option to add to your home WiFi if your router doesn't have built-in parental controls.
- Implement device-level protection. Even with a secure WiFi network, devices need individual filtering solutions. Use tools like Canopy or the Bark app to block explicit content before it loads.
- Test everything. See our Tackle the Tech articles and Instagram explainer reels.
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7) Consider using websites over apps on a device because they can be filtered. Realize that many apps have backdoors to the internet.

Continue the conversations. We all need regular reminders to practice safety and kids are no exception. Be a safe person to talk with—keep calm and thank your child when they tell you they've seen pornography or heard something disturbing. Responding with love and patience is key.