

It's Easy Out Here for a Pimp: How a Porn Culture Grooms Kids for Sexual Exploitation

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Note: This slideshow contains some animations (points where different elements on a slide appear in succession). Wherever you see [*], click and a new element will appear on the slide.

- **Title**

Good morning [afternoon, evening], and welcome. I want to thank you for asking me here to discuss the ways that our corporate media culture is hurting all of us, but especially children and young people, by selling us a set of toxic and distorted messages about gender, power, and sexuality. These issues aren't easy to talk about, but we have to confront them together if we want to create a better future for ourselves and our kids.

- SPC front page

This presentation was developed for the non-profit organization Stop Porn Culture, whose first educational slideshow is used by activists and educators across the U.S. and in several other countries. While that presentation focuses on the pornography industry, this one explores how mainstream media increasingly target children and teenagers with unhealthy and regressive messages about sex and relationships. Parents and other caring adults need to understand the culture their kids are living in, and they need some tools for talking with them about it.

Although most of this presentation concerns mainstream media, a section in the middle does contain some images taken from contemporary pornography. Thus, no one under age 18 should be in the room. You'll know when this section is coming up, so you can leave or duck your head if you don't want to view the pornographic images.

- Hustle and Flow

For those who don't recognize the reference in the title, it comes from "Hustle and Flow," a movie about a young black man named DJay, played by Terrence Howard, who pimps young women as he works to develop his own career as a hip-hop artist.

- Song lyrics

As you may know, the movie's song "It's hard out here for a pimp" won the Academy Award for Best Original Song in 2006.

Whatever the artistic merits of either the movie or the song, their mainstream popularity relies significantly on their reflecting our societal stereotype of the black, “ghetto” street pimp.

- The real pimps

But in fact, our society’s most powerful and influential pimps don’t reflect this image. Wealthy white men like Hugh Hefner, Larry Flynt, Bob Guccione, and “Girls Gone Wild” owner Joe Francis fly under the radar as we focus our attention on the racialized street pimp stereotype.

These men, and many other purveyors of both pornography and mainstream popular media, are creating a culture in which virtually all young people are being groomed for sexual exploitation.

- “Groom” (definition)

To groom someone for some role or function is simply to train or prepare them for it. Often this is perfectly benign, as when a party grooms a prospective political candidate, or a boss grooms a valued employee as his or her replacement. But when the grooming is for sexual service and sexual abuse, it’s far from benign. To groom a child or teenager, a pimp or molester has to gain her or his trust, weaken her or his connections to caring adults, and break down her or his limits and boundaries: “Come on, just this once . . . if you don’t like it, I’ll never ask again . . . don’t you even know how sexy you are?”

- Grooming family and community

But grooming the child is not enough. To ensure that responsible people in the child’s life won’t get in the abuser’s way, they too have to be groomed: to think it’s no big deal, to allow or even welcome the abuser into the child’s world, and—most of all—to see what’s happening as perfectly *normal*.

As important as it is to recognize when an individual perpetrator is grooming one or more children for abuse, we also need to understand that a similar grooming process is taking place at a broader *cultural* level . . .

- Thesis claim

. . . that in fact, our pornified, commercialized, and sexually toxic media culture is grooming kids and teens for sexual exploitation and abuse, while grooming adults to accept this process as normal.

The cultural grooming takes place on two levels. First, if you are a perpetrator, then the culture is doing a lot of your grooming for you: many of the cultural messages that bombard our kids from an early age render them extraordinarily vulnerable to individuals who would abuse them sexually.

Even more disturbingly, the culture itself is functioning as a perpetrator—such that, increasingly, many kids (especially girls) who have not been sexually abused by individual perpetrators will display symptoms and behavior similar to those who have. The culture itself has been their abuser.

- Groomed for what?

While pimps are probably the ultimate grooming experts, most kids (thankfully) will not end up selling (or buying) sex in brothels or on street corners. But kids and young people *are* being groomed to accept and act out the sexuality of prostitution—to see sex as something to be bought, sold, and bartered, and to see this commodification as normal and even beneficial.

- Boys . . .

Boys as well as girls are groomed as victims by individual perpetrators. At the broader cultural level, however, boys are primarily groomed to become—in the words of sexuality educator Cordelia Anderson—“users, takers, and pornography makers.” While this presentation focuses primarily on the grooming of girls, it is important to emphasize that, by training boys to think and act like pimps and johns, the culture disrupts their healthy sexual development and robs them of the potential for intimacy.

- Girls . . .

Meanwhile, by relentlessly bombarding girls with the “slut” image, the culture teaches them that their value lies primarily in their bodies and in their ability to attract male attention. But when they try to approximate that image, they are not rewarded, but rather blamed and vilified.

- Hooters girl in training

Don’t take it from me: the “training” theme is often overt in our highly sexualized popular culture. Girls learn quickly the kinds of roles, attitudes, and positions for which they are expected to “train” . . .

- Stripper/MILF/porn star in training

. . . and given these examples, the Hooters “training” T-shirts seem comparatively tame.

- How it happens: Normalization model

Now as we saw a moment ago, a key element of the grooming process is making something seem normal and acceptable. The “normalization model” tracks how something can go from being considered “bad,” or even criminal, to being considered “no big deal,” and then even to being valued as good. This is not always a bad thing: for instance, over the last several decades many parts of society have gradually moved from demonizing and criminalizing gay and lesbian people to accepting homosexuality as perfectly normal and healthy. But when what’s being

normalized is the sexualization of children, then this process is very damaging: our image of adult sexual interest in children and teens goes from criminal (as in the top right) to idealized and glamorized (as in the image from “American Beauty”).

- Compliant victimization

Too often, what results from this normalization process is what some trauma researchers call “compliant victimization.” Being groomed by an individual perpetrator, by a sexually toxic culture, or both may alter a young person’s beliefs, values, and identity to the point where she apparently consents to—or even encourages—her own exploitation and violation.

In short: just because a young person complies, that doesn’t mean she’s not being victimized! A compliant victim is no less harmed by her abuse, but her compliance makes it harder for others to recognize the abuse, and easier for them to legitimize it: since after all, “she wants it.” [*]

So in fact, it’s very *easy* out here for a pimp . . . whether it’s a pimp who looks like DJay, or one who looks like Joe Francis. In the remainder of this presentation, I’ll illustrate these patterns: how does our culture season girls to emulate and internalize the sexuality of prostitution?

- **Where kids live: The media landscape**

Let’s begin with a brief tour of the mainstream media landscape where most kids live—keeping in mind that, in effect, all media is children’s media. (That is, there is no wall separating “kids’ media” from everything else: kids watch everything!)

- Who’s telling the story?

First, to put these issues in perspective: what is culture for, and who controls ours?

The central function of all culture is to tell stories: about who we are, how we should behave, and what we should value. In contemporary U.S. culture, this function has been handed over wholesale to a mostly-unregulated corporate media that has, in the words of media critic George Gerbner, “little to tell, but a lot to sell.”

In this mass-media landscape, the most pervasive and influential mode of communication is not through words, still less arguments or lines of thought, but rather through *images*.

Images are extraordinarily powerful. When we’re confronted with images, especially photographic ones, we don’t ask “what,” “why,” or “who says”; our brains just say “right, that’s how it is.” And, predictably, by far the most dominant images are those that enable corporations to sell us things. Alternative, non-commercial images (and stories) are crowded out.

The stakes are high in this game because—as we’ll see—what is constantly sold to us in this hypercommercial media environment is not only products but ideas, values, norms, and identities.

- Youth and media use

Kids and adolescents are immersed in this commercialized media world; it is the air they breathe and the sea they swim in. They spend as much time with media—TV, computers, video games, and more—as they spend in school (and probably paying closer attention, too). What they encounter in this technologically sophisticated media world is overwhelmingly what one writer has called . . .

- Pornified

. . . pornified. A pornified culture is one in which raunchy, explicit, and often misogynist themes and images pervade the cultural landscape. I'll briefly illustrate these characteristics of a pornified culture, moving quickly toward those that particularly affect children and teens.

- Collage: Maxim, FHM, etc.

If you live in this culture and you're not a complete hermit, then you live your daily life in a veritable sea of highly sexualized images of female bodies. As you can see, there's a striking sameness in these images: the women are young, mostly white, and "beautiful" or sexy according to conventional standards. Above all, they appear to be sexually available and willing.

- Pop stars

It's virtually impossible for female pop stars these days to avoid fitting themselves into the pornified mold (though, admittedly, some seem more fanatical about it than others).

- Pussycat Dolls

The latest innovation is to create female pop groups, like the Pussycat Dolls, for the primary purpose of being presented as sexual commodities.

- Hollywood's most powerful actresses

Many of Hollywood's most powerful and respected actresses (like Nicole Kidman, Jennifer Aniston, and Maggie Gyllenhaal) are stripped for public consumption – while their male counterparts (Brad Pitt, George Clooney, James Gandolfini) get to keep their clothes on.

- Teri Hatcher

In such an environment, it's not surprising that even sexual abuse fits seamlessly into a glossy, glamorous frame. This Vanity Fair interview with Teri Hatcher, in which she discussed her lasting trauma from being molested by her uncle beginning at age five, was promoted with highly seductive and sexualized images.

- Danika Patrick

But it's not just actresses and pop stars: accomplished women in virtually every field are relentlessly sexualized. Sometimes it seems as if, the more otherwise threatening a woman's achievements may be—as with Danika Patrick in the virtually all-male world of auto racing—the more essential it becomes to pornify her.

- Palin, Clinton

In the most recent presidential election season, both Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin were routinely summed up in terms of their anticipated effects on male genitalia.

- Men buying/selling women and girls is normal/acceptable

In this cultural climate, it is considered normal and beyond question for men and boys to buy and sell female sexuality . . . both in person and in plasticized, homogenized images.

- Sex industry promoted in mainstream media

And industries of sexual exploitation are routinely celebrated as glamorous, exciting, and fun for all involved. [Note the irony of the porn-star sex advice genre: you can buy a book to tell you how to have sex like women who get paid to pretend that they're having fun having sex!]

It's vital to understand why these kinds of images and products are all over the place. It's not just because we're all so hip and sexually liberated nowadays. Rather, many mainstream corporations have financial stakes in the porn world, and so they have a profit-based motive to portray that world in positive, appealing ways.

- Women/girls encouraged to emulate strippers and porn stars

From “strip aerobics” classes at the local gym to “Pimp-n-Ho” parties on college campuses, girls and women are being encouraged to model themselves after some of our society's most sexually abused women.

- MTV, GGW etc.

And it works! . . . Here we see young girls obediently stripping and gyrating for the cameras of MTV and Girls Gone Wild.

- Sex and the City

The 2008 movie “Sex and the City” exemplified the ultimate merging of commercialism and pornified sexuality. Brand-name products—Manolo Blahnik shoes, Prada handbags, and so on—are central to the film's storyline and infused with profound emotional significance. Vogue's special issue promoting the movie featured photos of Carrie's imagined honeymoon with Mr. Big, including this one, in which he points a video camera between her legs. (How romantic!)

- **But hasn't it always been like this? – sex sells!**

Now we might wonder if there's really anything all that new here -- after all, "sex sells" and always has.

- "Sex sells" is used to silence us

But we need to blow the whistle on the old "sex sells" canard. While it's true that corporations have long found sexuality to be a useful tool in selling products, it's not just any old "sex" that they're pushing. Rather, it's a particular version of sex that involves hypersexualization (sex everywhere you look all the time), sexual objectification (presenting people, mostly female, as things for sexual consumption), and sexism (reductive and damaging gender stereotypes).

Media corporations know that it is not just "sex" that sells, but *women* presented as sex [*]: as one magazine editor blithely observes, "women just tend to sell better than men on our covers."

Furthermore, there's no denying that these trends have ramped up dramatically in the past couple of decades.

- Then and now -- pop stars

For example, compare a couple of pop-star images from the 1980's to more recent such images.

- Then and now – images of girls

And while sexualized images of young girls occasionally appeared in ads in the 1970's and early 1980's, such images did not pervade the cultural landscape in anything like the way they do now. These images, like this one of then 15-year-old Brooke Shields, got a lot of attention at the time precisely because they were relatively unusual. By contrast, note that the recent ad on the right portrays not just a seductive-looking girl but what appears to be a child streetwalker.

- Child/woman collage – what's the difference?

In the contemporary media landscape, images of highly sexualized little girls and childified images of adult women run together seamlessly. Everywhere we see grown women and little girls in the same fetishized clothing, in the same poses, with the same facial expressions. Who can tell the difference? . . . There must not *be* a very important difference.

- Reese Witherspoon and Dakota Fanning

The March 2006 issue of *Vanity Fair* provided a particularly dramatic illustration, presenting then-30-year-old Oscar-winning actress Reese Witherspoon as a vacant, knock-kneed little girl, while then-12-year-old Dakota Fanning wore an off-the-shoulder evening gown and a knowingly come-hither expression.

- Miley (and Billy Ray) Cyrus

Sexualizing young girls seems to be a particular forte for Vanity Fair, which got major attention in June 2008 for these suggestive photos of then 15-year-old pop star Miley Cyrus. While the loudest buzz was about the picture on the right, at least equally disturbing is the one on the left, showing Miley and her father, Billy Ray Cyrus, in an unmistakably romantic pose.

- Maddison Gabriel

Australian model Maddison Gabriel took the modeling world by storm at the ripe old age of twelve, sparking some controversy (at least in Australia) about the uses and portrayals of very young models. The controversy focused mostly on whether Maddison had freely chosen to model and whether she was being exploited; thus questions about individual choice drowned out any critical attention to the broader cultural implications of sexualizing young girls.

Her manager brushed aside criticism, saying that “Maddison has only ever done age appropriate jobs She hasn't done anything that is going to make her into any form of sex object or anything.” Maddison Gabriel has now been signed to Elite Model Management, a major New York-based agency.

As images *of* young girls continue to morph into a pornified mold, so too do many of the images and products being sold *to* young girls.

- Disney's female characters

Many observers have noted the dramatic sexualization of female Disney characters over the last 20 years or so. Granted, Disney has never been known as a bastion of feminism, but the female characters' specifically “sexy” look has a more recent advent.

- Bratz

The Bratz product line has come in for some well-justified criticism, as the highly glamorized, sexualized dolls and related products are marketed to girls as young as three and four.

- Age compression – Bratz book

Bratz is one of many examples of what's called “age compression” – the marketing of adult products and teen attitude to younger and younger kids. The absurdities of this approach might almost be funny if they weren't so sad: this Bratz book enlightens six-year-old girls on such topics as “luscious lips,” designing one's own sexy skirt, and “being an irresistible flirt.”

- Little girls emulating Bratz, products etc.

Little girls are sold products like costumes, makeup and even bras to help them achieve the “Bratz look.” And now, to reach an even younger market . . .

- Baby Bratz (read ad copy)

. . . we have “Baby Bratz,” who, we’re told, “already know how to flaunt it, and they’re keepin’ it real in the crib!”

In this market, it’s hard for less glamorized children’s characters to compete.

- What’s next? – Dora

Mattel and Nickelodeon have recently "updated" Dora the Explorer to compete with the more Bratz-like products. Here one artist imagined what a revamped Dora might look like. The real thing isn't quite that bad, as it turns out, but it's not good either [*]: according to the companies, the Dora Links fashion doll marries “girls’ existing love of Dora . . . with the fashion doll play and online experiences older girls enjoy.” The online experiences include “changing Dora’s hair length, jewelry, and eye color” onscreen.

- Heelarious

Even a “joke” item like these soft “high heel” shoes for infants exemplifies the trend – particularly when it gets heavily promoted everywhere from the Today show to Us Weekly.

- Playboy brand marketed to girls

Playboy routinely markets its brand to very young girls. The company denies it of course, but kids know better: one news article on this trend quotes a 12-year-old saying that she and her friends have “outgrown” the Playboy-bunny merchandise, that it’s really for the younger girls.

- Self-objectification

For a girl to adopt a prostituted sexuality, first she has to learn to treat her own body as a thing that exists to please others. According to the American Psychological Association, self-objectification is “a key process whereby girls learn to think of and treat their own bodies as objects of others’ desires.” More specifically, a girl must “internalize the male gaze” . . . so the constant question is not just “how do I look?” but “how do I look to *him*?”

- Are you fat?

The messages are reinforced everywhere. This is a quiz that you can take on Myspace, in case you’re for some reason in any doubt about whether you are a fat disgusting pig.

- Implants—who needs brains?

The culture sends the constant message that it is normal for women and girls to get by, and get our needs met, by our bodies and sex appeal—that is, that women and girls are naturally

prostituted. And the message gets through: the number of underage girls getting breast implants tripled in one year.

- Leg and bikini waxes for preteens

The pressures start ever earlier. Highly sexualized practices like shaving and waxing pubic hair are now marketed to girls who are barely old enough to have pubic hair.

- Girls' self-objectification . . .

What are the effects of self-objectification on girls? The evidence is in, and it's very strong. According to a 2007 report by the American Psychological Association . . .

- [Click through effects]

[*] Girls who self-objectify have lower self-esteem [*] and a higher risk of depression and eating disorders. [*] They tend to engage in near-constant body-monitoring: "is my stomach pooching out? do my thighs look fat when I sit like this?" [*] They experience high levels of shame and dissatisfaction with how their bodies look. [*] They are less assertive about their own sexual desires, limits, and boundaries, and are less likely to insist on condom use. [*] Feeling bad about themselves, and constantly distracted by self-monitoring and body vigilance, these girls not surprisingly show impaired performance in school. [*] Self-objectification even leads to impaired motor performance, such as "throwing like a girl."

- Seventeen cover

This Seventeen magazine cover poignantly illustrates what many girls want, and how they are told to get it. The screaming headline tells them "how to be hot"—there are almost 900 ways, better get cracking! [*] But if we look at the top, we see what the real prize is: a guy who actually wants to spend time with you and be your boyfriend. If you're hot enough, he might just stick around.

- Cosmo covers

From magazines like Cosmo, girls get a blizzard of information about the mythic and eternal "him": what he really wants in bed, how to make him hot for you, his ultimate fantasies. (In contrast, "men's magazines" typically give advice on how to get a woman into bed—not how to make her happy once she's there.)

- STDs

It would be one thing if girls were getting a lot of pleasure and self-actualization out of all this, and certainly some girls do find ways to enjoy their sexual activities and relationships. But too often they are treated as sexual service stations for boys, and left with STDs to show for it. And if that's not training for prostitution, I don't know what is.

It's worth briefly reminding ourselves that, as girls are relentlessly socialized into marketing their sexuality . . .

- Meanwhile . . . (images of/for boys)

. . . it's not as if boys are being left to themselves. From cartoons and superheroes to video games and gangsta rap, boys almost from birth are being sold a detached, callous, and often violent hypermasculinity . . .

- Pimp images

. . . one that, with accelerating frequency, is being explicitly linked to a glorified "pimp" image.

- Baby pimp

And for boys as well as girls, "the earlier the better" as far as the marketers are concerned.

- Howard Stern virginity auction

We wind up this summary of the pornified pop media landscape with the man who's probably done more than any other single media figure to create it, Howard Stern. Stern routinely promotes pornography on his show, along with any other form of misogyny he can get his grubby hands all over. This fall he got a lot of press attention by kicking off the public auction of a young woman's virginity on his show. Among other things, this item illustrates the porn culture's synergistic cross-promotion: we're told that the auction will be conducted online via the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, which we already know from HBO's "Cathouse" to be a fun and glamorous place where only wonderful things happen to women.

- **Not your father's Playboy: A brief look at contemporary pornography**

Because pornography itself is a pervasive and influential part of the cultural landscape, we need to take a brief tour of what it looks like. Many women haven't seen much pornography, and even some men who grew up with *Playboy*, *Penthouse* and *Hustler* may not fully realize what today's porn industry has become. In this section, you'll get a sense of what your kids are looking at—and how it is looking at them.

Some people think of pornography as simply pictures and films of beautiful naked people having sex. What we need to understand is that yesterday's porn is today's mainstream media. Most of that "soft," comparatively tame sexual content has migrated to HBO, Showtime, and other mainstream media outlets. That means that the pornography your kids are seeing is not like what you may have grown up with. If your 10 or 12 year old son is bored, curious, and/or horny and types "porn" into Google . . .

- Free porn galleries

. . . this is what he will find. These typical “free porn galleries” include shots of very young-looking girls, of women displaying pain and shock, and of a man’s hand painfully pinching a woman’s labia. The thumbnails link directly to sites such as [Disgraced 18](#), [Gangland Victims](#), and [The Reality of Slave Training](#).

- What is porn, anyway?

Now you might be wondering: What is porn, anyway? Who can really say? . . . While the question of definition is indeed complex, and disagreements about borderline cases are inevitable, it is possible to define pornography in a way that accurately describes the industry while articulating what is worrisome about it.

- One definition . . .

Pornography is sexually explicit material that makes dominance and inequality seem “sexy.” In pornography, relatively powerless people and groups are treated as objects for more powerful people’s use; portrayed as slavishly obedient to their desires (and punished when they’re not); and routinely subjected to violence. Such treatment is shown as sexually exciting not only for those who do it, but for those to whom it is done.

- Pornography is a business

But however we hash this out philosophically, the bottom line is that pornography is a business, an industry that exists in the world. It is not just art, expression, speech, or ideas about sex. What is shown is what sells, and sells big. And just as elsewhere in commercial media culture, what is sold both reflects and shapes the beliefs and values of the consumers.

- Recruitment agencies

Like any industry, the pornography industry needs a steady supply of labor. In the past few years many new agencies have sprung up to recruit young women into the industry with the promise of making big money and becoming a star.

- Cell phone porn

Also like any industry, the porn industry needs to expand its market; it needs new delivery streams. No new communicative technology hits the market without being made a venue for porn: from the camera to the VCR to the internet and the cell phone, pornography has driven the market for new communication technologies.

- Standard gonzo titles

The fastest-growing and most profitable market sector in contemporary porn is what’s called gonzo. Gonzo films are simply a succession of recorded sex scenes, without characters or plot, and with an emphasis on more extreme activities. Most gonzo films include a standard sequence of sex acts, including vaginal, oral, and anal penetration of one woman by one or more men,

ending with what is known as the “money shot” of male ejaculation in the woman’s face or on her body.

- Swallow for cash, teens for cash

Whatever the surface variations, pornography’s one constant message is the natural and contemptible whoredom of all women and girls. Interestingly, although we are all whores, many of us are led to realize this fact only by economic desperation, a female condition that is constantly sexualized in pornography: “no scholarship, no job . . . these girls fuck and suck to pay for school!” Remember this the next time you hear that porn is just about people having a good time together sexually. In fact, pornography often crows excitedly about women submitting to sexual use and humiliation in order to get something else that they want or need.

- Bangbus

The idea that all women are natural whores gets an especially vicious twist in the wildly popular Bangbus series and its legions of imitators. In these films, several men are shown driving around a city and coaxing young women into their van by offering them money to perform sexual acts. The young woman often shows some reluctance, but relents fairly quickly. Once she has performed the requisite sexual services, she gets out of the van expecting to receive the money she was promised; instead the men drive off laughing, leaving her alone by the side of the road.

In this series, a scenario of terror for women—being harassed and propositioned on the street by a group of men trying to get you into their van—is turned into a joke. The punchline is that, although all women are whores, we are too contemptible even to merit payment.

- Double penetration

Much pornography focuses on extreme sexual activities that most women and girls do not want or seek out. One example is double penetration, or DP, in which a woman is penetrated vaginally and anally by two men at the same time. Sometimes a third will penetrate her orally, resulting in a scenario that the industry calls “airtight”: every hole is plugged. Such acts are marketed as exciting *because* they are thought to hurt or humiliate women: these images of women displaying pain and shock are the promotional images on the site’s front page—the ones that are supposed to get the consumer excited, so that he’ll pay to get in and see more.

- ATM

Many gonzo scenes include “ATM,” or “ass-to-mouth,” in which a man removes his penis from a woman’s anus and puts it directly into her mouth or the mouth of another woman. There is no increased sexual pleasure for the man here, outside of the woman’s debasement and humiliation.

- In pornography, women are . . .

In the world of pornography, women are fuck objects who exist for only one reason: to be penetrated by any available man at his will. Whatever “it” is, every girl either wants it or has her

price. Whoever a woman is in the world, here she's just a slut, a piece, a thing to be used and thrown away.

- Generation XXX

One reason why pornography matters for kids and young people is because they are using it. In one recent study, 87% of college men admitted to using pornography, half of them weekly, and one-fifth of them using it every day or every other day.

[*] More startling for many are the study's findings on college women, 31% of whom reported consuming pornography (though most use it only occasionally, and it's not clear whether they are using it alone or with a partner).

- Younger kids and porn

We can be pretty sure that those college men didn't just discover porn the day they arrived on campus. According to Family Safe Media, kids 12 to 17 now constitute the largest group of internet porn viewers, and in one study of 13 and 14 year olds, more than a third of the boys said that they had viewed porn films "too many times to count."

Thus, at a stage of life when kids are most immersed in pop media culture, and most intensely interested in learning what it has to teach them, pornography powerfully and viscerally reinforces that culture's toxic messages about manhood, womanhood, and sex. Boys learn that girls are there for the taking [*]: one 13 year old explains that you just have to type any girl's name into Google and "something will come up." Girls learn what it is that boys and men want from them, and that whatever it is, they should get good at it and at least pretend to like it.

- Typical advice (gurl.com)

When a girl does object to pornography, she can count on having it quickly explained to her just how wrong she is. Here a girl writes to an advice column expressing her hurt and confusion at discovering the huge porn stash of her boyfriend, who had assured her that he wasn't into porn. Keep it in perspective, she's told: porn use is normal and healthy, and if you complain he'll think you're too controlling. Get over it—it's your problem, not his.

Pornography matters in the lives of kids and teens not only because they and their peers are watching and absorbing it, but also because the adults in their lives (especially but not only men) are using it.

- The next frontier: Barely Legal, etc.

As pornography runs out of ways to titillate an increasingly jaded consumer base, one main direction the industry goes is toward the overt sexualization of childhood and youth. Several kinds of perfectly legal pornography treat young girls as sexual targets and resources. This enormously popular genre, often called "pseudo-child," is shaping the sexuality of normal adult men—your co-workers, your relatives, your kids' teachers, the guy down the street.

- Teens, teens, and more teens

Sometimes it seems that the porn world is “all teens, all the time.” Many sites make a special point of claiming that the girls are just “barely 18”; a girl may be pictured holding a driver’s license with her birthdate, so you can make sure she’s not really 19 and all washed up. Many sites adorn very slight, small-breasted girls with pigtails, school uniforms, lollipops, teddy bears, and other accoutrements of childhood.

- Teens’ first threesome

This site is typical in its overtly pedophilic appeal, with two men “showing” a young and inexperienced girl how to perform sexually.

- Don’t Tell Daddy, Daddy’s Little Princess

There’s a lot of Daddy this and Daddy that: Don’t Tell Daddy, Daddy’s Little Princess. And many sites explicitly sexualize father-daughter incest: [*] “when the lights are off I forget he’s my dad.”

And lest we forget, the message that young girls aren’t as innocent as they look, and are appropriate sexual objects for adult men . . .

- You know you’re not the first

. . . is frequently reinforced outside pornography as well, as in this BMW ad for used cars.

- Shaving

The incessant sexualizing of childhood and youth casts another pornographic convention in a different light. Now standard in the porn industry, the shaving of women’s genitals blurs the line between adult woman and child—and as we’ve seen, it’s become the standard for women and girls outside porn as well.

- Anime

Sexualized child images are also pervasive in the massively popular genre of hentai, or anime porn. Such images are perfectly legal, since no actual children are used. For the same reason, there are no physical limits to what can be shown: often very tiny children are shown being multiply penetrated.

- Anime contact lenses

The latest innovation is anime contact lenses . . . so now, thanks to the wonders of capitalism, you too can approximate the look of a brutalized little girl.

- Child modeling sites

Another disturbing but legal arena is that of so-called “child modeling” sites that clearly cater to pedophiles. On some of these sites, the user can send in his requests: “I want to see little Betty Sue in a red raincoat holding a teddy bear” . . . coming right up!

- Child porn volume

These legal genres are often gateways to actual child pornography. By using these materials, the consumer gradually breaks down his own ethical boundary against sexualizing children, and then it’s just a small step to the real thing. The New York Times reported in 2007 that the volume of child pornography being seized from computers was doubling each year.

- 85% of child porn offenders abuse children

In one recent study, 85% of men convicted of downloading child pornography admitted to also having molested children themselves.

- Study of male undergrads

In one study, 14% of male undergraduate students reported using child pornography, while 22% admitted having some sexual interest in little children. This study was done in 1996, *before* the last decade’s dramatic upsurge in media sexualization of children.

- **“UR hottt!!!”: Kids navigating the DIY porn culture**

How do young people, particularly girls, respond to the messages we’ve been discussing? In a variety of ways, of course – we need not paint an overly simple “monkey see, monkey do” picture. But it’s hard to miss the evidence piling up about how these trends are affecting girls’ identities and choices.

- Everyone’s talking about it

A number of recent articles and books have taken up this issue—admittedly, some with greater sensitivity and insight than others.

- Adolescent brain development

To understand how powerfully media messages affect young people, and why, it’s important to take a look at adolescent brain development. The adolescent brain was long assumed to be a mostly-completed project, but that turns out not to be true at all. [*] First, as no one who’s either been or lived with an adolescent needs to be told, adolescents experience frequent and massive hormonal fluctuations that give rise to intense moods, erratic behavior, and powerful impulses. [*] What’s still far from finished is the part of the brain that thinks ahead, predicts consequences, and helps control impulses: the pre-frontal cortex.

- “Gas before brakes”

As child development expert Dr. David Walsh points out, “Adolescence is a heck of a time for the impulse control center . . . to be under construction. . . . The adolescent pre-frontal cortex is no match for overwhelming hormone-driven emotions.” In short, teenagers’ well-documented tendency to go off the rails is due in large part to their brains getting “the gas before the brakes.”

- Meanwhile . . .

Meanwhile, they are busy doing their job as adolescents: trying on different identities, seeing what works, how people react, what suits them and what doesn’t. Their sexuality is beginning to take shape. They want to belong, to fit in, and they ravenously take in information both from their peers and from the media about what’s expected. And finally, of course, they think they are very sophisticated! . . . they’ve got it all under control, you can’t tell them anything.

- Enter technology . . .

Given all this, it’s not surprising that teenagers often manage to get themselves into less than ideal situations. The problem is that, in a highly technologized environment, it becomes a lot harder to backpedal. Impulsive decisions are easier than ever—just click!—and instead of being ephemeral and quickly forgotten like such things should be, they may have long-term consequences. Leaving a “digital footprint” on one’s journey to an adult identity means that any crazy moment or temporary role may stick. Once you try it on, you can’t take it off!

Few of us need brain studies to tell us that doing stupid stuff is a normal part of adolescence. What’s new is how much of the stupid stuff is highly sexualized, in a specifically pornographic vein, *and* that, thanks to digital technology, its consequences can be much longer-lasting.

- Sexy costumes

As we’ve already seen, the identity menu for girls offers a limited range of choices: everywhere they look, they see that the “hot girl” gets attention and adulation, especially from boys and men, and pornified media provide the script showing exactly how a hot girl looks and acts.

- “Comment my pix!”

We might as well be daring them to follow suit, and so they do. These are some typical photos posted by kids on Facebook and Myspace. Girls often implore their page’s visitors to “comment my pix!”—that is, tell me that I’m hot and therefore deserve to continue existing.

- Teens send nude photos, and trouble

A flurry of recent news stories describes the growing phenomenon of self-produced child pornography, in which kids and teenagers take explicit pictures of themselves and post them

online or send them out from their cell phones. Such activity is, of course, illegal, just as it would be if an adult took and distributed explicit images of children.

And while adult predators sometimes play a role, more often the photos are being exchanged among peers.

- News story—girls sending pics to boyfriends

Girls who send explicit pictures to their boyfriends, like the two junior high girls discussed here, often get a nasty surprise when he forwards them on to others, either just to show off or to get back at her after a breakup. This article goes on to describe a case in which several girls sent naked pictures to their boyfriends, “only to learn that another boy had collected them from the Web and was trying to sell a DVD of them.”

- Mitchum ads

Here Mitchum helps out by assuring men and boys that publicizing women’s images without their knowledge or consent makes them extra-cool and manly. And just in case that one’s too subtle for us [*], here’s another ad from the same campaign.

- Schoolgirls bullied into stripping online

Too often, even the initial stripping and picture-taking isn’t voluntary, according to researcher Faye Mishna; boys will pressure their girlfriends into stripping for a webcam and then distribute the resulting video online . . .

- [Real Ex-Girlfriends](#)

. . . including on sites such as [Real Ex-Girlfriends](#).

- Allison Stokke

This case from summer 2007 reminds us that even when an image is completely innocuous, a pornified audience can turn it into porn. This young athlete, Allison Stokke, was harassed and stalked online for months, to the point of rarely leaving the house alone, after these photos of her got posted on a sports blog.

- Cunt Punt

Meanwhile, social networking sites display plenty of routine misogyny which, far from being questioned or named as such, is accepted as a normal part of the landscape. This is one example, from a band’s Myspace site.

Note that the commenter expresses his intention to wield the “cunt punt” song against girls and women in his life. Much of what is called “bullying” – both on- and offline – is sexual and/or gender-based. Women and girls are called sluts, whores, fat ugly cows, and bitches, while men

and boys insult each other as pussies, girls, and fags. Sexual harassment and misogynist abuse become invisible when they are referred to gender-neutrally as “bullying.”

- Alt-porn solicitation

Some young women who meet the hotness criteria are approached by porn producers interested in turning a profit. A college-aged woman received this solicitation from a fairly well-known producer of so-called “alt porn,” proposing that she appear in his next “surreal art/fetish film.” The work, he clarifies, is “unpaid in exchange for content”—she gets to keep copies of the pictures and video, and that’s it. And by the way, if we want to know just what an exciting opportunity is in store for this young woman [*], here are a couple of stills from one of this guy’s previous “surreal art/fetish” films.

- “Earn extra cash!”

Here young women are urged to “earn extra cash” by sending in photos or videos to a porn company. Whoever “Sarah Lou” may really be, using a woman as mouthpiece no doubt makes the process seem less threatening: she’s your friend, and look how glamorous she is!

- Pin-up/alt-porn

The pin-up and alt-porn scenes answer to many young women’s desire to reconcile a “rebel” image with conformity to the porn culture. By joining Suicide Girls, God’s Girls, or any of dozens of imitators, they can be validated as desirable in male terms while not feeling like they’re buckling under. And just as with the more standard Playboy template, the number of girls imitating this look on Myspace and elsewhere is astronomical. As you can see, this too is largely formulaic . . . lots of tattoos and piercings, a bit of a goth look, but otherwise more of the same.

- YouPorn/Pornotube

Another recent growth area is “amateur” porn. Sites like YouPorn and Pornotube are just like YouTube, but with explicit content—some copyrighted content, until the site catches and removes it, but mostly “home video” of consumers’ own sex lives. Not surprisingly, most of the home video looks a great deal like the commercial porn. Kids can’t legally upload such material, of course, but they can certainly watch it and learn its lessons: nothing is real, not even your own most intimate experience, unless it is captured, recreated in the porn image, and reproduced for public consumption.

- **What can we do?**

It’s easy to feel overwhelmed and angry at the mess that profit-seeking corporate pimps are making of our public life, our culture, and our kids’ psyches. What can we do about it?

- Adult confusion

Many of us grownups have questions of our own about how to distinguish healthy sexuality from unhealthy pornographized scripts. We may wonder: how can I talk to the kids in my life about these issues, when I hardly know which way is up?

- Sexual reality check

A good first step is to check in with ourselves, and see whether our own relationship to porn and the culture it creates is in line with our own deepest values. Kids are always watching what we do, not just what we say, and thinking through our own choices can help us clarify what we want to convey to the young people in our lives.

- Educate ourselves

There are resources available to help in this process, and educating ourselves will help us feel more confident in taking on these issues, whether in our own families or in the broader communities we move in.

- Porn sex vs. healthy sex

For instance, in their recent book and on their website, sex therapists Larry and Wendy Maltz offer this list of differences between porn-related sex and healthy sexuality. In addition to stimulating our own thinking, such resources can serve as conversation-starters with a son, a daughter, or a high-school youth group.

- But what do I say?

Many adults feel tongue-tied around sexual issues—even talking to other adults, let alone to kids. Here are a few ideas for how to get a conversation going. [Talk through them . . .]

- Carleton Kendrick quote

One family therapist has this suggestion: [read . . .]

- Framing the issue

It's important not to take a shaming tone, or to convey that sexuality is dirty or wrong. Rather the issue is our *values*, like the ones listed at the bottom, and how we express those values in relation to ourselves and others—including in sex. If we can get kids thinking and talking about what these values mean to them, and what they might look like in action, then we're doing our job.

- “Abstinence-only” – not a good alternative!

Unfortunately, the most widely visible alternative to porn culture is a regressive and rigidly patriarchal “abstinence-only” movement. It's really no alternative at all, since many of its

messages are remarkably similar to what we see in porn: for instance, that females are male property, and that girls who are sexual are dirty and worthless. [Can read “rose” text here . . .]

- Hijacking . . .

Young people have the right to explore their sexuality on their own schedule and on their own terms, [*] both alone and with age-appropriate partners, [*] without a stew of hateful and toxic messages getting in the way. [*] Desire and arousal are normal for people of all ages, [*] but our commercialized porn culture hijacks kids’ development, robbing them of healthy pleasure and intimacy. As caring adults, we need to fight back.

- Push back; build a “counterculture”

It seems daunting, but like almost everything, it’s easier when you join together with others. Start by finding at least one ally, like a parent of one of your kid’s friends. You can begin with a counterculture of two, and build from there!

- Madison Avenue, pimps, etc.

We wouldn’t have such a difficult job if it weren’t for the advertisers, pornographers, and other powerful interests that continue to tighten their grip on our culture. [* * *] Remember these guys? . . . As important as it is to effect change in our own families and local communities, we also have to join in organized resistance to these interests. [*] Those that are doing the damage and reaping the profits must be held accountable.

- Some web resources

Many groups are already doing wonderful work, and you can join them—or start your own.

- The goal . . .

We need to keep envisioning the kind of society we want to create. As one coalition opposing child sexual exploitation puts it, we must “keep prevention . . . in the front of people’s minds and hearts in such a powerful way that the normalization of such exploitation for individual or commercial gain becomes socially, economically, politically and spiritually unacceptable in our communities, nation, and the world.”

- Make love not porn—stop porn culture

Together we can take back our culture, our relationships, and our kids’ future.