

Boys, Porn and Education

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The headmaster of the all-boys boarding school I attended when I was a teenager was always wary of admitting students to the academy that had been exposed to pornography. Among his reasons for this was that boys who had carnal knowledge—even on the level that pornography affords—very often found it an impediment in the process of their education. Now I am the headmaster of that same boarding school, and I am increasingly convinced of the reasoning behind my old headmaster's reticence over such applicants. Pornography is a destroyer of innocence, and the innocence proper to certain years of a boy's life is an important factor in his education—especially if that education is informed by the classical pedagogies of wonder, imagination, and delight. Furthermore, I am increasingly convinced that I am facing a crisis that my headmaster did not face. While he had to consider the possibility that a boy may have viewed pornography, I have to consider the probability that [every](#) boy has viewed pornography. The only thing about our respective positions that are the same touching this matter is the grave obstacle of pornography in masculine education.

Pornography has come a long way in recent decades. There is a telling [scene](#) in a Woody Allen film from the 1970's where he peruses and purchases pornography at a corner store, forced to face the humiliations of a tactless checkout clerk and unsympathetic customer scrutiny. Those days are over. No more top-shelf magazines. No more public purchases. No more physical evidence. All is anonymous, instantaneous, and easy. The long way porn has come in recent decades has been straight down the information superhighway. Today we have the Internet, and to many, the Internet is for porn.

There is no doubt that, since the dawn of the online era, porn has become wildly and incalculably more available and more mainstream. It is now a standard, systemic temptation: a pervasive [fact](#) of people's lives, especially young people's lives—and most especially young men's lives. Though reports abound analyzing what percentage of the web is devoted to smut, or what the [addictive](#) properties of online porn are, or

what it is doing to [relationships](#), or how it is [affecting](#) bodies and brains, one thing is certain without scientific data or social studies: Internet pornography is damaging the lives and minds of possibly every single boy in this country, impeding his ability to be drawn to virtue and wisdom—in other words, impeding his education.

To suppose that boys in general, even boys from good families, are not exposed to pornography in some form or another is naïve. In our day, the presence of porn is a given, being widespread, strategic, and insidious. Porn is inescapable because it is immediately accessible. It is always just a click away, and hence it is everywhere. That is the reality that must be faced before it can be fought, and prudence demands that parents and educators presume the [effects](#) of pornography in the boys of today.

Whether boys seek porn out or not, nowadays it is unimaginable that most boys—if not all boys—have not encountered pornography and have not been assaulted by its lies.

As a lie, pornography is inimical to the truth and therefore an enemy of authentic education. The reason pornography hinders a boy's ability to accept and enjoy education is because pornography creates a barrier to wonder by numbing the sense of wonder. Without wonder, education is a crippled thing at best. [Socrates](#) taught that wonder is the beginning of wisdom, the very occasion of education, and pornography wounds the ability to wonder through the voyeuristic, shameless stripping of one of the most sacred sources of wonder. It creates desensitization to beauty, robbing boys of their innocence through the elimination of the mysteries of the heart, severely impairing their ability to be awed or find pleasure in the beautiful. Jaded spirits are not very susceptible to formation. Cynicism quickly develops as a defense. Boys are finally lost to apathy in a world that fails to titillate. The fantasy, or blasphemy, of reality results in a loss of desire for reality, which is the foundation of any education. This latter principle of teaching through exposure to reality is a particularly powerful tool in educating young men, as boys tend to be highly sensory and active, and the experience of the world and its mysteries is an arena for wonder. Pornography eradicates mystery, and without mystery, boys will lose their ability to wonder, and in a large part, their ability to become wise—which is the work of education.

Of course, pornography targets boys and men with specific force given their specific weakness for visual sexual stimulus; but beyond this, porn preys on the male impulse to exercise control. This is a natural masculine virtue, but one that can be perverted into vice. Pornography creates a false world of male supremacy, distorting the balance of truth—of activity and passivity—that education introduces and fosters. Men also have a predisposition to protect women, but pornography introduces a violation of women, like a species of rape, that breaks down a boy's sense of an essential identity of manhood. These perversions of self-knowledge are a tremendous inhibitor of knowledge of outside things. Boys learn well through the context of first-hand experience, and if that experience is warped, so too will it warp the things it measures. What is more, the overdeveloped sense of mastery and manipulation that porn creates can cause boys to shut off instinctively when drawn to receive truths that are solid and supreme. Reality is not something that can be enslaved like a fantasy, and hence reality is often rejected once a taste develops for pornographic illusion.

Through exposure to the anti-masculine paradigm and anti-feminine propaganda that is the chief poison of pornography, chimeria and culpability are softening our boys. As my old headmaster said, "You can't sculpt Jello." Boys have always struggled with motivation and attention, and pornography is a propagator of these problems by coaxing boys into a hazy dream world where they, and only they, are in charge. School calls boys out of themselves. Porn drags them within—and after time employs chains to keep them there, locked in within themselves and locked out from the world they are called to know as men of strength and sensitivity.

Pornography depicts women as disposable sexual objects, pulling boys away from the idea of permanency. Education, on the other hand, is about the permanent things, the eternal things, and anything that breaks down contact with transcendental realities impedes the work of education. Without the mysteries of beauty and love intact, there are severe impediments to education, where the whole draw is mystery and longing. Pornography, and the accessibility of pornography, cheapens the most hallowed of domains to a young mind and can render any object of beauty a dubious

and dirty thing, nothing to take seriously, nothing to respect, and nothing to be in awe of.

Pornography murders wonder and the sense of the sacred, which makes education far more of a challenge than it already is, especially to boys. Boys long for meaning, especially in education, and the damage and desensitization caused by Internet porn puts boys at risk of never finding their way out of the cave of shadows, out of virtual reality, into the world that God made good: a meaningful world filled with the mysteries of beauty where He can be found and give true fulfillment.

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