

Chapter 7—What Parents Can Do To Combat Sexualized Media Messages

Sexual socialization is the “intricate and gradual process by which young people acquire knowledge, attitudes, and values about sexuality through the integration of information from multiple sources.”¹

Deborah Fisher

How do kids learn about sex? Certainly there is a biological drive behind their interest, but the finer points about when to initiate sexual activity and how to have a sexual relationship are acquired through a process of social learning, similar to the one that teaches morals, ethics, social practices, and even basic skills. To put it simply, children watch others and learn from them.

In the case of sexual socialization, multiple influences are at play, as Deborah Fisher notes. Young people take in cues from the popular culture and media that surround them, and the attitudes and behaviours of their peers and parents.

As we’ve seen throughout this book, the masculine imperative and heterosexual script that dominate our culture have considerable negative influence on boys’ sexual socialization. In our culture, boys are given fewer opportunities than girls to educate themselves about their sexuality, yet are encouraged seek any and all opportunities to have sex. They are not taught to value their emotions or those of their partner but told, instead, that sex is a casual, physical game with girls as the pawns; a “collection of body parts existing for male pleasure,” in the words of educational psychologist Lori Day.

It is difficult for boys to counter the pressure to conform to cultural norms about sex. Peers reinforce what popular culture communicates and boys who challenge or disregard prevailing notions about the male sexual role risk being ostracized, called names, or even sexually harassed themselves for not being suitably masculine.

What can we, as parents, do to help our sons combat the negative messages in sexualized media? Understand our power and learn how to use it. I’ve included some tips and strategies here, organized by the themes and topics discussed in prior chapters.

Parents Have Power

Among the influences affecting boys’ understanding of sex and sexual roles, media is the primary point of concern for most parents. Their worries are justifiable, given the media

¹ Fisher, Deborah A. et al “Televised sexual content and parental mediation: Influences on adolescent sexuality” *Media Psychology* 12, no. 2 (2009): p. 122.

environment I described in the previous chapters. Yet, contrary to what many parents have been led to believe, the effects of media are not “hypodermic.”² That is, kids do not blindly follow the lead of celebrities and fictional characters when it comes to sex.

Media cannot be discounted entirely, however. They help establish norms, fill in gaps in knowledge, and model behaviour that some young people may be keen to emulate. Even if kids don’t act out what they see, their attitudes may change and they may become part of the problem by, for example, ignoring sexting and harassment, or being bystanders in general to others’ bad behaviour.

The burning question for most parents is this: can the lessons provided by Mom and Dad outweigh media messages? The short answer is a resounding yes.

Over the years, a variety of theories have been put forth to explain media influence on children’s attitudes and behaviours. Although each theory differs in the details, they all share one fundamental point: responses to and absorption of media messages depend on many factors unique to each child’s experience. Media are certainly a major influence for some, but for others, peers and parents play an important role as filters of media messages. The reasons for using media also come into play. Children who use media to learn about a subject (like sex) pay more attention and may place more value on what they see and hear, while those seeking entertainment may take media messages less seriously.

The bottom line in all of the research I read, however, is that parents have power. In fact, Deborah Fisher believes that parents are the “foremost” influence in a child’s sexual socialization. Other researchers concur. Here is what some recent studies have said about the parental role in sexual socialization:

- Children whose parents have expressed disapproval of teen sex show lower levels of sexual initiation and lower frequency of vaginal intercourse.
- If parents monitor their kids by talking regularly with them, knowing who their friends are and what do when they hang out, their children will be less likely to start having sex at an early age.
- The absence of parental attention is also a form of influence: poor relationships with parents can lead children to initiate sexual activity at a younger age, perhaps to compensate for the lack of emotional and physical connection in their families.
- Parents who watch and critique media with their children can affect their kids’ attitudes toward sex in a positive way.^{3,4,5}

² Gill, Rosalind. “Media, Empowerment and the ‘Sexualization of Culture’ Debates” *Sex Roles* 66, no. 11-12 (2012): p. 739.

³ Huang, David Y. C. “Parental Monitoring During Early Adolescence Deters Adolescent Sexual Initiation: Discrete-Time Survival Mixture Analysis” *Journal of Child and Family Studies*. 20, no. 4. (2011) p. 511-520.

In short, there are many opportunities for parents to guide their sons and help them make smart decisions about sex. In the remainder of this chapter I will talk about specifics, but first, a few words about communication and media literacy.

Communication

Communication is fundamental to all human relationships, yet it is something many people struggle with. Parents and teenagers have particular challenges in this area, especially when those teenagers are boys.

I hear from a lot of parents that their boys never want to talk. Many parents throw up their hands in the face of this reticence, conditioned to believe that boys are wired differently and inherently less capable of talking than girls. In reality, many boys love to talk but grow up in a culture that discourages them from doing so.

As we have seen, the masculine imperative dictates that boys should be stoic and self-reliant, two factors that mitigate against effective communication. Boys are not often invited to talk, whether about school, friends, or life in general. If they aren't in the habit of talking about this "easy" stuff, it is much harder to open a dialogue about sex.

So how do you get boys talking?

It is easiest if you start young so you can get boys accustomed to talking but even if you are starting later, you can still help your son get comfortable with the idea of communicating. Here are some ideas, tips, and experiences of my own for reference:

- Conversations don't have to be complicated or deep. Engage boys in chats about everyday life—what happened at school today, what are you learning in various subjects, what did you do at recess? We have these sorts of conversations daily at the dinner table or on the walk home from school and our sons participate fully. Our chats are casual and light but also make clear to our sons that we want to hear what they have to say. Talk about your day too so this becomes a two-way conversation that encourages questions and feedback from your son.
- Ask follow-up questions and really engage with your sons to create further conversation. Once the floodgates open, these seemingly idle conversations can go off in many directions and lead to more sensitive subjects or areas of concern they might have.
- Don't make conversations into inquisitions. There's no need to grill boys over every detail of the daily happenings at school or what they did when they were hanging out

⁴ Price, Myeshia N. and Janet Shibley Hyde. "When Two Isn't Better Than One: Predictors of Early Sexual Activity in Adolescence Using a Cumulative Risk Model" *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. 38, no. 8 (2009): p. 1061-1062.

⁵ Fisher, 122.

with friends. Kids will get defensive, and rightly so. During your chats with your sons you are building trust and setting the expectations that they can talk to you and you will listen without judgment. Keep your chats informal and non-confrontational.

- Listen when they talk and give serious attention to what they say, especially if they seem concerned or worried about something.
- Be patient if they seem troubled but do not want to talk about what is bothering them. Boys are sensitive to social norms about being a “man” and may feel the need to appear in emotional control. Unless you think there is an urgent need to resolve an issue, give boys time and space to process what they are feeling and invite them to talk whenever they are ready.

TIP: Don’t force conversation, especially on an older boy who may not be used to a lot of talk. Meet him where he lives, as the saying goes, perhaps by starting with things he is passionate about: sports, books, games, school, or whatever gets his attention. In our house, baseball never fails to be a conversation starter and a comment as simple as “How about those Blue Jays” is often the launching point for a very long and interesting chat.

Conversations with your sons are invaluable. They strengthen your relationship, normalize the act of communication, and make it far easier to transition from mundane topics to trickier subjects like sex.

Media Literacy

Conversations about media can be touchy. It is during adolescence that kids start to forge their own identity. They often use pop culture to signal who they are, carefully selecting musical artists, television shows, films, video games, and even books that make a certain statement. Often, the more parents dislike something, the more appealing it becomes to a teen. Music is a common flashpoint for parents and children, with many kids choosing artists that push the envelope with language and overtly sexual themes, but other areas of popular culture can also inflame parents.

The word “no” is often the knee-jerk response of parents faced with content they deem inappropriate or too mature, sexist, or sexual. Many parents also fall into the “because I said so” trap without offering further detail about why they disagree with a particular choice. For young children, the word “no” is a perfectly acceptable strategy. For older kids who have a better sense of the world and more wherewithal to question media and parental response to it, “no” won’t cut it. As Lyn Mikel Brown and colleagues wrote in *Packaging Boyhood*:

“[N]o” shuts down discussion, and how are kids to learn if they don’t have an opportunity to discuss what they like? Also, consider this: how will they be able to share what they like about their world if there’s an atmosphere of impatience or criticism; how will you as

a parent be able to share and listen if you can't even for a moment honor their choices but instead treat them as "bad" or "questionable"?"⁶

The key phrase in that passage? Honour their choices. As parents we need to instill in our children a sense of responsibility that can come only if we let them make decisions then consider the impact of those decisions. If a boy professes his love for the song *Wiggle*, that is a personal choice. As a parent, you should not condemn that choice but talk to him about the larger implications and messages in that song and its accompanying video. The same strategy applies to all media choices, as research is increasingly showing.

Fisher and colleagues conducted a detailed study into the impact of various types of parental mediation on television viewing. They noted that while restricting access to inappropriate television programs would be the most effective option for younger children, a different approach was needed for adolescents who see more sexual content, are interested in acquiring sexual information, and at a stage of cognitive development where they can better understand "the concepts of risk, consequences, and future planning." Their suggestion? Parental co-viewing and discussion, which enable parents to explain the content their children watch, talk about negative consequences, and reinforce positive or "desirable" messages.⁷ (For the record, I am not including pornography in this point. That is a whole other issue, discussed separately below.)

Extrapolating Fisher's research to all media, the bottom line is that being aware of your children's media choices and discussing what concerns you is a far more effective strategy for managing media than outright bans. Discussion is the basis of media literacy, not turning something into the ever-tempting forbidden fruit. Even if your child continues to watch or listen to the media you dislike, he will do so with more critical eyes and ears.

Ideally lessons in media literacy should start early in life, a point reinforced in an email chat I had with educational psychologist Lori Day. She noted that media often "scoop" parents, and "the key is to try to get out ahead of it, even if it feels uncomfortable [and] not to put off crucial conversations."

Begin when children are young with discussions of gender stereotypes, which form the basis of the sex role stereotypes they will see as they get older. Explain what stereotypes are: generalizations about people based on the group they belong to; in this case, male or female. The problem with stereotypes, again quoting Lori Day, is that they are limiting and leave no room for exceptions.⁸ They also affect behaviour by making people feel they have to conform to the expectations of their group.

⁶ Brown, Lyn Mikel et al. *Packaging Boyhood: Saving our Sons from Superheroes, Slackers, and Other Media Stereotypes*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009. p. 267.

⁷ Fisher et al, p. 133-35.

⁸ Day, Lori and Charlotte Kugler. *Her Next Chapter: How Mother-Daughter Book Clubs Can Help Girls Navigate Malicious Media, Risky Relationships, Girl Gossip, and So Much More*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014, p. 47.

As kids get older, you can start to look more closely at music videos, lyrics, pro sports, and advertising. Questions often work very effectively here: Why do pro sports need barely-dressed women on the sidelines? Why does Jason DeRulo have eight women lying in bed with him in a music video? What do bikini-clad women have to do with selling hamburgers, Carl's Jr?

Even if there are no immediate answers, these questions get boys thinking about what they are seeing and how media representations can affect attitudes.

Boys interact with media every day, so your questions and discussions with your son need to be ongoing. As Melissa Atkins Wardy notes in her book *Redefining Girly*, challenging media representations is not a one-time thing: it involves many little talks and answering lots of questions.⁹

TIP: Get to know your school curriculum on media literacy. In Ontario we have quite a good range of media literacy beginning in the primary grades. The grade 7 and 8 classes at our school, in particular, have had special programming on gender stereotypes, media literacy, and healthy relationships from our local sexual assault centre. Check in your area for community resources like this and inquire as to their programming for schools.

Media literacy is a vital skill for children growing up surrounded by sexualized media. Much more has been written on this topic than I can cover here. For further reading, please see Appendix A.

Peers

Even the best parental communication and media literacy lessons may be lost in the face of peer pressure. Peers are social influencers, teaching kids which types of behaviour are appropriate or “cool.” As communications scholar Kimberly Maxwell noted in a 2002 study, adolescents are particularly vulnerable to peer influence because they experience “a stressful biological event over a relatively short period of time,” while also trying to form a personal identity that enables them to fit in rather than be outcasts.

Peer pressure can be immense and is often blamed for bad behaviour. As we saw in earlier chapters, boys face their own unique pressure in the form of the “bro code,” a set of unwritten rules that tells them how to respond to their own sexual desires and teaches them to go along with or ignore the actions of their male peers, even if those actions are less than desirable.

When it comes to managing peer pressure, the key for parents is to be aware of who their children's friends are and what kinds of things they do together. This is not to suggest parents spy on their kids, but rather that they check in with them and make it clear they're interested and involved in their lives.

⁹ Wardy, Melissa Atkins. *Redefining Girly: How Parents Can Fight the Stereotyping and Sexualizing of Girlhood, From Birth to Tween*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014, p. 103.

Statistician David Y.C. Huang refers to this strategy as high monitoring. He studies the factors involved in teenage risk-taking and wrote specifically about sexual initiation in a 2011 paper. He and his colleagues described a scale of parental monitoring of teens aged 14-16. Parents who knew a good deal about their children's friends and their parents, kept tabs on who a child was spending time with, and were informed about a child's teachers and what they were studying in school were considered to have "High" levels of monitoring.

Relative to children in the High group, those in the Low group were more likely to initiate sex before the age of 14. Teens in the High group, in turn, delayed sexual initiation by an average of 1.5 years compared to members of the Low group. This delay sounds minor but is actually quite significant. As Huang notes, many important cognitive and social developments occur during each year of adolescence. Eighteen months is a long time and can result in "new levels of social awareness" that can improve a teen's "capacity to make sound judgments." Specifically, Huang and colleagues note that older teens might possess better coping and decision-making abilities as well as improved negotiation skills that could help them avoid risky sexual activities, unprotected sex, and coercive sex.¹⁰

TIP: Peer influence is not always negative. Maxwell's research showed that, in setting social norms, peers can dissuade kids from engaging in harmful habits like smoking and potentially negative behaviours like drinking and having sex.¹¹ Consider your own sphere of friends: there have likely been times you have refrained from a behaviour because you know you will be judged harshly for it. Adolescents may often respond in a similar fashion, making peer pressure a positive instead of a negative.

Gender Stereotypes, Heterosexual Script, and Objectification

I mentioned social influence in the section on peers and it applies here too. Whether from media, peers, or parents, stereotyped ideas about gender and sexual roles are conveyed to children by the people around them.

Because gender stereotypes and the heterosexual script are so normalized and pervasive, they can be difficult to combat, but this is a war worth waging. Begin with some basics:

- Lessons in media literacy are an excellent place to start. Be sure to discuss the representations of each gender in everything from advertisements to professional sports, music videos, comic books, and video games. Look at physical appearance, clothing, amount of dialogue, and the traits exhibited by fictional characters or, in the case of

¹⁰ Huang, David Y. C. "Parental Monitoring During Early Adolescence Deters Adolescent Sexual Initiation: Discrete-Time Survival Mixture Analysis" *Journal of Child and Family Studies*. 20, no. 4. (2011) p. 511-520.

¹¹ Maxwell, Kimberly A. "Friends: The Role of Peer Influence Across Adolescent Risk Behaviors" *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. 31, no. 4 (2002): p. 267-277.

music and sports, real people. Indicate the biases in various media. For example, you can discuss the lack of screen time for female characters; their often sexed-up or—relative to men—non-existent fashions; excessive muscles in men; objectifying words and actions by males. Ask questions, as I suggested earlier in the media literacy section. The key is to get boys to challenge media orthodoxy on gender and sexual roles. Such lessons, according to Marshall Smith, will go a long way toward helping boys critique all of the sexualized media they see, whether in pornography or less explicit genres.¹²

- On the subject of gender stereotypes, Lori Day recommends modelling egalitarian relationships at home. Teach boys from a young age that, regardless of what popular culture says, men can be just as active on the housekeeping and child care fronts as women. She also suggests that parents facilitate cross-gender play among younger children to encourage friendships and help boys and girls see each other as “more similar than different.” Mixed-gender sports leagues are helpful in this regard. Boys can also be encouraged to work with girls on school projects and in extra-curricular clubs and volunteer organizations. These strategies will also help boys and girls develop healthy dating relationships when they get older.
- Be careful of your gender-based judgments. Refrain from criticizing the appearance and fashion of celebrities, friends, and family—male or female. Avoid terms like “slutty” to describe a woman’s manner of dress or behaviour and “stud” or other such words for males.
- Teach boys that it is normal to want to look at someone they are attracted to, but there are right and wrong ways to act on that attraction. Admiration is fine; objectification, catcalling, and unwanted physical contact are not.
- Encourage boys to educate themselves about the impact of gender and sex role stereotypes. Getting them to think for themselves about these things will be far more meaningful than having you, as a parent, tell them what to think. Give them this book as a guide or refer to the resources in Appendix A.

Pornography or SEM

We have seen in this book that pornography (also known as SEM or SEIM) is not the only, nor necessarily the biggest influence on boys’ sexual socialization. Even media considered mainstream can have an enormous impact on boys’ attitudes toward sex and, ultimately, their behaviour. Men objectifying women, seeing themselves as sexually insatiable, wanting sex mainly for the physical gratification, happy with casual sexual encounters; women being reduced to bodies and men increasingly treated in a similar fashion: all of these messages are being delivered to adolescent boys without them having to watch one second of porn.

Yet pornography is still influential. Teens know it is controversial, so it carries with it a very appealing element of subversion and rebellion. It is also the only medium to which sexually curious boys can turn for instruction in “real” sex. It is this educational aspect that makes pornography especially worrisome. As we saw earlier, teens who use media to learn about sex

¹² Smith, Marshall, p. 73.

tend to be more highly engaged and more easily persuaded that what they are seeing is legitimate or accurate.

Some people argue that pornography is not entirely bad. In his quest to find out where and how young adults had learned about sexuality during their adolescence, Marshall Smith noted that porn was helpful. It enabled young people to: explore sexual behaviors safely and comfortably; find reassuring content featuring different body types; and use it in a positive manner for masturbation and sex with their partners. He noted that many of the young adults he surveyed were able to see porn for what it really is: completely false and even problematic in its representations of bodies and sexuality in general. Smith concluded that this critical approach helped avoid negative impacts.¹³ In other words, kids who had the wherewithal to critique porn—that is, a high level of media literacy—were able to watch it and come away from it unscathed.

I share Smith’s results not because I think we should let our sons heed the siren call of XXX films and watch freely, but to reiterate the importance of media literacy. It is unrealistic to think that boys will never watch pornographic films or read explicit magazines, so telling them to take what they see with a huge grain of salt will help avoid the worst impacts. And with boys being exposed to porn at ever younger ages, the timing of these conversations is important. Waiting until they are in high school might be too late.

The first step in handling the issue of pornography is to be honest about both its appeal and your need to discuss it with your child. Don’t pretend it doesn’t exist or that your sweet young son won’t be persuaded to watch with friends or seek it out himself. The statistics I presented earlier show that most boys are not regular users of pornography but many are exposed to it at some point and may become casual viewers. As hard as it is to admit, most of our sons will be among their number.

Conversations about pornography are very difficult. I know from my own experience, although my talk was made more awkward because my son had no idea what porn was. The term was introduced to him and his grade 6 classmates through an unnecessarily alarmist booklet about sexual abuse prevention distributed without first being previewed by school administrators. This book’s glossary defined pornography as “sexually obscene writings, drawings, photographs or videos” but the word first appeared early in the book via a True/False quiz that said: “Pornography is about healthy relationships.”¹⁴ There had been no discussion of the subject matter of this book in his class so the content of the book caught all of the kids off guard and forced parents to address the more inflammatory passages immediately.

¹³ Smith, p. 73.

¹⁴ Canadian Centre for Child Protection. *Be Smart, Strong & Safe*.

http://www.smartstrongsafe.ca/pdfs/SmartStrongSafe_ActivityBooklet_en.pdf Winnipeg: Kids in the Know.

Trying to explain pornography to an 11-year-old who had no concept of why people would want to watch sex was challenging, to say the least. It was uncomfortable for both of us but, I have to admit, it did break the ice.

If you are dealing with an older teenager who is more aware of what sex is, the conversation might be easier to initiate, but in all honesty, these discussions are always a little stressful. I say that not to dissuade you, however. As Lori Day wrote to me, not discussing porn “doesn’t make it go away—it just leaves kids to navigate it alone, without parental guidance and the filter of parental values.”

So where do you start?

You first have to decide the age for this conversation. You know your son and his level of maturity and sexual knowledge, so you are the best judge. Of course, your hand might be forced if your child accidentally encounters porn or, as mine did, a badly written sex ed guide.

It is essential that you be completely frank. As awkward as it is, you need to explain why people watch pornography and what concerns you have about it. It may be helpful to have those concerns mapped out before you talk. In language suited to his age, you can tell your son that most pornography:

- shows sex as an act of male aggression, with women presented as submissive and deserving of or enjoying the abusive treatment they receive;
- can be overtly violent and degrading to women, as in the case of gonzo porn and several other genres;
- distorts male sexual performance capabilities and penis size;
- is only about getting off, not actually having a relationship like a boy would in his own life;
- normalizes risky sexual acts like having sex without condoms or engaging in unorthodox sexual behaviours;
- glamorizes casual sex and promiscuity which are also risky behaviours;
- rarely if ever shows consensual encounters.

The key is to make clear the huge discrepancy between porn sex and sexual relationships in the real world. You can then talk about those “real relationships” and how they should be based on:

- understanding the potential outcomes of a sexual relationship and talking about those impacts with your partner;
- communication about what you want and when you want it;
- equal partners who share the experience together;
- freedom to say no if you’d rather not take part;
- respect for the other person’s desires and wishes.

You can also talk to your sons about how pornography can change their perceptions of what is “normal”:

- Studies have found a correlation between high levels of pornography use and acceptance of aggressive sexual behaviours, like holding a girl down and forcing her to have sex or sexual harassment.¹⁵ Explain to your sons that the sort of male sexual aggression seen in pornography is not normal. In some cases, the acts shown are criminal. Tell him succinctly and clearly that sex should not be an act of male dominance but one of equality.
- Research has also shown that teens who watch a lot of pornography tend to believe that people start having sex earlier in life and prefer more unorthodox or varied sexual techniques (e.g. anal, group, bondage).¹⁶ Tell your sons it is okay to experiment sexually at the right age, but boys should draw the line at what makes them uncomfortable and not feel they have to follow the “porn script.” They should also educate themselves on STI prevention for different types of sexual contact.
- Because condoms are virtually absent from pornographic films and written content, always make clear to your sons that condoms must be part of their sexual experiences.
- Porn can also inhibit a boy’s own sexual imagination. Rather than becoming aroused with his own thoughts and preferences, he will become more reliant on external influences and see the acts depicted in X-rated videos as more normal than his own ideas. Perhaps you can share the words of journalist Manne Forsberg who wrote in his book *Sex for Guys*:

[S]ex is about making decisions along with your partner about trying things that are fun and exciting. It’s not what you’ve seen online or in your tattered *Hustler* magazine. It’s okay to do what you want in bed, as long as both of you help decide what to do. Porn shouldn’t decide for you, and neither should anyone else, for that matter.¹⁷

One final, critical point that I want to reinforce here: it is vitally important that we, as parents, do not judge or condemn boys for their interest in sex. Sexual urges are natural and normal, as is the desire to see sex acted out for arousal or simply to demystify it a little. If your son is older, the message might be that you, as an adult, understand the temptation of XXX films and his interest in them, but he must be conscious of the negative messages in the films he watches. (Since porn viewing is sometimes a group activity, your son must also be told that he should never feel pressured by peers to watch anything he is uncomfortable with.)

As I noted earlier, an important part of media literacy is honouring kids’ choices. It is uncomfortable to think of our sons as sexually active, but we cannot deny that they will be one day. We need to give them firm guidelines but also the freedom to learn about their own sexuality through experience. When it comes to pornography in particular, Mathias Weber’s research has shown that teens who feel a lack of independence from their parents tend to use porn more. You may not want to throw open the doors to porn use, but you may wish to give an

¹⁵ Flood, Michael. “The Harms of Pornography Exposure Among Children and Young People.” *Child Abuse Review* 18, no. 6 (2009), p. 393.

¹⁶ Weber, Mathias et al. “Peers, Parents and Pornography: Exploring Adolescents’ Exposure to Sexually Explicit Material and Its Developmental Correlates” *Sexuality & Culture* 16, no. 4 (2012), p. 409-10.

¹⁷ Forsberg, Manne. *Sex for Guys: A Groundwork Guide*. Toronto: Groundwork Books, 2007, p. 96-97.

older boy some freedom so he knows that you respect his choices and believe he is responsible and capable of making sound judgments about his sexuality. If you have given him good media literacy lessons in regard to pornography and made it clear you are not watching his every move, you might even find that the allure of porn will diminish.

Of course, if you find your son showing signs of addiction to porn, or anxiety or depression stemming from porn use, you should consult a medical professional for advice.

Sexual Health and Education

As noted above, a lot of boys will be tempted by pornography, seeking it out not only for arousal but also for instructional purposes. According to some researchers, one way to reduce the appeal of pornography is to provide adequate sexual education yourself:

- Valkenburg and Peter argue that pornography has become a “de facto” sex educator and if parents and teachers want to remain influential in adolescents’ sexual socialization, they need to answer questions in “a way that keeps adolescents from consulting SEIM for sexual advice.”¹⁸ In other words, be completely open, honest, and non-judgmental about sex so you become a trusted resource for your son.
- Marshall Smith suggests giving teens general lessons on how to access sexual health information online that also cover the topic of SEM. The SEM discussions could incorporate commentary on the production of pornography, its formulaic interactions, and how different SEM is from real life,¹⁹ thereby minimizing its perceived utility as a tool for sexual education.

In short, giving kids alternatives for their sexual education might reduce the amount of pornography they watch and keep the potential ill effects of regular porn use at bay.

Schools can do a lot in the area of sexual education, but the approach and content can vary from school to school. As parents, it is important to know what is being taught at school and, more importantly, what is not. Parents need to reiterate the lessons taught at school and fill in the gaps by engaging in discussion and also directing boys to accurate and informative websites and books, some of which are listed in Appendix A. Because conversations about sex between parents and sons can be uncomfortable, it may be easier to point your son to these credible and reliable resources before talking with him. Read them over first, however, to ensure they suit your values and overall approach to sexual education.

Here are some important sexual education lessons parents can convey to their sons:

¹⁸ Peter and Valkenburg, 2010, p. 393.

¹⁹ Smith, Marshall. “Youth Viewing Sexually Explicit Material Online: Addressing the Elephant on the Screen” *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*. 10, no.1 (2013): p. 73-74.

- Much of our culture places the responsibility for pregnancy prevention on girls. Boys need to know that they have equal responsibility and can take control of contraception themselves if a girl is unwilling or lacks adequate knowledge.
- The same message applies to STI prevention: boys can provide condoms and make sure they are used.
- Talk to boys about how STIs can be contracted and stress that oral and anal sex are not necessarily safer than intercourse.
- The predominant message in our media is that once boys get turned on, they cannot stop. Educate boys that they can and must control themselves, at least for as long as it takes to make smart decisions regarding contraception and STI prevention, and to heed the word “no” if it is uttered. Tell them to prepare themselves for those “heat of the moment” occasions when reason can fall by the wayside; that is, ensure they have condoms and use them, and instill in them a clear understanding of consent.
- Boys should not feel ashamed of the changes in their bodies, especially when spontaneous erections and wet dreams start to occur, along with the desire to masturbate. As uncomfortable as it may be, parents need to reassure boys that everything that is happening is normal and healthy, not perverted or weird.

Parents also need to stress the importance of sexual health care for boys. Many adults are keenly aware of the need for their daughters to see a physician on a regular basis, but less vigilant about their sons’ medical check-ups. Puberty, sexuality, and body image are all areas of concern for boys. Here are some things to be aware of:

- Most schools cover the basics of pubertal physical changes, but it helps if parents open the lines of communication on this topic and tell their sons they can come to them with questions. Again, a book on the subject might remove some of the awkwardness.
- Doctors tend not to be as rigorous with boys’ sexual health as they are with girls’. Talk to your family doctor and let him/her know you want your son’s sexual health attended to. You may, however, choose not to be present at his appointment since it may be easier for your son to talk about his concerns without a parent listening.
- Health care professionals should be attentive to boys’ growth and pubertal development in their teenage years. Physicians Michael Westwood and Jorge Pinzon suggest that doctors initiate conversation by asking boys whether they have concerns over athletic performance, strength, or endurance. Such conversations can lead to questions about how a boy feels about the changes going on in his body. Parents can ask these questions too, or suggest them to their physician.
- Westwood also talks about mental health, noting that boys may be reluctant to seek care for emotional problems from fear they will appear weak. Stress, anxiety, and depression are common among adolescent boys, with pubertal changes, body image, and sexual issues sometimes at the root. Any change in a boy’s disposition—increasing interpersonal conflicts, sudden poor performance in school, loss of interest in activities—should be investigated.

In addition to your family doctor, be aware of other community resources. Some organizations might run workshops and seminars about healthy relationships and boys' health care. Planned Parenthood is a good place to start. Other resources are listed in Appendix A.

Consent

How soon do we need to teach kids about consent? I have a story that might offer a few clues.

I was at a Toronto Blue Jays game recently and saw a girl of about 5 years of age wrap her arms around a younger boy and give him a kiss on the cheek. The boy ended up in tears. The children's parents laughed it off and dismissed the boy's reaction as a case of him being shy. My heart went out to the little guy. He wasn't being shy; he was objecting to the unwanted physical affection. Clearly it unsettled him and may have even scared him.

Like the adults at the ball game, many people write off this type of "harmless" exchange but it is important that we do not. There is no doubt that the girl's intentions in this case were innocent but what about the little boy? It sounds extreme to say so, but his personal boundaries were violated. Imagine if the girl had been told to ask first. The boy could have said no, and an uncomfortable situation could have been avoided.

As this story shows, lessons in personal boundaries need to begin at a young age. Just as we teach kids manners and basic courtesy, we also need to teach them rules around personal space. Such lessons will carry into later childhood and adolescence. Here are a few other pointers for teaching consent at various ages:

- Model good behaviour—don't force physical affection on your own kids or anyone else. When my kids were younger I was particularly guilty of giving them an unwanted peck on the cheek or hug. I have since changed my ways and now ask before doing so. If I'm told no, I don't do it. Full stop. As psychologist Jennifer Shewmaker noted in a 2014 blog post, asking for consent before engaging in any physical affection also gives your child a chance to practice the very important actions of giving or withholding consent.²⁰
- Shewmaker recommends that parents "inundate" adolescents with information on the importance of consent, noting that recurring conversations are more effective than a one-time chat.
- There has been a change of focus in consent lessons lately. Instead of "no means no," the emphasis now is on affirmative consent or "yes means yes." In the documentary *Asking For It: The Ethics & Erotics of Consensual Sex*, Dr. Harry Brod puts it very clearly, in a way kids can understand: "Consent is not something you have. Consent is something the other person has to give you, and if the other person doesn't give it to you, you don't

²⁰ Shewmaker, Jen. "Teaching Kids About Consent: Yes means yes" *jennifershewmaker.com* September 29, 2014. <http://jennifershewmaker.com/2014/09/29/teaching-kids-about-consent-yes-means-yes/> Accessed October 1, 2014.

have it, no matter what you think the rules are supposed to be or what you think you're entitled to."²¹ Share this lesson with kids when they are old enough to understand it.

- Because consent is rarely modelled in popular culture, it is important to talk about it when watching media with your kids. Point out the absence of consent in sexual scenes—even the least explicit ones—and explain how important it is to have clear verbal consent in any kind of physical interaction.
- Debunk the myth that boys can't stop once they've started, which is really just a masculine stereotype. Make it clear that boys can and must control their sexual urges, whether they are in an actual sexual encounter with an unwilling partner or any other situation where they feel overwhelmed by temptation.
- Explain that, despite dominant cultural messages, sex is not about a girl pleasing a boy. It is a relationship of equals, with each person's desires and wishes respected.
- Shewmaker offered another piece of good advice in her blog post: parents should include alcohol and drugs in their discussions of consent. Explaining that these substances can reduce inhibitions is important, as is the need to emphasize that consent includes the ability to make an informed decision. If someone is drunk or high, he or she will not necessarily understand what is going on and cannot consent.
- Ensure that your son knows he also has the right to say no. The heterosexual script portrays males as the initiators of sexual encounters and the aggressors who always want to take things further. In reality, boys can be pushed or coerced into doing things they don't want to do and may go along because they feel they need to prove their masculinity. They have just as much right to stop a sexual encounter as a girl and must be taught that saying "no" or "stop" is perfectly acceptable.

You can also give your son examples of how to get consent. Communication between partners is essential. These conversations are hard for teens to have, but here are a few standards they can use.

- If a boy has not yet engaged in sex with his partner, recommend that they have a discussion beforehand to see whether there is mutual interest. He needs to be clear about what he wants too. Saying "I want to take things to the next level" is not specific enough. He must specify that he is interested in sex and wanting to find out if she is too. He can keep it simple: "I really like you and I'd like to have sex sometime. Would you?" They could then progress to discussions of contraception and safe sex. It may sound unrealistic to ask this of kids, but it is best if they try to be honest and direct in their conversations about sex. Shewmaker recommends role-playing to help kids get over the unease of having these conversations.
- In the heat of the moment, a boy needs to know to pause and utter a few simple words: "Are you okay with this?" A question like this is not too intrusive and ensures that both people are on board with what will happen next. If the answer is no, the sex stops. Period.

²¹ Jhally, Sut. *Asking For It: The Ethics & Erotics of Sexual Consent*. Transcript. Media Education Foundation. 2010.

Remember as well that boundaries are not just physical. As I mentioned in the sections on media literacy and pornography, teens need to know their boundaries are respected when it comes to media choices and friends. Yes, you can guide them but you also have to give them space—don't check their Internet history, spy on them, or shame them for hiding a “dirty” magazine in their room. If you violate your children's privacy, your lessons on consent will seem rather hollow.

When boys and girls learn about consent at an early age, they will be less likely to confuse the issue and better equipped to challenge cultural messages of male sexual dominance and female compliance as they get older. In fact, if we start now, maybe we won't even need the “yes means yes” laws I described in chapter 4. By the time this generation gets to college or university, we can hope that the notion of seeking consent will be second nature.

Aggression/Harassment

What does it mean to cross the line? Boys are often unsure and media offers little guidance: sexually objectifying images of women are far too common; consent is rarely modelled; fictional male characters are often shown leering at women or making comments about their bodies and sexuality. Misconceptions about what constitutes “real” rape—evidenced in people's rape scripts, discussed in chapter 5—also lead to confusion over wrong and right.

A teachable moment in crossing the line came in the spring of 2015 outside a Toronto soccer game. A female reporter was setting up for a live report when the phrase “Fuck her right in the pussy” (FHRITP) was yelled at her. She confronted several young men about it, none of whom had a problem with it. When asked what his mother would think, one man said that she would “die laughing eventually.” The FHRITP trend has been ongoing for a couple of years, but will hopefully die a quick death after the actions of that Toronto reporter.²² Still, its repeated use—many female reporters interviewed after the Toronto incident said it is a daily occurrence—is indicative of the kind of culture we have created around sexual harassment and aggression. The theory is that boys and men can make crude, sexual comments and women just have to put up with them.

Boys need to understand that sexual aggression, whether verbal or physical, is never okay. They also need to learn the importance of speaking out when they see their peers engaging in any kind of harassing, aggressive, or violent behaviour. Those kinds of confrontations are difficult but essential to ending trends like FHRITP and date rapes that are common among adolescents and young adults. Here are some discussion points you can take up with your son:

- If you are watching a film or TV show, be sure to point out instances of female sexual objectification. Sexual comments directed at girls in popular culture lower the threshold for boys in the real world who might believe it is okay to treat a girl in such a manner.

²² Talbot, Michael. “CityNews’ Shauna Hunt confronts men about ‘FHRITP’ vulgarities” *680 News* May 11, 2015. <http://www.680news.com/2015/05/11/citynews-shauna-hunt-confronts-men-fhrntp-vulgarities/> Accessed June 8, 2015.

Make boys understand that seeing someone as a sexy plaything opens the door to aggressive or harassing behaviours.

- Ask boys to “walk a mile in her shoes” as the saying goes. Teach boys to see things from the other side. How would they feel if they were a girl or woman having FHRITP yelled at them or enduring other types of harassment? Would they be laugh off the comment if it were directed at their girlfriend, sister, or mother? Boys need to understand the impact of words.²³
- Teach boys to combat the “bro code.” Easier said than done, I know, but boys need to learn that it is not wussy to call out bad behaviour; it is actually very courageous. Another perspective comes from filmmaker Thomas Keith: “Think about how many lives would be improved or saved if men had the courage to say something or do something in the face of an assault, bullying, or rape.”²⁴ Powerful words for a boy to hear.
- Teach boys to talk to others. A boy may not confront a peer directly but talking to another peer or trusted adult about how someone’s sexual aggression bothered him can relieve some of the pressure he might feel and help him realize he is not alone in seeing this behaviour as wrong.
- Lead by example. Do not use words like “slut” and “tramp” in discussions of celebrities or friends of your son. Such labels perpetuate the “she was asking for it” mentality that underlies so many rape myths.
- A 2011 study by social workers Sarah McMahon and Lawrence Farmer showed that alcohol is often used to excuse perpetrators or blame victims of sexual assault. They suggest that rape prevention programs talk about alcohol’s role in perceptions of responsibility.²⁵ Parents can have these conversations too, in the context of consent, and make it clear, first, that drunkenness is no excuse for committing sexual assault and, second, that someone who is assaulted when drunk is not to blame.
- Many professional sports are taking up the mantle of sexual assault prevention. Introduce them to your son. In Canada, these include the Toronto Argonauts and B.C. Lions football teams. The White Ribbon Campaign has long led this charge and has partnered with the Argonauts and others. Consult Appendix A for links to these various organizations.

Boys also need to understand that they can be victims of sexual aggression and be given outlets to talk about any incidents they experience. Harassment of boys is more common than assault, although the latter does occur. Here are some ideas for handling these issues:

- Boys should be taught to talk to a trusted adult about any harassment directed at them. It is particularly hard for boys to take this step, given male stereotypes and the bro code, but

²³ CBC reporter Shannon Martin talked about how the FHRITP phrase affected her in an interview that would be very instructive for boys.

<http://www.cbc.ca/player/AudioMobile/Metro%2BMorning/ID/2667112599/>

²⁴ Keith, Thomas. *The Bro Code: How Contemporary Culture Creates Sexist Men* Transcript. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 2011.

²⁵ McMahon, Sarah and Lawrence G. Farmer. “An Updated Measure for Assessing Subtle Rape Myths” *Social Work Research* 35, no. 2 (2011), p. 79-81.

they need to ensure the harassment stops. As we saw earlier, the impact of harassment on boys can be severe. In your conversations with your son, be sure to tell him he can come to you with any troubling behaviour and you will listen.

- Be aware that the impact of sexual harassment can be more severe than that of bullying. Schools often lump harassment under the rubric of bullying but the use of derogatory sexual language is a whole other category of abuse and should be treated as such. Boys who are called “gay” or harassed in some other sexual manner often feel deeply hurt and ashamed; having the sexual element of the crime taken out of the equation does not help and may lead people to be less understanding of how badly he is feeling.²⁶
- Assure your son that the victim of harassment or assault is never to blame. Avoid saying anything that would lead him to think otherwise, for example: Were you drinking? Why did you go to that party? Why don’t you stand up to the kid calling you names?
- Familiarize yourself with the sexual harassment policies in your son’s school and workplace, if applicable. If he is harassed, he needs to know his rights and the courses of action open to him.
- In 2002, psychologist Michelle Davies asked a rape crisis worker about sexual assault services for males and was told: “Honey, we don’t do men...Men can’t be raped.”²⁷ Given attitudes like that, it is no wonder that services for men were nearly non-existent even 15 years ago. The situation has improved but there are still far fewer options for boys and men who are victims of harassment or assault than for girls and women. If your son comes to you, help him find a qualified person to listen and support him. Many communities have a sexual assault help line, and family doctors may be able to recommend a counsellor or therapist. National hotlines might also help. I have listed some in Appendix A.

Body Image

Recently my son and I sat down to watch a short film profiling one of his favourite baseball players. At the end there was a clip of this player sitting, shirtless, at his locker. The image was on the screen for only a few seconds but the man’s extremely muscular frame was hard to miss.

All I could do was hope my son hadn’t noticed. He aspires to be an All-Star baseball player like his idol, but the last thing I want is for him to aspire to that body. As an elite professional athlete, this man has achieved a level of fitness unattainable to all but a few men. Yet bodies like his are the norm in sports and fitness magazines aimed at male audiences. A less chiselled but still very muscular physique can also be seen in popular musical artists like Jason Derulo, Drake, and Trey Songz, teen idols like Nick Jonas, Justin Bieber, and Shawn Mendes, and the stars of virtually any superhero film. (A look at the group from the latest *Avengers* film will demonstrate this point.) The men themselves are not to blame for normalizing this body type, but the increasing

²⁶ Gruber, James E. and Susan Fineran. “Comparing the Impact of Bullying and Sexual Harassment Victimization on the Mental and Physical Health of Adolescents” *Sex Roles* 59, no 1-2. (2008), p. 1-13.

²⁷ Davies, Michelle. “Male sexual assault victims: a selective review of the literature and implications for support services” *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 7, no. 3 (2002), p. 205.

presence of that specific male physical aesthetic in popular culture makes lessons in body esteem and media literacy all the more important for boys.

As parents we need to be sensitive to the fact that boys are affected at both ends of the body shame scale—overweight boys or those who are heavy-set but not muscular run the risk of feeling they are too big, while slimmer, smaller-framed boys may feel they are not nearly big enough.

No matter where on the size spectrum your son falls, there are some basic things you can do to help him maintain a healthy body image. The key is to remember that you have influence and, through effective communication, can help him feel secure and learn to question media depictions of male bodies. Here are some ideas:

- Do not criticize your own appearance or that of anyone else in front of your son. Conventional wisdom dictates that girls are more vulnerable to the “fat talk” or body shaming they overhear from their parents, but boys hear and internalize these messages too. The more they learn that appearance matters, the more they may pay attention to and feel the need to compare themselves to media images of perfect bodies.
- Point out some of the distortions boys may see in media. Marci Warhaft-Nadler notes in her book *The Body Image Survival Guide for Parents* that adult males often take on the roles of adolescents in films, creating an unrealistic basis of comparison for young audiences. For example, in *The Hunger Games* film, both Josh Hutcherson and Liam Hemsworth were playing teenagers, despite being in their 20s. In the *Divergent* film, lead actor Theo James was a full 10 years older than the 18-year-old male protagonist in the book on which the movie was based. Make it clear to boys that the teens they see on-screen are often adults and fully physically mature.
- Speaking of physical maturity, remind your sons often that boys develop at very different rates. Among my own son’s grade 7 class, there is a huge range of heights and muscular development; some boys’ voices have even changed. Ensure your son is well aware that pubertal development varies wildly between boys so he doesn’t feel like he is somehow “less than.” Some of the books about puberty in Appendix A might help.
- As we saw in chapter 6, peer appearance criticism can influence boys’ attitudes about their bodies. Be sure to keep the lines of communication open. Talk with your son about his friends and try to gauge whether there is any ridiculing or body shaming occurring within his peer group.
- Beware of fitness and other men’s lifestyle magazines. For obvious reasons, these publications focus intently on bodies. Studies have shown that these particular publications may have a negative influence on the body esteem of boys and men.^{28, 29, 30}

²⁸ Botta, Renée. “For Your Health? The Relationship Between Magazine Reading and Adolescents’ Body Image and Eating Disturbances” *Sex Roles* 48, no. 9/10 (2003), p. 389-399.

²⁹ Hatoum, Ida Jodette and Deborah Belle. “Mags and Abs: Media Consumption and Bodily Concerns in Men” *Sex Roles* 51, no. 7/8 (2004), p. 391-407.

³⁰ Alexander, Susan M. “Stylish Hard Bodies: Branded Masculinity in *Men’s Health* Magazine.” *Sociological Perspectives* 46, no.4 (2003), p. 535-554.

You may want to limit their presence in your home or discuss the content with your children.

- Boys can get sucked into “hero worship” habits at a very young age, either from watching sports stars or the superheroes that dominate kids’ media. In most cases, heroes are associated with big, perfect bodies. Introduce boys to a wide range of male “heroes,” especially those that use their brains rather than their brawn. My kids are both fans of Nikola Tesla, DaVinci, and Elon Musk (the subject of my older son’s “hero” speech at school). Boys who like music might want to learn more about famous composers or musicians. Don’t forget to add some accomplished females in the mix to balance a boy’s definition of the word “hero.”

A Strategy for Smaller Boys

Boys who are smaller often get teased or feel pressure to be bigger. As parents of two “small” boys, my husband and I have always been conscious of the pressures they might feel. Granted, neither is a teen yet, but we think we have laid the groundwork for high body esteem. Here are some of the things we have done:

- We find the word “skinny” just as toxic as the word “fat” and rigorously avoid its use. Words with such negative connotations should never be used to describe any child.
- We have never made size particularly relevant to our sons. We emphasize all of the wonderful things they do academically, athletically, and artistically so they don’t feel their size is any more important than any other traits they possess.
- Both play sports and have had coaches and parents comment on their smaller size. (We’ve heard both “petite” and “diminutive” used along with the comparatively harsher “tiny.”) We have told them that their size will be remarked upon but to disregard what others say. Rather than focus on their size when they play, we use words like “agile” and “quick.” We have also told them that being underestimated—as small boys often are—can often work to their advantage. In short, we have framed smaller size as a positive, not a negative.

For boys in the throes of adolescence, the pressure to be muscular can intensify, a reality demonstrated by the authors of *The Adonis Complex* showed. They did a body image test with boys aged 11 to 17 and found that more than half chose as “ideal” a body image silhouette with about 35 pounds more muscle than they actually possessed themselves: a body ideal that most men could attain only with steroids.”³¹ The authors recommend that parents talk with their sons about the illusions of bodily perfection in the media and the potential dangers of steroids, excessive exercise, weight-loss drugs, protein powders, and other extreme weight management and muscle building strategies. They also stress that parents not blame their sons for their desire to be bigger, but listen, understand the pressures they face, and do all they can to boost their son’s self-esteem. Their book is an excellent resource for parents of boys, providing guidelines

³¹ Pope, Harrison G. et al. *The Adonis Complex: How to Identify, Treat, and Prevent Body Obsession in Men and Boys*. New York: Touchstone, 2000, p. 174.

as to what constitutes extreme behaviour, and advice about how they can help their sons accept their bodies.

TIP: If your son is showing signs of extreme stress or excessive focus on his appearance, medical help might be necessary. Consult your family physician for advice.

A Strategy for Bigger Boys

With increasing numbers of kids becoming overweight, parents often have questions about how to help them achieve a healthy weight without making them feel ashamed of their appearance.

Warhaft-Nadler has some very sage advice for parents of overweight children. First, she recommends that you find out for sure if there is anything to worry about. The body ideals in our culture are so distorted that most people cannot distinguish between children who are actually overweight and those who are just on the bigger side of a healthy weight range. Schedule an appointment with a doctor without your child being present to determine if there is, in fact, a problem.

If your child is overweight, take Warhaft-Nadler's second piece of advice: say nothing. Studies have shown that focusing on a child's weight can make matters worse. Rather than addressing the issue verbally, take concrete actions that will help. Warhaft-Nadler suggests that you:

- Stay positive. Teach kids that bodies come in all shapes and sizes and the focus, always, is on healthy bodies, not skinny ones.
- Don't demonize foods as "bad." Talk about balance and moderation, and avoid making children feel ashamed for wanting a cookie or a handful of chips.
- Encourage children to get active, and get the whole family involved. In Warhaft-Nadler's words, spend less time worrying about how many calories kids are taking in and more on how many they're putting out.
- Never put children on a restrictive diet. Make healthier choices for everyone while ensuring that kids' caloric and nutritional needs are met.
- Get your son involved in menu planning, shopping, and meal prep so he can learn to appreciate food and make good choices himself.

Sexual Anxiety

While it may not be apparent in adolescence, anxiety about penis size and sexual performance may start to take root during this phase of life. Concerns over penis size are especially common and often emerge when boys compare themselves to others, either in media or real life.

In their paper, Drs. Michael Westwood and Jorge Pinzon recommend that physicians broach the topic of penis size with adolescent male patients to ensure they develop realistic expectations in a culture that makes penis size so central to manhood. Parents can do their part as well. If your son seems concerned about his size, here is some information you can share:

- Penis size ranges greatly. Flaccid penises can range from 5 to 15 cm in length, and erect ones from 11.4 cm to 19 cm. Most men fall right in the middle of these ranges³².
- Penile growth occurs on a very specific schedule and some boys reach their full size long before others. Locker room comparisons are unwise during adolescence or, really, any other time.
- Media, especially pornography, distort and exaggerate penis size while also sending the message that bigger is better in the bedroom. In fact, research has shown that penis size has very little to do with how much a woman enjoys intercourse. As Lynda Madaras notes in *The “What’s Happening to My Body?” Book for Boys*, there are no scientific studies proving that women prefer men with big penises, but there are plenty of studies that show women do not care about their partner’s penis size.³³
- If your son has seen ads for penis enlargement, explain to him that many of the techniques they promote are dangerous, then reiterate my first point about penis size: the vast majority of boys and men fall into a normal range and there is no need to worry about being bigger.

A little media literacy will help too. Stress to your son that the makers of penis enlargement products succeed only when men and boys feel badly about themselves, and they will use some rather unethical tactics to convince people that their products work.

As an example, let’s consider the Male Edge™ 2nd Generation Penis Extender.³⁴ The home page on the company’s website references a *British Journal of Urology* (BJU) report that seems to support the use of their product. The link they provide does not go to the actual study, but to the company’s highly biased interpretation of the study. The BJU report actually says the efficacy of penile extenders is supported only by “*some scientific evidence*” (emphasis mine) and further studies are needed. The report also: disputes the company’s claims that the extender can increase penis girth; states very clearly that these devices should only be suggested for patients who “persist” in requesting treatment even if they have a normal penis; and recommends cognitive behavioural therapy for men with anxiety about their penis size before any other treatment.³⁵ Not exactly a ringing endorsement. Boys should be made aware of cases like this where falsehoods are used to make products seem not only effective, but necessary.

Speak Out for Change

In this last section I am taking a page out of Melissa Atkins Wardy’s book—almost literally. Wardy is a tireless advocate for girls and writes extensively about the sexualization of females in

³² Westwood, Michael and Jorge Pinzon. “Adolescent male health.” *Paediatric Child Health* 13, no. 1 (2008), p. 32.

³³ Madaras, Lynda. *The “What’s Happening to My Body?” Book for Boys*. New York: HarperCollins, 2007, p. 53.

³⁴ Male Edge. “Natural Penis Enlargement” <http://www.maleedge.com/en/> Accessed June 12, 2015.

³⁵ Oderda, Marco and Paolo Gontero. “Non-invasive methods of penile lengthening: fact or fiction?” *BJU International* 107, no. 8 (2011), p. 1278-1282.

media. In her book *Redefining Girly*, she recommends that parents become advocates themselves.

Bothered by a show like *Family Guy* making fun of rape? Sick of the Sunshine Girl in the newspaper your son peruses for the sports scores? Tired of “fighting fuck toy” image of women in video games? Become an activist: blog; share your thoughts on social media; create petitions through one of many online tools listed in Appendix A; write letters to the editor; write to companies themselves.

Media producers love the status quo and will not change unless they know their potential audience is dissatisfied or disgusted with their product. As Wardy notes, change in the marketplace and media is not going to happen overnight,³⁶ but it won’t happen at all if we stay silent.

³⁶ Wardy, p. 173.