Protecting Your Family On the Internet

Protecting from Pornography

What's available for free and sometimes delivered without asking for it is not just airbrushed naked women anymore—it's very clear pictures of people actually engaging in various types of sex, bestiality, and adults molesting children.

Like the tobacco industry used to, the pornography industry aggressively targets young children as consumers. They position their Web sites to be found in seemingly innocent searches using words like toys, Disney, Nintendo, or dolls. According to NetValue, children spent 64.9 percent more time on pornography sites than they did on game sites in September 2000. Over one quarter (27.5%) of children age 17 and under visited an adult Web site, which represents 3 million unique underage visitors.{1}

But they are not the only ones struggling with easy and anonymous access to pornography—over 200,000 Americans, classified as "cybersex compulsives," are hopelessly addicted to e-porn. The study, conducted by psychologists at Stanford and Duquesne universities, appears in the March 2001 issue of the journal *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity.*

We personally know of people now in jail for stealing to support their porn addiction. Pastors are hearing from scores of people in their congregations who are secretly addicted to e-porn. Exposure to pornography, for some, escalates into more perverse and dehumanizing images. Online pornography is so strongly graphic, sending a hormonal power surge through the brain, that it has been called "electronic crack cocaine."

Protection from online pornography is essential. Parental

involvement is the first line of defense. And Internet filters will add an additional layer of security in the home. Whether a filtered Internet service provider, a filtering software program, or even hardware filters just recently available, some level of filtering is better than none, but none are perfect. The technology is developing every day and filters are far more effective and less intrusive than a couple of years ago.

Many organizations have tested filtering technologies, and their evaluations and experience is available to parents. The Center for Decency (www.centerfordecency.org), the National Coalition for the Protection of Children and Families (www.filterreview.org) and a combination of several organizations at www.getnetwise.org are excellent resources.

Those sites will also provide excellent advice to parents about monitoring their children or spouse's online activities as well as provide resources to deal with situations that arise if pornography is a problem in the home.

Put your computer in a public place in your home where anyone can see what's on the screen. Determine how much time children can spend online. Some families link screen time to reading time: a half-hour of reading earns you 30 minutes of Internet time. Talk to your children about the dangers of pornography. We warned our boys about "mind dirt," the kind of mental images that can't be washed out of memory like the mud that was ground into their soccer uniforms. Talk about why pornography is wrong: because it destroys the dignity that God gives people made in His image, and because it fuels our flesh instead of our spirits.{2}

Protecting our families from Internet pornography in our homes, businesses, schools, and libraries is one of the most loving and important things we can do for them.

Protecting from Predators

Several years ago when my son was about eight or nine, we had a memorable conversation when he decided he was going to run away from home. I used all the arguments from reason to try and dissuade him, but he was determined to leave. He was quite confident that if he met any bad guys, he'd just "beat 'em up," and that would be the end of that. I had to tell him about the *real* bad guys who are out there looking for vulnerable runaways, alone and defenseless, who either capture or lure them to places where they make horrible videos of grownups doing horrible things to kids—or worse. Thankfully, he decided to stay home.

As parents, of course we want to protect our kids from predators "out there" in the world; but it's just as important to protect them from predators online. Evil people and pedophiles know how to find children who don't know enough to be suspicious and self-protective, and they often rationalize their actions by saying that if parents don't protect their kids, then they deserve whatever happens.

One of the most unsafe places on the Internet is chat rooms. Conversations start out in a group, but one person can invite another into a private conversation. Anyone can initiate a private conversation, called an "instant message" or IM, with any other computer user once they know their nickname or screen name. I strongly suggest you teach your kids not to go into chat rooms or have private conversations unless you are supervising. Some "kids" they meet in chat rooms or IM's may not be kids at all, but adults with bad intentions.

It's essential to set down safety rules for our families. Teach your kids never to give out personal information like their age, phone number, school, or your town or city. Don't even let them use their real names. Kids must never call or meet an online friend in person unless a parent is there. And it would be wise also not to have a personal profile, which is

a big part of the America Online community, but also Web sites like Yahoo (www.yahoo.com). Predators prowl the profiles looking for likely victims.

Donna Rice Hughes,{3} a children's Internet safety advocate, suggests some excellent questions to ask your kids who spend time online:

- Have you seen any pornographic pictures?
- Has anyone online talked dirty to you?
- Have you met anyone online whom you don't know?
- Has anyone asked you for personal information?
- Has anyone asked to meet you in person?

Ask the questions, and watch their body language for clues that anything has happened. We need to stay alert. We need to protect our kids from predators.

Protecting Ourselves Emotionally

The Internet has opened an almost literal Pandora's box of emotional disasters for huge numbers of people.

An innocent looking computer screen or television set, for those with Web TV, turns out to be a portal to enormously addictive and powerful relationships with people we would never otherwise meet. People can be overwhelmed by the sense of truly connecting with people in an intense, compelling way. It can be a shock and a thrill to get a computer for doing mundane tasks like word processing or bookkeeping and discover that when it connects to the Internet, there are live people on the other side of the screen! The nature of online communication is different from the face-to-face or telephone communication we're used to in real life (or "RL" in net-speak). For one thing, people can project themselves as they wish to be. The painfully shy introvert can become a witty conversationalist, the charismatic center of attention in a chat room. Overweight, slovenly people can pretend to be buff

and beautiful. Middle-aged men can—and do—present themselves as young girls.

This means that online communication so often isn't between *people* as much as between *personas*. Add to that the development of a dizzily rapid sense of intimacy, and you have the potential for people to get hurt by not guarding their hearts as Proverbs 4:23 tells us to do.

For instance, one young man met disaster when, lonely after his divorce, he thought he fell in love with a young lady he met in a chat room. They started talking by phone. He professed his love for her; she professed her love for him. She visited him for a romantic weekend tryst. But it turns out she was a fourteen-year-old runaway, not eighteen as she had said, and when her parents tracked her down they had him arrested as a sex offender.{4}

Many married people have discovered how intrusive the Internet can be when their spouses start spending hours online in chat rooms and private conversation. Many marriages have broken up over online affairs. It doesn't matter if the relationships become physical or not; when people give their affections to another person, it's adultery of the heart.

How do we protect ourselves emotionally?

First, pre-decide to guard your heart (Prov. 4:23). If you start to think and daydream about someone in a way that you would be embarrassed if others knew what you were thinking, pull back. You're probably spending too much time online and spending too much emotional energy on that person. Redirect your thoughts to ones that are more righteous.

Second, if you're married, shore up your relationship. Spend at least as much time building into your marriage as you do with online friends. Resolve not to take your spouse for granted or compare him or her to your image of your online friends. Remember that we tend to project onto online friends

the qualities we want them to have, and it's not fair to compare the reality of the person you're married to with the fantasy of the *persona* on the other side of the screen. Consider that it is extremely rare, and frankly unwise, for married people to have close friends of the opposite sex.

Third, watch how much of your heart you share with people online. They are, after all, strangers. Our emotions follow our hearts, and when we give chunks of our hearts away by sharing our hopes and dreams and feelings, our affections are tied to those pieces of our hearts. I've heard it called "emotional fornication," and for good reason.

It's important to realize how quickly and easily we can fall into the false and fast intimacy of online relationships. We need to remember that the intimacy is not real, but the pain that might come from forgetting that *is* very real.

Protecting Ourselves Financially

Every year, more and more people are buying and selling on the Internet. That means more opportunity for fraud, mischief and flat-out evil intentions. How do we protect ourselves financially?{5}

First, protect your online identity. Identity theft is a growing problem, and the Internet has only made it easier. Don't store your personal information or credit card numbers with online retailers. Reputable merchants will ask if you want them to keep track of your personal information so you don't have to enter it every time. It's not that hard or time-consuming, and it's a good way to protect yourself. Don't give out more information than is necessary, especially your social security number. You're not being paranoid. You're being wise.

Now let's talk about making a purchase online. You don't have to be afraid to do this if you're dealing with a reputable company or organization. Be sure you're dealing with a real

company or organization. Look for a physical address and at least one customer service number. (Call it to make sure it's active.) Check out the company online at the Better Business Bureau (www.bbb.org).

Before entering personal information, make sure you're using a secure, or encrypted, connection. Look at the site's Web address. If it changed to "https," the 's' shows that it's secure. Although, not all secure connections use the https designation. The one thing you absolutely must see is that the padlock icon on your Web browser is locked.

Once you make your purchase, print a copy of your online order and keep it for the length of the return or warranty period. Your printed copy may be the only proof of your purchase.

Use a credit card instead of a debit card. Credit cards give you bargaining leverage if you need to dispute a charge—for instance, if the item never arrived. With debit cards, it's like spending cash; once the money is out of your account, it's gone.

If you participate in online auctions like eBay or Amazon.com, be aware that auctions are the number one online scam today.{6} If you don't want to gamble, you can use a third-party escrow service where the seller doesn't get paid until the buyer receives and approves his purchase. The most money lost in Internet scamming is through the Nigerian money offers.{7} "These offers, which used to come by airmail but now are increasingly arriving by email, promise millions of dollars in exchange for allowing your bank account to be used to safeguard someone else's riches. But the real intent is to take money out of your account, not put money in it."{8}

We need to be just as good stewards of God's money online as we do every other place.

Protecting Ourselves from Unnecessary Losses

The rise of the Internet has opened new doors to all kinds of unnecessary losses from which the wise person protects himself or herself. Probably the biggest loss is time. And probably the biggest time-waster is chat rooms. They are not productive, and many are not safe because predators prowl there. They encourage a false sense of intimacy and community. Chat rooms are a way to spend time, but when we stand before the judgment seat of Christ, one wonders how much of that activity will withstand the fiery test and endure into eternity? (1 Cor. 3:12-15)

Another consumer of time is e-mail. The problem with this is that, like handwritten letters, some e-mail is valuable for true communication. And like newspapers, some is valuable for disseminating information. But a lot of time is spent forwarding messages that are actually hoaxes and urban legends. Like fake virus warnings, for instance. I get several of these a week, and often per day, urging me to forward the letter to everyone in my address book. Please, before passing on a virus warning, check it out at one of the sites that expose virus warning hoaxes, like www.Vmyths.com. And please don't waste your time or anybody else's by passing on e-mails that promise goodies in exchange for forwarding the message to a certain number of people. There is no such thing as e-mail tracking. Nobody will know if you forwarded the message, and you won't ever get the goodies.

But real viruses are a true threat, and they can wipe out data on your computer. That is a completely unnecessary loss because of the excellent virus-protection software available today, such as Norton Anti-Virus or McAfee VirusScan. Don't open e-mail attachments if you don't know what they are or if you don't know the person who sent them. (You generally{9} don't need to worry about opening the e-mail message itself,

though. It's the attachments you need to be concerned about.) Many programs infect a person's computer and send out copies of themselves to people in their address books and the sender doesn't even know it's happening. I regularly receive messages containing viruses and worms from people I don't know because I'm the one who sends out our online newsletter, the *Probe-Alert*, and some people's infected e-mail programs automatically reply back with nasty surprises for my computer.

In this article we've looked at ways to protect ourselves and our families from online pornography and online predators. We suggested how to prevent emotional and financial disasters. And finally we've examined some unnecessary losses. Hopefully, you've found something that will help you pursue the worthy scriptural goal of "doing all to the glory of God," (1 Cor. 10:31) even in your online life.

Notes

1. "The NetValue Report on Minors Online," *Business Wire*, December 19, 2000.

2. I enthusiastically recommend two Web sites for people addicted to porn and those who love them. The first is divided into two sections, targeted at both groups of people, with different articles on each. www.pureintimacy.org. The second is www.settingcaptivesfree.com, which features an online Bible study program ("Pure Freedom") through which many have found freedom from sexual addiction for the first time in their lives.

3. http://www.protectkids.com

4. http://www.ozarkcountry.com/jerry.

5. The Kim Komando National Talkradio Show E-Zine, May 26, 2001.

6. http://www.natlconsumersleague.org/susantestimony52301.html

7. http://www.fraud.org/scamsagainstbusinesses/tips/nigerian.htm

8. http://www.natlconsumersleague.org/susantestimony52301.html

9. There are exceptions, such as the Wscript.Kakworm that someone sent me. According to the Symantec web site, “The worm utilizes a known Microsoft Outlook Express security hole so that a viral file is created on the system without having to run any attachment. Simply reading the received email message causes the virus to be placed on the system.” This shows the importance of running an up-to-date virus protection program, because I was alerted to the presence of the worm as soon as it arrived in my inbox and before I opened the e-mail message that contained it.

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The Value of the Internet for Christians

Sue Bohlin’s article, originally written in 1995, asks, How should Christians deal with this new culture force? There are many worthwhile places on the Internet for believers, and this essay is heavily documented with the electronic addresses. The dangers of pornography and unwise intimacy with computer-mediated relationships are also discussed.

An Exciting Technology

The internet is a cultural force that is changing the way we live and communicate, but many people don’t understand it. In this essay we’ll examine the Internet as a tool for Christians

to use to the glory of God while at the same time employing discernment to be wise in our use of a most exciting technology.

The internet is like our highway system, only it includes both the destinations as well as the roadways. Just as you can travel in a car over a series of connected interstates, state highways, city streets, farm-to-market roads, and gravel paths, the internet lets you travel electronically through a network of computers that lets you get just about anywhere in no time flat. The internet also includes the destinations in your electronic travels, much like different kinds of malls, where the stores are right next to each other. There are entertainment malls, where you can see pictures ranging from fine art in the Louvre (www.louvre.fr) to breaking news stories,{1} watch video clips of live performances, and listen to speeches, {2} music,{3} and radio stations on the other side of the globe (www.radio.com or www.christianradio.com). There are information malls where you can do research and gather information on everything from Caribbean vacations to the Crusades to castles.{4} There are library malls where, instead of books, you can get files of everything from games to computer software to historical documents.{5} And there are conversation malls where you can talk to people across town or around the world.{6}

The internet also provides almost instantaneous electronic mail, or e-mail, which allows people to communicate so quickly, easily, and cheaply that e-mails now outnumber physical mail aptly nicknamed “snail mail.” You don’t have to track down paper and pen, handwrite the note or letter (and these days, legible handwriting is becoming all too rare), find a stamp and then walk it to a mailbox. Instead, those who can type find that it’s a lot faster to zip off a letter at a keyboard, type in an e-mail address, hit the “send” button, and bam! Your letter is in the other person’s mailbox waiting for them to log on and read it.

You can also subscribe to electronic, automated mailing lists, which are a blend of newsletter and discussion group devoted to a single, specialized topic. My friend Bill, whose 8-year-old daughter Cheska lost a courageous battle with cancer, was grateful for the Brain Tumor list.{7} Subscribers to this list are people with brain tumors, those whose families or friends have brain tumors, and health-care professionals who treat these patients or do research into the disease. Bill gleaned exceedingly valuable information and leads on research and therapies. He also gave and received support and encouragement from this virtual community of people bound by a common tragic bond.

The instant, easy communication of e-mail also made it possible for Cheska to receive prayer support from literally around the world. By sending prayer updates to a little more than 200 people, her father discovered that by word of mouth and computer, thousands of people all over the globe prayed for her. I discovered that same wonderful phenomenon when sending out requests for prayers and cards to the Barbershop (singing) community for my father during his battle with cancer, and he was delighted to receive encouragement from all sorts of people he didn't know.The internet is one of the most exciting developments that the world has ever seen. Many Christians are both fearful and ignorant of it, though we don't have to be. Like any other kind of technology, the internet is morally neutral. It's how we use it or abuse it that makes the difference.

Home-Schoolers and Missionaries

The technology of the internet has been a tremendous boon to families. Many of them have discovered that the internet's rich informational resources have provided a way to share common interests. One father and his son like to surf the World Wide Web to explore their passions for the Civil War and astronomy.{8} Another father-son duo used the internet to

decide what historical places they would visit while planning a battlefield tour. Many families have enjoyed researching their vacation destinations before leaving home. In our family, we used the internet to learn as much as we could about Costa Rica before our son headed there on a missions trip. Our other son, researching a paper for school on the artist M.C. Escher, found biographical information and examples of his artwork on the World Wide Web. It yielded excellent information and saved us a trip to the library, making both of us happy campers!

Many home-school families have discovered the benefits of the internet. There is a great deal of information online that can supplement lessons and provide resources for the parent teacher. Online encyclopedias,{9} newspapers and libraries{10} offer more information to home-schoolers than has ever been available before. But for many families, the best part of the internet (as well as forums on the online services like CompuServe and America Online) is the support and interaction they can enjoy with other home-schoolers. Families in the most remote corners of Canada can enjoy an electronic camaraderie with those in suburban Atlanta and even military families in Germany. They share insights and experiences with each other as well as brainstorming together on problems and challenges such as finding a different way to teach a child having trouble grasping a concept, or what to do with a special needs child. “Plugged-in” home-school families report that the encouragement of their online home-school communities is often what keeps them going.

As video capabilities become cheaper and more accessible, home-school families look forward to networking with others in some learning exercises. A family’s geographical location won’t make any difference in a virtual (electronic) classroom.

For missionaries and mission organizations, the internet has become a huge blessing. Radio and satellite links give missionaries in even the most remote outposts access to

instant, inexpensive, reliable communication with their organizations and families via e-mail. The internet has shrunk the world, and missionaries no longer have to feel so isolated. One missionary in the former Soviet Union told me via e-mail that she was very grateful for almost instant access to loved ones as well as mature, wise believers who can encourage and guide her as she deals with the challenges of missions work. But the best thing, she said, was that she can ask people to pray specifically and immediately for needs and problems, and start seeing answers within hours instead of weeks or months. A missionary battling discouragement, homesickness and weakness, not to mention the intensity of spiritual warfare, can summon real-time prayer assistance from the other side of the world and experience very real support and a sense of being truly connected to the larger Body of Christ.

Whether a parent is saying goodbye to a child headed for the mission field, a foreign military post, or even to college in another part of the state, the internet has made it easier to separate knowing they can stay in close contact with their loved ones, in a world that has grown considerably smaller as the internet has grown larger.

Dangers on the Internet

The internet provides a wealth of information, but not all the information is edifying or wise. Much of it is downright silly, but some of it is actually dangerous. Fortunately, you don’t have to worry that you’ll turn on your computer and a pornographic picture will fall out of your monitor into your home; however, porn pushers are getting increasingly aggressive in finding ways to send their pictures to unsuspecting people, often children.

The key to protecting our children from online pornography is the same way we protect them from printed pornography: parental vigilance. Parents need to know what their children

are doing at the computer, which is why it’s wise to keep the family computer in a public place. And it’s also wise to become computer and internet literate ourselves. But there are some powerful tools to help parents and schools keep adult-oriented material away from children: software programs that filter out objectionable sites and prevent access to them. There are several filtered internet service providers (ISP), where the filter resides on a remote computer. This is the safest and most effective system, much harder for technically savvy kids and teens to circumvent than a filtering program that you install on your own computer.

Just having a filtering program isn’t enough. Some programs work so poorly that they’re actually worse than nothing at all because they give a false sense of security. Not all filtering software is created equal! Nothing will ever take the place of parental involvement and vigilance, and that will always need to be our first line of defense. But what about when our kids are at school? Administrators are very much aware of the dangers of the internet, while desiring students to have access to the incredible resources it offers. Many school districts are in the process of developing Acceptable Use Policies that will provide stringent parameters for student internet access. It’s essential that parents check on the policies of both their children’s schools and the local public libraries, which often provide unfiltered access to both adults and children out of a misguided (in my opinion) allegiance to the concept of no censorship.

Another danger of a very different kind also requires our vigilance. There are a lot of computer viruses floating around on the internet, which are transmitted when you transfer a file from a remote computer to your own (downloading), or from an infected diskette to a clean one.

A virus is an invisible program, written by programmers ranging from mischievous to mean-spirited, that attaches itself to a file and wreaks some degree of havoc on an

unsuspecting person’s computer. It’s important to use software that scans your hard disk and diskettes for viruses and then destroys them. I used to neglect to keep checking my computer for viruses, and when I turned it on the day of Michelangelo’s birthday, March 6, the virus of the same name wiped out all my data—mine and a few other thousand people’s! A little caution goes a long way. Be sure to use, and update, virus protection software by good companies such as Norton or McAfee.

Online Communication

Both Ann Landers and Dear Abby have run an increasing number of letters in their advice columns about spouses who emotionally or physically abandoned their families after meeting people through the computer. Those who have never developed a relationship with someone who lives on the other side of a screen and a telephone line have a hard time understanding how such a thing could happen, but there is an electric thrill in the immediacy of computer communication, as if a radio personality suddenly started conversing with you through your radio.

The dynamics of computer conversation are vastly different from face-to-face discussion. There is no non-verbal element, which comprises 93% of our communication. When body language and tone of voice are missing, and words are all you have to work with, words become much more important. And words, especially those of a direct and personal nature, are very powerful. But words on a screen are enough to allow friendships to sprout up quickly and mature under the right circumstances. Many people count their online friends, some of whom they’ve never met, as among their most cherished relationships. And many Christians are grateful for the depth of fellowship with other believers they have found through the computer.

However, it’s important to understand how online relationships differ from those in the “real world.” Because we have very

limited information about the people we communicate with, we project our preconceptions and fantasies onto them, quite unconsciously. Real life can be ordinary and drab compared to the idealized image we relate to on the screen. One person finally realized that the reason she preferred her online friends to her real-life ones was that, as she put it, she "had imbued them with magic."

That's why there are emotional potholes in cyberspace. A false sense of emotional intimacy is easily achieved when all you have to work with is words and thoughts and feelings. What is missing is the fullness of another person's whole personality and the context of his or her three-dimensional life. Therefore, what people experience is generally not true intimacy, although a relationship can indeed be extremely intense and most people are unprepared for the level of intensity that can characterize online communication. Sometimes, though, that experience of emotional intimacy can come at the cost of intimacy in one's "real life" relationships. Many husbands and wives feel shut out of their spouse's heart and mind because they spend hours a day at the computer, communing with unseen people with whom they readily share their deepest selves.

Women are especially vulnerable in online communication for two reasons: first, because God made us verbal creatures, and we respond deeply to words. And words are everything in cyberspace. Secondly, women are vulnerable because of the pervasive loneliness in our culture. Even those in marriages and families experience unmet needs for attention, warmth, and interaction. Many women are starving for romance, and any attention from a man can feel like the romance they're starving for. When a woman receives focused attention from a man who is listening to her heart as well as her words, it can feel like the romance God designed her to receive, and that's why a frightening number of women become infatuated with men they've never even laid eyes on, although this happens to men

as well. The word of God tells us to guard our hearts (Proverbs 4:23), and this is wise advice for all online communications and relationships.

Christian Resources

Never before has it been so easy to access so many Christian ministries and their material. It's now possible for us at Probe to make our radio transcripts available to anyone in the world with internet access, without printing or mailing costs. And internet surfers can stumble across biblically-based, Christian perspectives without even meaning to by using search engines,{11} programs that scour the net for anything they can find on a given subject. For example, someone looking for information on angels will find Probe's essay{12} right alongside articles from a typically New Age perspective.

If you have a computer, a modem, and an internet provider, you have access to literature and reference works beyond the scope of many libraries. One favorite internet site is the Institute for Christian Leadership's amazing "Guide to Christian Literature on the Net."{13} Here you can browse various Bibles, articles, classic essays, creeds and confessions, sermons, and reference works. They also offer the "Guide to Early Church Documents on the Net,"{14} a real find for church history buffs. Wheaton College sponsors the "Christian Classics Ethereal Library (www.ccel.org), offering writings by great saints such as Thomas Aquinas and Augustine, John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards. Their collection of reference works is thrilling to Bible students. Here you can find a concordance, Bible dictionary, a topical Bible, and Matthew Henry's commentary. One of the best Christian resource is the Bible Gateway (