Parents find porn in the boys' room

Dear Alice,

I have found pornographic material in my teenage boys' bedroom. I know the desire for them to discover their sexuality is good and healthy, but I have a problem with them having the material. I want the boys to learn to respect women as women and not as sex objects. My husband and I have some magazines (in a safe the boys cannot get into) that we look at together and enjoy. I know my husband and myself respect each other for who we are. I do not want the boys to use women as only sexual objects.

I am not sure if I should forbid the material or not? Please advise.

Answer

Dear Reader,

While you may prefer your sons were still reading Highlights, it seems you recognize their emerging sexuality as the natural and healthy development that it is. Awkward as it may feel, parents can use this and other situations as opportunities to communicate their values about sexuality to their children. In deciding whether to forbid the material or not, it may be useful to consider the following points:

- Think about how you feel and discuss this with your partner. Do you agree upon how to approach the issue? What were your experiences with porn or similar materials when you were teenagers? Do you want to forbid porn, have conversations about it with your kids, or both?
- Decide together the values you want to instill in your children. You mention respect for women. What other values regarding sexuality, love, and relationships do you want to share?
- Consider how your children treat women and all people in everyday life. That maybe a better indicator of respect than hidden porn. How do they demonstrate respect? Aside from the porn, do you have other concerns about their view of women?
- Communicate your values and any “house rules” to your children together. Offer truthful explanations if they have questions about your family values or rules.
- Finally, keep in mind that you found the material in their room. Was it kept privately? Were any privacy boundaries violated in finding the materials?

There are a number of messages you might want to convey to your children. They could be specifically related to porn or they could be more broadly related to healthy sexuality. The
following points are examples of messages you may want to convey:

- You may want to point out that you feel porn frequently objectifies the people in it, often women, and that you want your boys to respect women.
- Maybe you want to address body image and discuss with your teenagers that most women (and men) do not look like the images in the material.
- Perhaps you want to address that some adults use this material to enhance their sexual fantasies, and that while it is healthy for adults and teens to fantasize, porn can perpetuate stereotypes and create unrealistic messages about sexuality.
- You may also want to emphasize that it is normal for your children to be curious about sex and that they can always come to you with questions.

The next step is to talk with your kids. It might be more comfortable and less threatening to approach the topic casually, as it can also show them how approachable you are as parents. In addition to a conversation specific to porn (if you decide to have one), you can also use everyday situations as opportunities to talk with your children about sexuality and respect for people of all genders, such as:

- If you’re watching a TV show with sexual scenes, begin a dialogue, such as "What do you think about how he treated her in the last scene?"
- When you pass sexually suggestive billboard advertisements, discuss them with your children by talking about the product they are selling and how they are using sexy images to sell the product.
- Read magazines or visit websites that your children enjoy together. Comment on sexual content or ask your children to comment on it.

It's pretty common for parents to find sexually explicit material in their teenagers' room. Fortunately for you, many parents and educators have gone before you in having these types of conversations? you can find helpful resources, tips, and suggestions for talking with your kids about all aspects of sexuality at Advocates for Youth[2]. Continuing to have open and honest discussions with your boys about sexuality will help lay the foundation for your teenagers to mature into sexually healthy adults.

Alice!
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