

Protecting Our Children

The recent murder of a young woman in Maine, lured to her death by a phony Facebook message, and similar crimes frequently headlined in our daily newspapers remind us again of how desperately we need to establish practices to protect all the children in our communities. Other highly-publicized cases have raised our awareness of the abuse perpetuated by coaches, priests and pastors, and other leaders into whose care we entrust our children and youth. We may be less aware of the tragic fate of children kidnapped and exploited by those who produce pictures and videos for the prolific child pornography industry. In his 2012 book *The Evil and the Innocent* (see Resources list below), Senator Bill Diamond describes in horrific detail the tragic fate of these children, often forced into prostitution and sometimes tortured until they die in so-called “snuff” videos. According to an article in the January 15, 2014 *Faith in Action: News and Views from the United Methodist General Board of Church and Society*, human trafficking is one of the fastest growing organized crimes in the USA, victimizing an estimated 100,000 children and young women, ranging in age from 9 to 19. (Tamica Smith Jeuit, “A Dehumanizing Crime: Mississippi Tackles Human Trafficking”)

Sadly, some children are abused – physically, emotionally, and/or sexually -- by their parents or guardians, and not just in economically-disadvantaged homes, as some might suspect. Those who were abused as children have a high risk of becoming abusers themselves, once they experience the pressures and demands of parenting. The Fact Sheets posted at www.preventchildabuse.org, describe proven prevention strategies which churches could implement and/or promote: support programs for new parents; parenting education; child and family screening and treatment; child care; therapeutic treatment for those who have been abused or neglected; interpersonal skills training for children and adults; family support services; and public information and education.

Our children are at risk, not only because of those who betray their trust, but also from the toxic influence of media and online pornography. In one study, 90% of children ages eight through sixteen reported viewing pornography online, mostly while doing homework. The largest consumers of internet pornography have been shown to be twelve through sixteen-year old children (1). Even very young children may inadvertently click on links to pornographic images and sites, some of which are designed to appeal to natural curiosity about and interest in our bodies and in relationships. What they reveal, however, is not natural or healthy, but perverted and corrupt. Pornography establishes unrealistic expectations and may spoil the capacity for real relationships. Studies from multiple sources, including the American Psychological Association, confirm that repeated exposure to sexualized images may lead to depression, promiscuity, eating disorders, substance abuse, and other self-destructive behaviors.

In addition, popular television programs and music videos often present poor role models for dating relationships and sexual activity. Much of advertising, as well, promotes unhealthy values, leading girls, in particular, to internalize fears of not being thin enough, which often leads to depression and eating disorders. Although we cannot protect our children entirely from exposure to such influences, we can equip them to process and understand them for what they

are. Producers of such media seem to ignore the negative consequences of the lifestyles they portray and the influence they may have on individuals and groups.

Since 1975, various trustworthy agencies have testified about the clear link between media and gaming violence and increasingly aggressive and violent behavior by children. Entertainment violence not only stimulates aggressive attitudes, values, and behavior, especially among children, but also emotionally desensitizes persons to violence in everyday life. Yet violent programming has increased in every television time slot, and – without Cable Choice, many parents pay for programming they don't want and which is harmful to their children. (2)

Media and peers may also influence children to experiment with addictive substances. Not every person who experiments will become addicted, but there is no clear way to predict who will, except that evidence suggests a genetic link. The high school in Waterville, Maine, where I taught in the early '80s, held substance abuse awareness programs, based on research coming out of Hazelden, a highly respected private non-profit addiction treatment center based in Minnesota (www.hazelden.org). I learned that those who begin using alcohol or drugs before their brains have fully matured (which is usually in the 20s) are most at risk, since instead of learning to cope with life and relationships, they rely on drugs to get them through social and other challenging situations. They may at first use alcohol, marijuana, heroin, or prescription drugs because they like how the substance makes them feel. As addiction progresses, they need the drug in order to feel normal. The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) website revised their document "DrugFacts: Nationwide Trends" in January 2014, noting a significant increase in illicit drug use since 2002, especially in the use of alcohol and marijuana. Churches would do well to initiate and/or support community programs to educate parents and youth about the dangers of substance abuse and about the symptoms of and treatment for addiction.

In the fall of 2013, the American Academy of Pediatrics published new guidelines advising against excessive use of television and electronic devices. They suggest limiting "screen time" to two hours or less for children, and none for children under two; and they strongly advise that televisions and internet devices be used where parents can easily monitor them. Among the negative effects of excessive screen time described by the Mayo Clinic are impaired academic performance, behavior problems, and lack of independent and creative play skills (3).

Reading about these dangers may make parenting seem an arduous task, and indeed it is challenging to set rules, communicate clearly, and resist the temptation to let children do whatever they want to do. Children are precious gifts from God, entrusted into our care. Churches can help families and communities protect children, not only to keep them safe, but also to support them in fulfilling God's highest purpose for their lives. After the following list of suggestions, you will find more detailed descriptions of "Resources for Protecting Our Children," including information about specific programs named among the suggestions and marked with an asterisk.

- Frequently remind parents that parenting is their most important vocation at this time in their lives and affirm the church's support for them in this role. Excuse them from committee assignments and tasks that might interfere with parenting responsibilities.
- Provide multi-generational activities through which parents can bond with other parents and children can engage with other caring adults.
- Carefully follow the practices outlined in *Safe Sanctuaries*.*
- Offer *Darkness to Light** training to establish safe practices as norms.
- When speaking to children and youth, affirm characteristics other than physical appearance and sex appeal. Inquire about their interests and opinions. Praise their efforts, social skills, and positive character traits.

- Teach parents about the dangers of pornography and violent programming, how to limit their children’s exposure to it, and how to talk with their children about it.
- Encourage parents to counter the sexualizing images and poor role models to which our children are exposed by setting limits around their media viewing, watching with them, and helping them evaluate media messages.
- Teach parents to establish themselves as trusted sources of accurate information about sex for their children by speaking frankly and naturally about their bodies and about sex and by initiating age-appropriate conversations at teachable moments.
- Encourage parents to seek and share with each other information about movies, music, television programs, and games that appeal to children and youth. In-depth reviews and analyses may be found at www.pluggedin.com, as well as at other sites. A church website could include a link to information and recommendations gleaned by parents in the church and community.
- Support legislative action to regulate online pornography and to prosecute those involved in sex trafficking.
- Provide parenting education and support groups, encouraging parents to set clear boundaries around early dating, sexualized clothing, and unchaperoned parties and to participate in “Safe Homes” and “Parent Peer Group” pledge programs.*
- Provide relationship education for children and youth and encourage nonsexual friendships between boys and girls.
- Provide internet safety education for children, youth, and parents. See “Promoting Internet Safety” under Parenting in the Best Practices Articles and Recommended Resources section at www.marriagelovepower.net to learn how some churches address this important issue (or search by title or topic at www.umdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries).
- Share resources for “Parents of Prodigals”*

Notes:

- (1) “Protecting Your Family Online: A How-To Guide for Parents,” www.covenanteyes.com (type article title into search bar), pages 4-5
- (2) “When Are We Going to Learn?” The Parents Television Council, *PTC Insider*: Vol. 15 #1 January 2013, page 7
- (3) (www.mayoclinic.org/children-and-tv/art-20047952?p=1).

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Resources for Protecting Our Children

See also “Promoting Internet Safety,” “Empowering Parents,” “Equipping Youth for Healthy Relationships,” “Countering Media’s Negative Messages,” “Facing up to Pornography and Sex Addictions,” and other [Best Practices Articles and Recommended Resources](#) documents posted at www.marriagelovepower.net or (search by title or topic at www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries).

4 Every Girl – A Campaign Against Sexual Exploitation, www.4verygirl.com. A recent study conducted by the Parents Television Council (see listing below) found that 33% of television episodes aired during the study portrayed underage girls experiencing sexual violence and harassment or involved in sex trafficking, stripping, and pornography. Many episodes treated these situations and behaviors as if humorous, teaching impressionable boys and girls to consider them normal and acceptable activities. The PTC, which describes the shocking content of many programs in its newsletter, has persuaded a number of corporations to stop advertising on offensive programs and has succeeded in getting some of them off the air. In addition, they have begun a national public awareness campaign with a 30-second public service announcement, already broadcast on the Hallmark Channel and other values-based networks. Read the study posted at the website and learn how you can participate in this campaign.

Darkness to Light, www.d2l.org. This national nonprofit organization works to “raise awareness and educate adults about how to prevent, recognize, and react responsibly to child sexual abuse.” Visit the website to find training events and leaders near you, to download a free booklet outlining the necessary steps for preventing abuse (Learn the Facts, Minimize Opportunity, Talk About It, Recognize the Signs, and React Responsibly), and learn more about this effort to change the norms in order to protect our children. While current statistics, indicating that 1 out of 10 children experience sexual abuse, show an improvement over those of the past, we still have much to do to increase child safety.

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (www.missingkids.com) This nationwide organization, with regional offices in California, Florida, New York, and Texas, provides tools and resources for protecting and rescuing children from predators and from those who would exploit them. The tools include a telephone hotline 800-THE-LOST (843-5678) and Cybertipline (at the website) for reporting possible child sexual exploitation). The resources include downloadable videos and presentations that may be used for family or classroom lessons and discussions, as well as links to other relevant sites such as www.thesafeside.com, which can help children understand why they should not share too much information about themselves online, how to respond to cyberbullying, and the dangers hidden in apparently friendly invitations.

National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA), <http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/> “NEDA supports individuals and families affected by eating disorders, and serves as a catalyst for prevention, cures and access to quality care.” The website offers numerous articles, videos, and webinars to increase awareness and understanding and a toll-free hotline, 800-931-2237, available Mondays - Thursdays 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. and Fridays 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. (EST).

National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), www.drugabuse.gov This website provides up-to-date information on drug abuse trends, prevention, and treatment. For articles and videos for individual use and for prevention and educational programs, see www.easyread.drugabuse.gov/. The article titled “Help Children and Teens Stay Drug-Free” notes that telling your children not to do drugs really does have a positive effect. You should also teach and help them practice “refusal skills.” A parent or other adult’s close connection with a child or youth is the most effective substance abuse prevention tool.

Parents of Prodigals, www.parentsofprodigals.com Vision statement: “We want to come along side by individually supporting parents of “prodigals” in crisis. With a committed team of intercessors, praying fervently, being available for times of crisis. Being open to God’s Word for each specific situation, knowing there are NO magic formulas. There is no such thing as the “right book” or the right Pastor to “fix” this. God will equip each one for their specific situation. We must seek God; search His Word for what He has. We will encourage each other to be honest and open, feeling secure that this is a safe place – we all have confidences we need maintained.” At this website you can submit prayer requests, sign up for a weekly message of encouragement, ask for assistance, and learn about helpful resources and strategies.

Parent Peer Groups and Safe Homes Parent Networks. An internet search for these topics brings up websites for various communities that have invited parents to stand together for common standards of behavior. Members of such groups usually sign a pledge promising that they will not allow consumption of alcohol and drugs on their properties or unsupervised gatherings that may lead to substance abuse and other destructive behaviors. The signers may be listed on the website so that other parents will know which other parents have pledged to provide a safe place for young people to gather. View a sample “Safe Homes, Smart Parties” agreement at http://www.informedfamilies.org/campaigns/safe_homes. Such websites also offer events, articles, videos, and other information about effective parenting.

Parents Television Council, 707 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 2075, Los Angeles, CA, 90017, www.parentstv.org. This nonprofit research and education organization lobbies for enforcement of broadcast decency standards and publishes a newsletter to inform parents of negative and harmful media messages, as well as family-friendly programming.

Pornography Harms, a project of Morality in Media, now known as the National Center on Sexual Exploitation, now has a new website (www.EndSexualExploitation.org) which reports on its mission to expose the connection between all forms of sexual exploitation and to address the harms of pornography. Visit their Facebook page for more information as well.

Prevent Child Abuse America (www.preventchildabuse.org), founded in 1972, promotes the healthy development of children nationwide “...through a network of chapters in 50 states and nearly 600 Healthy Families America home visiting sites in 39 states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Commonwealth of the Marianas, Puerto Rico, US Virgin Islands, and Canada. A major organizational focus is to advocate for the existence of a national policy framework and strategy for children and families while promoting evidence-based practices that prevent abuse and neglect from ever occurring.” Visit the website for articles, brochures, and tips about proven prevention strategies, which can be initiated and/or supported by local churches.

Safe Sanctuaries: Reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church for Children and Youth, by Joy Thomburg Melton (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2008). This book is designed to teach people how to recognize and prevent potential problems, deal effectively with situations that may arise, recognize signs of child endangerment, and avoid incidents or even the appearance of inappropriate behavior. By establishing clear policies and procedures to be applied unilaterally, such as never leaving a child alone with one adult, church leaders can provide a safer environment for children. Visit <http://www.gbod.org/lead-your-church/safe-sanctuaries> for more information and for guidance for developing and updating your policy.

So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood and What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids, by Diane E. Levin and Jean Kilbourne (2009). Risqué Halloween costumes for young girls. T-shirts that boast "Chick Magnet" for toddler boys. Sexy content on almost every television channel, as well as in movies and video games. Popular culture and technology inundate our boys and girls with an onslaught of graphic sexual messages at earlier ages than ever before. Without the emotional sophistication to understand what they are seeing, kids are getting into increasing trouble emotionally and socially. [This book] provides parents with the information, skills, and confidence they need to discuss sensitive topics openly and effectively, so their kids can just be kids. (Amazon review)

Talking to Your Kids About Sex: Turning "the talk" into a conversation for life, by Laura Berman (Great Britain: Dorling Kindersley Limited, 2009) The author encourages parents to talk together about the values they want to pass on to their children. She then provides guidance for initiating appropriate conversations at every age. By taking advantage of "teachable moments" from infancy through adulthood, parents can establish themselves as credible sources for information. Children who know their parents will provide honest and helpful information are less likely to be misled by peers and popular media.

The Evil and the Innocent, by Senator Bill Diamond (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2012). Although disturbing to read, this book describes dangers to children that we must know about in order to protect them. High level technology now makes it easier to find, track, and capture perpetrators, but inconsistencies and loopholes in the law sometimes result in ineffective action. The author urges education of the public and of our elected officials about the deficiencies of legislation that is supposed to protect our children.

The United Methodist General Board of Church and Society, www.umc-gbcs.org

Among the many issues-related articles at this website, you will find two of particular relevance to this topic: <http://umc-gbcs.org/content/articles/HumanTrafficking.pdf> and <http://umc-gbcs.org/content/articles/ChildrensRights.pdf>

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