

Child Pornography Prevention

On Tuesday another one of my clients was sentenced in Federal Court on Possession of Child Pornography charges. That evening, the group talked about how to prevent people from possessing child pornography.

A Federal judge is mandated to look at four factors (according to US Code 3553) when imposing a sentence upon a defendant. Any sentence must reflect the seriousness of the crime; provide deterrence to criminal conduct; protect the public from further crime and provide rehabilitation.

The way I have heard judges, both federal and county, explain their thoughts on deterrence is that they need to impose a sentence that will send a message to other people in the community who are either engaging in the behavior or thinking about it. Their thinking is that if someone sees the sentence imposed upon another for a crime, they will either stop or won't start engaging in an illegal behavior.

I and my clients both struggle with the concept of deterrence in these cases. My clients will tell you that they knew what they were doing was wrong and they wanted to stop. They also will tell you that they could not stop. Reading news stories in their local paper about individuals being arrested for possession of child pornography did not deter their behavior. They were aware of the illegality of their behavior but were caught up in the throes of addiction, they could not stop their behavior.

I also see this in my clients who are new to treatment after the police initiate an investigation into their illegal pornography use. In the near term time frame, clients can't even imagine looking at pornography again. I call this "sobriety by police". One would think that the appearance of the FBI in your home at 5 a.m. would be a great deterrent to addictive behavior. However, it is not a long term deterrent. When we are dealing with addiction, punitive deterrents do not last as long as the client would like or as long society would think.

If the use of legal deterrents is not very effective in stopping people from viewing child pornography, the question remains, what will work? I believe the lack of actual prevention work is problematic. There are prevention programs for teens regarding drugs, alcohol and even gambling. There are no real prevention programs for pornography for teens. There are some well meaning groups who are spear heading this movement and this week the cover story in Time Magazine is about pornography and young people. Still, no one is talking about child pornography. Even in talking about problematic pornography use child pornography is rarely addressed, yet there are a lot of people, both adults and teenagers, who are watching it online.

Many of the younger men who come to my practice started looking at pornography online when they were approximately 12 years old. This statistic is not uncommon. We know that the average age of first exposure to online pornography is around 11 years old. What is also very common for my younger clients is that they started watching child pornography at the age of 12 as well. Though it is biologically appropriate for a teenager to have sexual attraction to a teenager, to watch pornography involving 12 year olds is illegal. Also, the content of those videos is frequently the result of child sexual assault. Therefore, it is not truly the same as a 12 year old looking at another 12 year old in school and having sexual thoughts about them.

The news is bombarded with articles about teen sexting and some of those teens being charged with either production or possession of child pornography. This youth produced imagery is not normally what we see in child pornography possession cases. Exposure to stories about teen sexting helps

spread awareness but not enough.

How do we prevent the possession of child pornography? By spreading educated awareness, meaning thoughtful, helpful awareness that is free of judgment and shame.

First, talk to your children about online pornography. When you are talking to your children about online pornography you MUST also talk to them about child pornography. An illegal image is only a Google search away. Talk to your children about what to do if they come across this imagery. Talk about the images your child might have seen.

Second, we need to acknowledge that pornography addiction in adolescents and adults is a real problem. The academic crowd might argue as to whether or not pornography addiction exists. Let them argue. What those of us in the trenches know is that pornography addiction is real. There is treatment available from specialists who are trained to specifically deal with this issue. If you know someone who is struggling with pornography addiction, talk to them. Let them know that they can get treatment. Treatment is always confidential so no one has to know if they don't want them to know.

Third, know that incidental contact with child pornography is not that uncommon. Most people think that gaining access to child pornography is difficult. It is not. Anyone who is using a filesharing program to download pornography has likely seen child pornography. Anyone who has been looking at pornography online for a long time has likely seen child pornography. This does not mean that they are looking for it but they have likely come across it. Even if you are not seeking it out but have inadvertently opened a thumbnail file that is a pornographic image or video of a child, you can be arrested for it. Anyone who wishes to avoid incidental contact with child pornography should stay away from file sharing programs. You can download thousands of images quickly but likely some of that is illegal. Stop using filesharing programs.

A final thing to know is that even if you are addicted to viewing pornography that includes child pornography, you can get help. Each state has different rules, but in most states, any therapist you go to is NOT legally required to report the use of child pornography. Recent law changes (2015) in Pennsylvania and California have made child pornography viewing part of a therapists mandate to report. If you live in a state where there is a mandate to report, you can still get help for pornography addiction, you just won't be able to say you are also looking at illegal pornography. This is obviously not ideal for the context of therapy, but is still better than nothing.

People possess child pornography for a multitude of reasons. Some started to look at it 15 years ago when they were a young teen and never stopped. Perhaps their pornography addiction progressed to the level that they needed more taboo material to get a "hit". Some are reenacting a childhood trauma by watching images of child sexual assault. Some people intentionally look for the content because they are attracted to minors. Some people encounter child pornography by accident. No matter what route a person takes to get there, any possession of child pornography is illegal and the person can be prosecuted and placed on a sex offender registry.

The more we talk about the problem of child pornography in a rational manner that is not based in fear, the more we can enact prevention efforts. Talking to a 12 year old about the risks of looking at illegal pornography may be uncomfortable for a parent, but please trust that the conversation about pornography will be much less uncomfortable than sitting in a court room waiting for a judge to sentence your child for an internet sex crime.

Jennifer Weeks Ph.D. LPC CAADC CSAT-S is the founder and owner of Sexual Addiction Treatment Services (SATS). SATS is an out-patient treatment program located in Pennsylvania that specializes in the treatment of sexual addiction and in treating sexually addicted offenders. Dr. Weeks specializes in treating cybersex offenders. She has been an invited presenter on the topic, taught continuing education for attorneys and serves as an expert witness on the topic.