

How to Protect Your Child from Being Harmed from Cybersex: Teach them Resilience

During the course of researching my book, *The New Age of Sex Education: How to talk to your teens about cybersex and pornography*, I came upon the research of Pamela Wisniewski and her colleagues. Dr. Wisniewski's research focuses on teen internet safety and parental mediation styles. In non-scientific terms, her work helps us understand how teens navigate risk on the internet and how different parenting styles and parenting behaviors affect the behaviors of teens online. Her work is very timely and offers wonderful suggestions on how to help your child navigate the online world safely.

In this post, I would like to focus on data from a presentation on the topic of resilience that Dr. Wisniewski and her colleagues gave at a conference in the spring of 2015. This topic resonates strongly for me as a possible answer or at least a piece of the puzzle for my clients.

Many, if not all, of my clients often ask why they ended up with a sex addiction or a pornography addiction. We all know that some people can view pornography and have no problem with it. You can equate this to the social drinker. Some people drink socially and never develop an alcohol abuse or addiction problem while others will quickly escalate into problematic drinking. The same can be said for pornography. Some people can watch online pornography sometimes as a tool to help with masturbation or as something they do with their partner to spice up their sex life. For these people, the use can stay casual and it never escalates into a problem. In fact, for these people, the use of pornography might even be beneficial to their sex lives. My clinical practice doesn't work with this population. The clients who come to my office who watch online pornography often quickly become addicted. They all want to know why.

The question of why someone becomes addicted to online sexual behavior is important from many perspectives. First, having some information about the “why” can sometimes help clients feel like they have a better understanding of their addiction, their behavior or themselves. Additionally, if we can figure out “why”, we have tools to work with to help the client function better in the world. Finally, answers to “why” can help our prevention efforts immensely.

One of the key factors that may influence the effects of exposure to risky online materials is the presence of psychological problems or low self efficacy. Studies have shown that kids that report more psychological issues are more affected by experiencing online risk (such as pornography, bullying, etc). Other studies have shown that compulsive use of the internet by adolescents can be linked to negative affect. Negative affect is the psychological term used to describe feelings of distress such as anxiety, guilt, fear, etc. Dr. Wisniewski's research shows us that resilience, the ability to overcome negative experiences, is a moderator between online risk and negative affect.

So what does this mean for parents of teens who are online being exposed to risk? There are many useful implications of this research. The first is that, as parents (or educators, therapists, etc), we need to be on the look out for psychological issues in adolescents. If these issues, such as depression or anxiety, go unnoticed or untreated, there is an increased risk of the child engaging in compulsive internet use. If a child has an internet addiction, interventions need to limit exposure but also treat the underlying emotional issues.

From a prevention perspective, perhaps one of the most effective prevention tools is to teach your child how to cope with negative emotions. Creating emotional resilience in your child may inoculate them from the dangers of any type of addiction, be it drugs or the internet. We also need to teach children

how to cope with negative online experiences in a healthy manner. Because you cannot shelter your child from all risk, teaching them healthy coping skills can go a long way to limit or prevent psychological harm from experiencing a negative event.

Let us circle this discussion back around to the “why” question my clients ask. For many the answer lies in resilience and negative affect. Many of my clients experienced adverse life events as children or suffered from mental health issues such as anxiety, depression or social anxiety. They did not have coping skills or resilience and no one tried to teach them these skills. They found a way to sooth their negative affect (unpleasant emotions) on the internet and through pornography or sexual chat.

For more information on ways you can help teach your child resilience, click here for the American Psychological Associations Resilience Guide (<http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/resilience.aspx>).

For more information on Dr. Wisniewski's research, <http://news.psu.edu/search/gss?query=pamela%20wisniewski&site=news>