

Cultivating Innocence:  
Character Formation in the Age of Porn

The Armitage Lecture 2016

The Shore School, 26 August, 2016

Dr. David John Sandifer

It's great honour to be here today. I want to thank Dr Wright, council members and staff, and the Rev. Paul Dudley especially for the privilege of addressing you as part of this important lecture series.

I'm also particularly thankful to be speaking to you about the subject at hand, even though I'm sure it's not a particularly pleasant one for most of us.

This article appeared in the UK spectator about a year ago:

## Pornography has changed the landscape of adolescence beyond all recognition

As a study reveals a sharp rise in the number of schoolgirls at risk of emotional problems, Allison Pearson says we need to embolden our daughters to fight back against pornography - however embarrassing it may be

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Sending naked photos or videos - so-called 'sexting' - is part of everyday life for teenagers. Photo: Alamy



By Allison Pearson

9:06PM BST 22 Apr 2015

[Slide 1]

It details how more and more young teenage girls are presenting to their paediatricians with serious internal damage, in some cases with life-long effects, as a result of rough sex. This is happening because the boys they're doing this with are mimicking the porn they've been watching. These girls are not socially

disadvantaged. They were not abducted. They were not raped by strangers. They're average, middle-class girls, living the 'normal' life of teenagers today.

As a society, we're only beginning to become aware of impact of porn on the rising generation. For educators in particular, most are still working out impact on the educational environment, and what the appropriate response should be.

The purpose of this afternoon's lecture is threefold. First, I want to sound the alarm about the porn epidemic amongst children and young people. Secondly, I want to step back and examine philosophical underpinnings of porn, especially the liberal commitment to the untrammelled dissemination of knowledge. I will seek to contrast this with an earlier view which attached a high value to innocence, or to what I will call 'negative knowledge'. Finally, I will suggest some ways in which Christian educators might respond.

## I. THE PORN EPIDEMIC



[Slide 2]

Alarmism not the stance which academics typically like to adopt. In fact, historians have coined an expression which effectively inoculates against this sort of posture: 'moral panic', something which of course none of us wants to be accused of. However, much as we all find alarmism unpalatable, and no doubt prefer the detached stance of the analytical observer, the fact is, there are times when, well, we need to sound the alarm. I believe the present porn crisis is such a time, and such a time for educators in particular.

The research on this is actually less complete than one would hope for, with a lot more needing to be done. Yet the picture which it paints is already pretty clear.

Consider:

- A study of the most popular porn scenes showed that 88% contained physical aggression, 94% of it directed toward women; in 95% of cases the victim was shown to respond either neutrally or with pleasure.<sup>1</sup>
- A major study at the University of Sydney in 2012 showed that for men who were frequent users of pornography, 43% were first exposed to pornography between the ages of 11 and 13.<sup>2</sup>
- A large-scale survey in the US revealed that amongst young adults age 25-30, 25% had first viewed pornography before puberty.<sup>3</sup>
- The same survey revealed that half of 13-24 year-olds actively seek out online porn at least once a week.<sup>4</sup>
- In a 2010 survey of English 14-16 year-olds, nearly one third claimed that their first exposure to pornography was at 10 years or younger.<sup>5</sup>
- A 2015 survey in the UK showed that 1 in 5 twelve to thirteen year-olds believed that watching porn is "normal behaviour".<sup>6</sup>
- The same survey revealed that the porn site Pornhub was one of the "Top 5" internet sites for 11-15 year-old boys.<sup>7</sup>
- Unwanted exposure to pornography among minors is increasing, with the number of 10-12 year-olds accidentally seeing porn rising from 9% to 19% between 2000 and 2005, and from 28% to 35% for 13-15 year-olds.<sup>8</sup>

Remember: the iPhone came out in 2007—this was *before* the age of smartphones

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<sup>1</sup> Bridges, A. J., Wosnitzer, R., Scharrer, E., Chyng, S., and Liberman, R. (2010). Aggression and Sexual Behavior in Best Selling Pornography Videos: A Content Analysis Update. *Violence Against Women* 16, 10: 1065–1085.

<sup>2</sup> <http://sydney.edu.au/news/84.html?newsstoryid=9176>

<sup>3</sup> <http://endsexualexploitation.org/articles/porn-phenomenon-care-groundbreaking-research/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://endsexualexploitation.org/articles/porn-phenomenon-care-groundbreaking-research/>

<sup>5</sup> "Parliament investigates online porn", *Psychologies*, July 2010,

<sup>6</sup> Childwise/NSPCC survey, <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/fighting-for-childhood/news-opinion/online-porn-evidence-impact-young-people>

<sup>7</sup> Childwise/NSPCC survey, <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/fighting-for-childhood/news-opinion/online-porn-evidence-impact-young-people>

<sup>8</sup> Mitchell, K. J., J. Wolak, and D. Finkelhor. (2007). Trends in youth reports of sexual solicitations, harassment and unwanted exposure to pornography on the internet. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 40(2): 116-126.

- The latest neuroscience research has demonstrated that pornography use has measurable negative impacts on the brain.<sup>9</sup>
- Research by behavioural scientists shows that the consumption of pornography can lead to addiction, with similar neurological processes to those observed in substance addiction.<sup>10</sup>
- Multiple studies have shown a correlation between early exposure to pornography and early sexual activity.<sup>11</sup>
- Minors who have been exposed to pornography are more likely to view women as sex objects.<sup>12</sup>
- Minors who view pornography and other sexualised media are more accepting of sexual violence, and more likely to believe “rape myths” (that women enjoy being raped).<sup>13</sup>
- Adolescents who are exposed to pornography are more likely to engage in sexual violence.<sup>14</sup>
- Pornography is used by adult sexual abusers to undermine children’s resistance to exploitation.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Kuhn, s., Gallinat, J. Brain Structure and Connectivity Associated with Pornography Consumption, *JAMA Psychiatry*, May, 2014,

<sup>10</sup>“Neuroscience of Internet Pornography Addiction: A Review and Update”, Todd Love, Christian Laier, Matthias Brand, Linda Hatch, and Raju Hajela, *Behavioral Sciences*, 1 Sept. 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Huston A, Wartella E, Donnerstein E. 1998. Measuring the Effects of Sexual Content in the Media: A Report to the Kaiser Family Foundation. Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation: Menlo Park, CA; Strasburger V, Wilson B (eds). 2002. Children, Adolescents, & the Media. Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA; Wingwood G, DiClemente R, Harrington K, Davies S, Hook E, Oh M. 2001; Exposure to X-rated movies and adolescents’ sexual and contraceptive-related attitudes and behaviors. *Pediatrics* 107: 1116–1110. DOI: 10.1542/peds.107.5.1116).

<sup>12</sup> Peter, J. & Valkenburg, P. (2007). Adolescents’ exposure to a sexualized media environment and their notions of women as sex objects. *Sex Roles*, 56, 381–395.

<sup>13</sup>Check J. 1995. Teenage training: the effects of pornography on adolescent males. In *The Price We Pay: The Case Against Racist Speech, Hate Propaganda, and Pornography*, Lederer LR, Delgado R (eds). Hill and Wang: New York; 89–91; Strouse, J, Goodwin M, Roscoe B. 1994. Correlates of attitudes toward sexual harassment among early adolescents. *Sex Roles* 31: 559–577. DOI: 10.1007/BF01544280; Kaestle C, Halpern C, Brown J. 2007. Music videos, pro wrestling, and acceptance of date rape among middle school males and females: an exploratory analysis. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 40: 185–187. DOI: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2006.08.010.

<sup>14</sup> Bonino S, Ciairano S, Rabaglietti E, Cattellino E. 2006. Use of pornography and self-reported engagement in sexual violence among adolescents. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology* 3: 265–288. DOI: 10.1080/17405620600562359.

<sup>15</sup> Russell D, Purcell N. 2005. Exposure to pornography as a cause of child sexual victimization. In *Handbook of Children, Culture, and Violence*, Dowd N, Singer D, Wilson R (eds). Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA; 59–84.

- A correlation has been shown between a child being exposed to pornography and their likelihood of being a victim of sexual violence.<sup>16</sup>

At a presentation in February, Joe Tucci, of the Australian Childhood Foundation, reported that whereas 10 years ago pornography was almost never involved in cases of child-on-child sexual assault, today there is a porn connection in virtually every case.<sup>17</sup>

As most of us know, private schools have not been immune to this onslaught: here in Sydney one sadly made the news last year when it was discovered that a group of year one students were watching porn on school-provided iPads. Later in the same year at the same school a case of child-on-child sexual assault was reported amongst the same cohort.

Furthermore, what's increasingly becoming clear in all of this is, is that we've only seen the tip of the iceberg. Stories of child exposure to porn are beginning to proliferate in the news, and it's hard to shake the feeling that this is only the beginning: we've only just begun to chart the enormous impact that porn is having on children and young people.

Here is the bleak reality: porn is everywhere. Increasingly, it forms the 'wallpaper' of the lives of adolescents and young adults. Virtually all children will become exposed to hard core porn before their eighteenth birthday—and for many, it will become a daily part of their lives by their teen years. In most cases, their first exposure will come from their peers, often from school friends.

This is a public health crisis, an educational crisis, and a spiritual crisis.

It requires a response from parents, from Christian leaders, and from government; it also requires a response from educators.

However, as is often the case, in order for our response to be more than a reflexive or knee-jerk one, we need to take some historical perspective. Let me suggest that a good place to start is the Victorians.

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<sup>16</sup> Bonino S, Ciairano S, Rabaglietti E, Cattellino E. 2006. Use of pornography and self-reported engagement in sexual violence among adolescents. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology* 3: 265–288. DOI: 10.1080/17405620600562359.

<sup>17</sup> "The impact of pornography on children: A crisis in the making", Joe Tucci, Pornography and Harm to Children Symposium, Sydney, 9 Feb. 2016.

## II. LEARNING FROM THE VICTORIANS: PORN VS THE ETHIC OF INNOCENCE



"Making Decent", cartoon showing William Wilberforce covering up the statue of Achilles at Hyde Park Corner, Richard Westmacott, 1822.

[Slide 3]

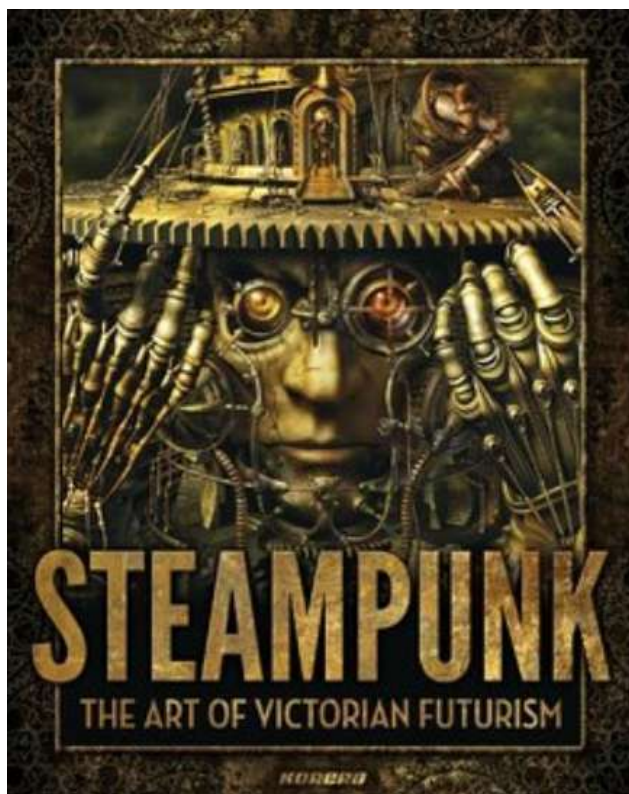
Porn has not appeared in a vacuum. Rather, it is the logical culmination of certain beliefs, beliefs which have had a long gestation in the history of Western thought. The best way to understand these beliefs is to place them in historical context, and to appreciate how they came to acceptance, and what competing beliefs they displaced. In order to do that, I suggest that we turn our attention to the original "wowsers" and to perhaps the most ridiculed cultural phenomena of the last 200 years, namely 'Victorian values' and especially its most distinctive feature, 'prudery'.



Even by the mid Victorian period, a backlash against it had begun. Though that famous expurgation of Shakespeare, Thomas Bowdler's *Family Shakspeare*, was the most popular version of the bard during the high Victorian period, even then the term bowdlerism had already been coined as a pejorative for prudish excisions of a text. Likewise Mr Podsnap from Dickens' *Our mutual friend* (1865), quickly became a byword for ridiculous over-sensitivity on sexual matters. By the end of the century Oscar Wilde not doubt reflected the sentiments of many when he ironically put in the mouth of Algernon that ironic statement that 'half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read' (*Importance of Being Earnest*, Act 1).

In the Edwardian period this counter-force famously turned into a full-scale rejection of Victorian value and its perceived hypocrisies, perhaps best exemplified by the luminaries of Bloomsbury Group, such as Virginia Woolf and Lytton Stratchey. The latter of course, offered up a savage skewering of the heroes of an early generation in his *Eminent Victorians* (1918).

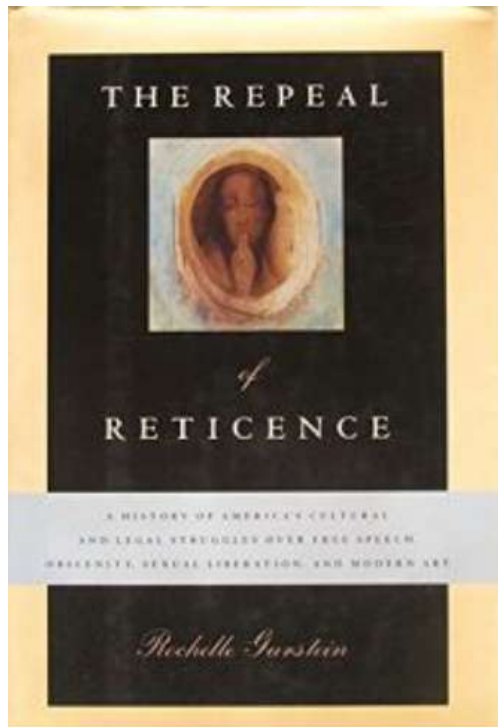
Today, though there has been partial rehabilitation of Victorianism, it remains well settled in the contemporary consciousness that this was for the most part an unfortunate detour in march of progress. One of the most interesting contemporary manifestations of this is in the rise of the steampunk aesthetic. It is based in part on a counter-factual history where Byron, instead of being censured at the start of the Victorian period, was instead venerated. It is an appropriation of the Victorian aesthetic without Victorian morals—our kind of Victorianism, if you will.





[Slide 4]

What I want to suggest this afternoon, it that it is worth our taking a second look at our prudish forebears.



[Slide 5]

In a 1996 book called *The repeal of reticence*, Rochelle Gurstein posited that from the mid nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, there was a great contest in Britain and America between the ‘party of reticence’ and the ‘party of openness’—a contest decisively won by the party of openness.<sup>18</sup> Today, we are in many ways reaping the fruit of this victory—most spectacularly in the rise of porn culture, which is a bitter fruit indeed. Without taking sides in the larger question of whether it was on balance a good or bad thing that this cultural battle played out as it did, now seems like a particularly apt time revisit the terms of that contest.

First, a historical recap, to place things in perspective.

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<sup>18</sup> Rochelle Gurstein, *The Repeal of Reticence* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996).



Newton, *A row in a cock and hen club*, 1798.

[Slide 6]

Most historians today would agree that what we think of as 'Victorian values' was largely the product of the *pre*-Victorian generation—the period roughly from the French Revolution (1789) to the advent of Queen Victoria (1837). It was a time of tremendous changes, especially social changes, and, perhaps most of all, changes in public morality.

A telling picture of these changes comes from that towering literary figure of the period, Sir Walter Scott, who observed how significantly the mores of the times had shifted by relaying that a great aunt of his asked him if he could find for her the works of Aphra Behn, a popular 17th century writer. He said he could, but that he didn't think they would constitute 'quite proper reading.' His great-aunt insisted, however, saying she had enjoyed the books in her youth. Scott sent the books to her, but the next time he saw his great aunt she handed them back to him, suggesting that he burn the books. Her comment was this:

I found it impossible to get through the very first of the novels, but is it not odd that I, an old woman of eighty and upwards, sitting alone, feel myself ashamed to read a book which sixty years ago I have heard read

aloud for large circles consisting of the first and most creditable society in London?<sup>19</sup>

Many more stories like these could be multiplied from the period. They illustrate that something momentous happened to British society within the space of forty years or so, taking it from one of the most profligate ones in Europe to, as universally acknowledged then, by far the most conservative and pious. Thus, for example, the very term 'Englishness' in German came to mean 'prudishness' in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This transformation was in fact a source of wonderment to many at the time.<sup>20</sup>

At the forefront of these changes were the evangelical reformers of the period. Some of their names are still familiar to us today—William Wilberforce and Hannah More at the forefront—though many of them are not. It was also a time of educational reform. Sunday Schools and charity schools proliferated, the first journal of education was created (Sarah Trimmer's *Guardian of Education*) and conduct books became all the rage

It is to these actors then, that we look, to gain a better understanding of a certain sensibility, one which laid the foundation for what we now think of as Victorian 'prudery'. For the next few minutes: I want us to immerse ourselves in that sensibility. I suspect for that many of us, it will be a disorienting experience, though I hope not unpleasantly so. My aim is to achieve what the French call *dépaysement*.

**DÉPAYSEMENT** (*dé-pè-i-ze-man*) s. m.

Action de dépayser. Changement d'habitudes, d'occupations, d'idées.

[Slide 7]

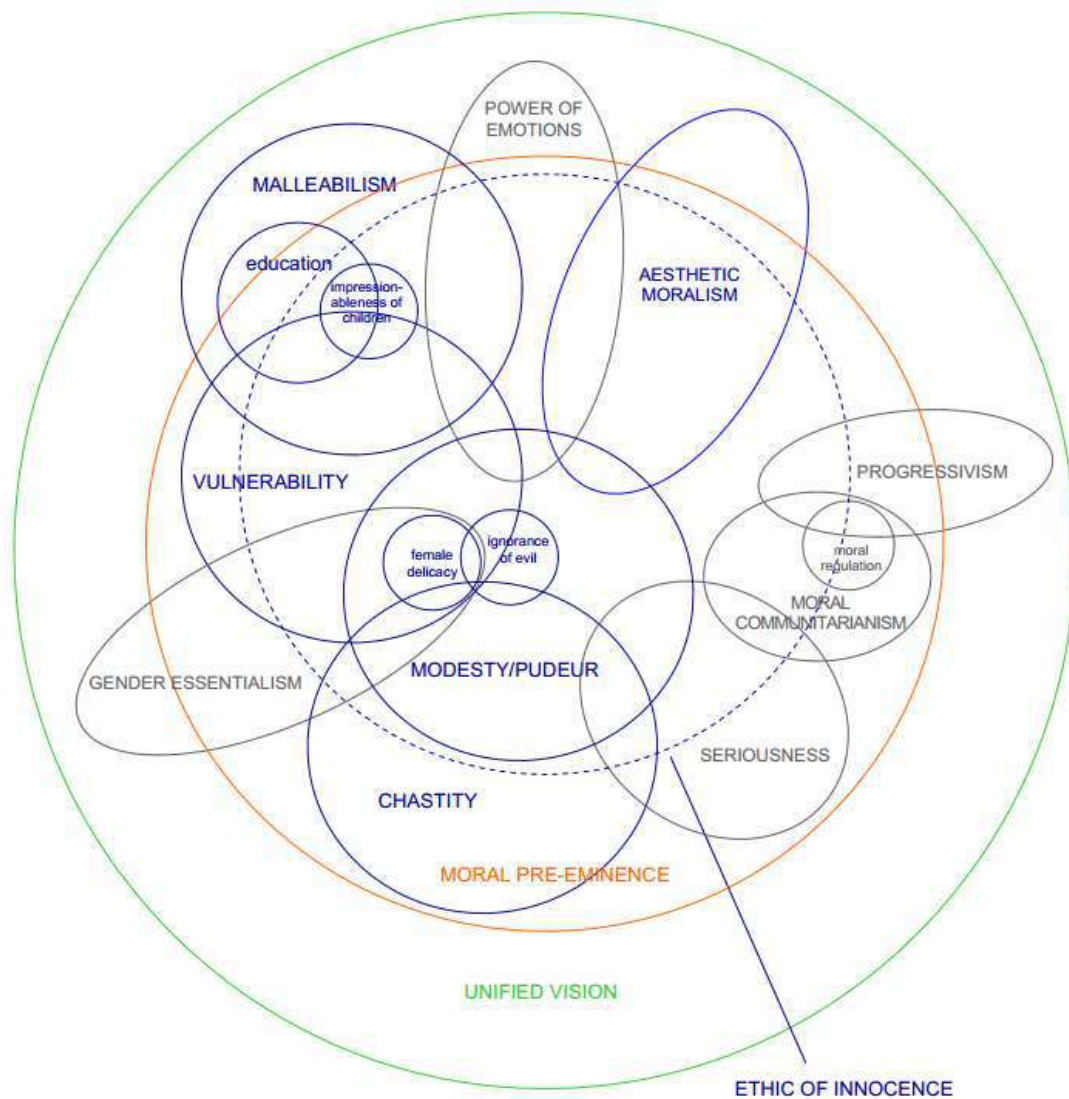
Literally, this would be translated 'de-countrification'—the sense of being uprooted and placed in an unfamiliar environment.

A central aspect of this mentality was a valuation of innocence. It was founded on the belief that one's mental diet had a direct bearing on one's moral health, and therefore followed the conviction that a key aspect of the moral life is the deliberate avoidance of harmful influences. As might be expected, this was especially applied to children and young people, but it was also viewed as

<sup>19</sup> Walter Scott, *Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, , X, 96, quoted in Quinlan, *Victorian prelude* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Langford, *Englishness identified* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 159.

essential for adults. This moral belief was so fundamental, and so multi-faceted, that it is not too much to call it an ethic, what we might term 'the ethic of innocence'.



[Slide 8]

As suggested by an attempt to map some of its key elements, the ethic of innocence was a complex web of overlapping beliefs. At the heart of these was a particular view of knowledge.

Is not quite right to say 'all knowledge is good' is an axiom of liberal thought today. However, it is not far off the mark. While there are certainly countervailing forces at work—as illustrated by the rise of 'safe spaces' on university campuses, and the 'de-platforming' of individuals whose ideas are felt to be unacceptable—nonetheless, the liberal bias in favour of open

dissemination of information remains very strong. The 'default setting' is that, to reduce it to a bumper stick, 'more information = more good'. The reigning assumption is that knowledge is good, more knowledge can never hurt, and ignorance is always the enemy.

Perhaps two examples will suffice to solidify in our minds the strength of this bias. Consider in the first place the presumption that one cannot critique something without having seen it. If, for example, you say to someone that you don't think highly of a work—say DeSade's *120 days of Sodom*—the common response will be 'have you read it?' or 'have you seen it?', the implication being that if you haven't, then you have no right to an opinion. If you were to express the notion that you didn't care to be exposed to it, because you felt you already knew enough to form the opinion that it was morally lacking, you would almost certainly be thought a Philistine. Or consider the case of Wikipedia. It is often presented as an encyclopaedia for the internet age. But whereas you'd be hard pressed to find anything remotely titillating in Encyclopaedia Britannica, Wikipedia provides a clinical, amoral approach where all is on display. So, for example, a variety of extremely explicit information and imagery is presented in the articles on sexuality, in spite of the fact that Wikipedia is a go-to resource for parents and educators. Unsurprisingly, this sort of content does produce complaints. Yet the Wikipedia community is ferocious in protecting what it would describe as its anti-censorship philosophy.

It is not difficult to trace this bias to Enlightenment roots of modern liberalism. The very terms 'enlightenment' and 'enlightened' point to a conscious effort to value openness and bring everything to the light, an impulse which lay at the heart of the movement. One recalls that one of the glories of the Enlightenment was Diderot's encyclopaedia, the first of its kind, which was meant to be a compendium of all knowledge, where no doors would be closed to the student of life.

To push the openness point further, there is an interesting nexus involving the radical Enlightenment and pornography. Diderot, for example, published several pornographic novels, and a plausible argument can be made that modern pornography is a product of certain streams in Enlightenment thought. In fact pornography is arguably a logical by-product of the kind of materialism and hedonism espoused by LaMetrie and Diderot.<sup>21</sup>

Nonetheless, the Enlightenment offers more of a mixed heritage on this point than may be thought. Milton's *Aeropagitica* is often held up as the seminal work on freedom of the press, but in fact Milton was only arguing against *pre*-censorship of books—he strongly defends the suppression of objectionable books *after* their publication. Rousseau was famously in favour of a severely restricted education: his ideal pupil, Emile, was to read nothing at all except *Robinson Crusoe* before age twelve. Perhaps confusingly, even Diderot was in

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Lynn Hunt, *The Invention of pornography: Obscenity and the origins of modernity, 1500-1800* (New York: Zone Books, 1993), 34-37.

favour of censorship for works he felt to be injurious to public morals, such as some of the statues of nudes on display at Versailles.

As Jonathan Israel has convincingly argued, sharp distinctions must be drawn between various strands of Enlightenment thinking, and particularly between the radical Enlightenment and moderate Enlightenment.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, as Gertrude Himmelfarb and others have argued, there are profound differences between the French, the Scottish, and the English Enlightenment—so much so that some have taken to speaking of ‘Enlightenments’ rather than ‘Enlightenment’.<sup>23</sup>

My own conviction is that ‘freedom’ was only one of many core values of the Enlightenment project—it was also, for example, about the ‘natural’, universal norms, the brotherhood of man, moral reform, the march of progress, and refinement, to name only some of its more prominent ideals. It was not until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century that freedom increasingly came to be viewed as the totalising principle for what we now think of as liberalism.

Be that as it may, it is certainly the case that in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Britain, the question of the value of information was typically viewed in a much more nuanced way than we might expect. Thus for Hannah More ‘there is some knowledge which it is a praise not to know’; Sarah Ellis wrote in her advice book for young women that ‘the page of thought’ must be closed ‘against every improper image’.<sup>24</sup>

Nor was this perspective limited to those we would associate with moral reform. In 1821 the *Edinburgh Review*, the most influential journal of the period, reviewed Thomas Bowdler’s *Family Shakspeare*. The reviewer was Francis Jeffrey, the journal’s editor. He not only praised Bowdler’s expurgations, he went on to add:

...and, as what cannot be pronounced in decent company cannot well afford much pleasure in the closet, we think it is better, every way, that what cannot be spoken, and ought not to have been written, should now cease to be printed.<sup>25</sup>

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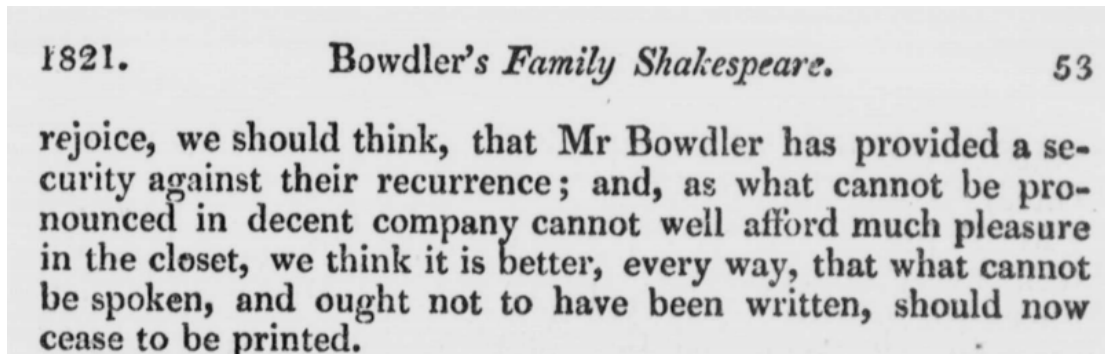
<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment contested: Philosophy, modernity, and the emancipation of man 1670-1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), see esp. 582-9.

<sup>23</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The roads to modernity: The British, French, and American Enlightenments* (London: Vintage, 2008). See also J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and religion: Vol. 1, The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>24</sup> Hannah More, *Moral sketches* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1819, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) 145 and Sarah Ellis, *The daughters of England* (London: P. Jackson, 1842), 141.

<sup>25</sup> [Jeffrey], ‘Bowdler’s *Family Shakspeare*’, *Edinburgh Review*, 1821, V. 36.





[Slide 9]

Note the extraordinariness of what we are being presented with: one of the leading literary critics of the age, not known for being particularly religious, advocating permanent excisions of Shakespeare's text for moral reasons.

Nothing was sacrosanct. Even eminent literary works, far from being above moral judgement, were expected to yield to this higher standard. Regardless of their supposed excellence, some things were felt to be morally deficient, and thus unacceptable. Some things were simply 'not worth knowing'.

One of ideas intrinsic to this outlook was that there is a kind of knowing from not knowing. Though this term was not used at the time, we may think of this as a kind of 'negative knowledge'. It is a kind of ignorance, if you will, but a chosen ignorance, precisely for the purpose of safeguarding another, superior kind of knowledge. The assumption was that different kinds of knowledge can compete, and exclude one another, so that a choice must be made. Thus, one can 'know' what is like to be a virgin when one marries; or one can 'know' what it is like to have had sex with several different people before marrying—but one cannot know both. One form of knowledge excludes the other. So the promiscuous might be said to have a 'positive knowledge' of sexual variety, and the chaste a 'negative knowledge' of it. Which of these is the 'superior' knowledge is a judgement which, by definition, cannot come by experience but must precede experience and emanate from basic assumptions, in this case moral assumptions.

To unpack this some more, we can identify several key aspects of this 'ethic of innocence'. In the first place, it was felt that providing too much detail about certain evils could make them appear dangerously fascinating and attractive. Obviously, this was particularly the case for sexual sins. Thus a frequent criticism of certain novels was what was referred to as their 'tendency'. Whatever, their professed moral—and novels of the eighteenth century sometimes literally had a

'moral' explicitly appended at their end—the real question was what the overall effect of the novel would be. Thus the claim that Samuel Richardson's novels, though written 'with the purest intentions of promoting virtue', did this by describing scenes which, 'it would be safer to conceal' exciting as they do sentiments which 'it would be more advantageous to early virtue not to admit'.<sup>26</sup> As the historian Edward Mangin put it: the novelist should make it his duty to 'warn his reader against vice without too plainly telling what it is'.<sup>27</sup> Of course this sounds humorous to our ears, but it was no laughing matter to them: warning against vice by definition involved a delicate balance of providing enough information to be effective, but not so much as to engage in precisely the kind of sully which was to be avoided.

A second concern was that by merely disclosing certain things, the moral landscape would be contaminated, and the unthinkable made thinkable. Thus the Lord Chamberlain, who had the responsibility to censor plays, was called upon in 1821 to be more strict, on the basis that some things being performed were 'unknown and unthought of by decent or well regulated people'.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, in 1806, the judge in a sodomy trial 'lamented that such a subject should come before the public' and that 'the untaught and unsuspecting minds of youth should be liable to be tainted by hearing such horrid facts'.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, such trials were typically shrouded in secrecy and coded language for this very reason, up until the twentieth century. In fact, as late as 1921, a proposed provision against female homosexuality was successfully defeated in Parliament after Lord Desart offered this objection:

You are going to tell the whole world that there is such an offence, to bring it to the notice of women who have never heard of it, never thought of it, never dreamt of it. I think this is a very great mischief.<sup>30</sup>

As Rochelle Gurstein put it:

For the party of reticence, indecent, filthy, unnamable, and shameful things went beyond the limits of human understanding and transgressed the boundaries of social order; consequently, speaking of them was to commit a powerful act of pollution and contagion.<sup>31</sup>

A third concern was that familiarity with vice would lead to a de-sensitisation of the moral faculty. Thus John Witherspoon argued that 'from the seeing of sin

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<sup>26</sup> Vicesimus Knox, *Essays, moral and literary* (London: Charles Dilly, 1782), 69.

<sup>27</sup> John Taylor, *Early opposition to the English novel* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1942), 94-5.

<sup>28</sup> L. W. Connolly, *The censorship of English drama* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1976), 153.

<sup>29</sup> A. D. Harvey, 'Prosecutions for sodomy in England', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 942.

<sup>30</sup> Ari Adut, *On Scandal: Moral disturbances in society, politics, and art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 43-4.

<sup>31</sup> Gurstein, 53.

frequently committed' we 'gradually abate that horror which we ought to have of it upon our minds, and which serve to keep us from yielding to its solicitations'.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, John Robertson, in his conduct book for young women, expressed this familiar view, stating that 'when vice generally becomes familiar' it 'no longer excites that horror and detestation, which it ought to create'.<sup>33</sup> According to this conception, the moral sense is often compared to taste: it must be carefully trained and formed, and must not be allowed to be desensitised by exposure to odious flavours.

It follows that the ability to be shocked is frequently seen as a sign of well-attuned moral organ. Inverting the modern idea, shame was seen as something natural, and the loss of shame as an artificial construct, from exposure to corrupt society. The capacity to feel shame—what the French call *pudeur*—was therefore to be protected at all costs.

Finally, a fourth aspect of the ethic of innocence was a conception of knowledge as "right knowing" as opposed to mere information. To possess knowledge was viewed primarily not merely as the possession of facts, but as the correct appraisal of them—especially the correct appraisal within an overall scheme of knowledge. Thus it is possible that more specific knowledge of a particular can actually lead to a loss of general or 'true' knowledge: more information can be detrimental to 'right knowing'.

Thus Hannah More was concerned that Christians limit their knowledge of 'the world':

the sense in which Christian parents would wish to impress on their children to know the world, is to know its emptiness, its vanity, its futility, and its wickedness... in this view, an obscure Christian in a village may be said to know it better than a hoary courtier, or wily politician; for how can they be said to *know* it, who goes on to... give their soul in exchange for its lying promises?<sup>34</sup>

Once again, however, we find that this was a generalised view, not one limited to Christian moralists. Thus one of the recurring themes of literary criticism during the period is that art must be 'truthful'. What was meant, however, was just the opposite of how the expression would typically be used today: far from meaning that art should reflect the world in all of its gritty reality, it was felt that it should reflect what was 'really true', that is, the deep meaning and reality of the world—its moral and metaphysical truth.

Thus for Samuel Johnson,

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<sup>32</sup> John Witherspoon, *A serious inquiry into the nature and effects of the stage* (New York: Whiting & Watson, 1812), 95.

<sup>33</sup> Joseph Robertson, *An essay on the education of young ladies* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1798), 42.

<sup>34</sup> Hannah More, *Strictures on the modern system of female education* (London: T. Cadell Jr. and W. Davies, 1799), vol. 1, 76.

It is therefore not a sufficient vindication of a character, that it is drawn as it appears; for many characters ought never to be drawn: nor of a narrative, that the train of events is agreeable to observation and experience; for that observation which is called knowledge of the world, will be found much more frequently to make men cunning than good...<sup>35</sup>

or, as the *Gentleman's Magazine* would put it more pointedly: 'the duty of an author' is 'not *only* to paint nature, but to paint *such* parts of it, as every good man would wish to see imitated'.<sup>36</sup>

For a mind to gain true knowledge, it must be fed on the right kind of diet, one which above all reflects moral truth. As Samuel Johnson put it: "virtue is the highest proof of understanding".<sup>37</sup>

Isaiah Berlin argued that this view of knowledge is in fact central to the Western intellectual tradition:

Knowledge, for the central tradition of western thought, means not just descriptive knowledge of what there is in the universe, but as part and parcel of it, not distinct from it, knowledge of values, or how to live, what to do, which forms of life are the best and worthiest, and why.<sup>38</sup>

Before seeking to relate this valuation of innocence to the current porn crisis, let me offer three general observations.

The first is that it was usually acknowledged that a total innocence of evil was impossible. Instead, the educational strategy was typically conceived as seeking to provide enough information about vice to as to inoculate without causing harm. Likewise, most also recognised the value of a traditional education—including an education in the Classics—even if this meant there would be *somewhat* of a violation in innocence—though efforts were to be made to minimise this as much as possible. This is why the Bowdler *Family Shakespeare* was welcomed so warmly by educators: it allowed students to familiarise themselves with the bard at an early age, without risking contamination from the more objectionable parts of his works—before Bowdler, most educators would have felt Shakespeare unsafe for children.

Secondly, the emphasis on innocence must be understood as part of a larger conception of education as 'enculturation'. It is useful to remember that in the late eighteenth century Lockean psychology was still accepted as a matter of course, and enormous stress was placed on the perceived malleability of the

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<sup>35</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, No. 4, March 31, 1750.

<sup>36</sup> 'Animadversions on the moral tendency of the *The school for scandal*', *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1778, Vol. 48, 59.

<sup>37</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The works of Samuel Johnson* (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, et al, 1823), vol. 2, 26.

<sup>38</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The crooked timber of humanity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 28.

mind. It followed that character formation was largely a matter of controlling influences.

Interestingly, the recurring analogy in this respect is not Locke's 'blank slate' but rather that of the 'unsown field'. Thus for Thomas Gisborne, an evangelical moralist and associate of Wilberforce:

The mind is originally an unsown field, prepared for the reception of any crop; and if those, to whom the culture of it belongs, neglect to fill it with good grain, it will speedily be covered with weeds.<sup>39</sup>

Wilberforce himself uses very similar language:

The vicious affections, like noxious weeds, sprout up and increase of themselves but too naturally; while the graces of the Christian temper, exotics in the soil of the human heart, like the more tender productions of the vegetable world, though the light and breath of Heaven must quicken them, require on our part also, in order for their being preserved in health and vigour, constant superintendence and assiduous care.<sup>40</sup>

It follows that there must be a conscious process of sowing things into the mind which lead to good character development. These are the influences which are conceived of as 'improving'.

This emphasis also reflects the consensual view of education during this period, namely that its primary role is moral and religious formation, rather than impartation of knowledge per se—the latter was viewed primarily as a means to an end. Thus, in the words of one popular late eighteenth-century tract, the purpose of education in children is 'to remove... whatever is most likely to pollute hearts, anticipate their feeling, inflame their passions' and instead to 'train them up in the knowledge, the preference, the love, and the practice, of all that is truly good, virtuous, and honourable'.<sup>41</sup> Hannah More similarly stressed that 'all human learning should be taught, not as an end but as a means [of moral/religious improvement]'.<sup>42</sup>

Thirdly, it is important to note that this approach to education and character formation was not an eighteenth century innovation, but rather was rooted in the humanist tradition of education—itsself drawing deeply from Classical ideals. Thus, if we go back to the sixteenth century, we find that Erasmus' influential *Education of a Christian prince* stressed that the future prince's mind 'from the very cradle... while still open and unmolded, must be filled with salutary

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<sup>39</sup> Thomas Gisborne, *An inquiry into the duties of the female sex* (London: T. Cadell Jr. and W. Davies, 1797), 44.

<sup>40</sup> William Wilberforce, *A practical view of the prevailing religious system*, (Dublin: B. Dugdale, 1797), 136.

<sup>41</sup> [Anonymous], *Private worth the basis of public decency, An Address to People of Rank and Fortune, Etc. By a Member of Parliament*, (London: 1789), 25.

<sup>42</sup> Doreen Rosman, *Evangelicals and culture* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), 229.

thoughts'. It follows that the good teacher is one who realizes that precepts must be 'impressed, crammed in, inculcated' as 'the seeds of morality MUST IMMEDIATELY BE sown in the virgin soil of [the prince's] spirit' since 'nothing remains so deeply and tenaciously rooted as those things learned in the first years'.<sup>43</sup>

Similarly, Erasmus' contemporary George Buchanan stressed that 'as liberal education is in every point of view so momentous, what prospective care and anxious precaution ought to be used, that the tender minds of kings may be properly seasoned from their very cradle!'<sup>44</sup>

It is not difficult to hear echoes of Plato in this emphasis. Consider his instructions for the training of rulers in his ideal republic:

Then we must compel our poets, on pain of expulsion, to make their poetry the express image of noble character; we must also supervise craftsmen of every kind and forbid them to leave the stamp of baseness, license, meanness, unseemliness, on painting and sculpture or building...

We would not have our Guardians grow up among representations of moral deformity, as in some foul pasture where, day after day, feeding on every poisonous weed they would, little by little gather insensibly a mass of corruption in their very souls. Rather we must seek out those craftsmen whose instincts guides them to whatsoever is lovely and gracious; so that our young men, dwelling in a wholesome climate, may drink in good from every quarter, whence, like a breeze bearing health from happy regions, some influence from noble works constantly falls upon eye and ear from childhood upward, and imperceptibly draws them into sympathy and harmony with the beauty of reason, whose impress they take.<sup>45</sup>

Similarly: Plato believed that the 'truth' which poets should tell is moral truth: 'I would inflict the heaviest penalties on any one in all the land who should dare say that there are bad men who lead pleasant lives, or that the profitable and gainful is one thing, and the just another'.<sup>46</sup>

Aristotle likewise famously laid stress on early formation, calling for the exclusion of 'all unseemly talk' as well as any 'gazing at debased paintings or stories' until children have reached the age of maturity when they will be 'completely immune to any harm'.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, *The education of a Christian prince*, trans. Lester Born (New York: Norton, 1968), 140 and 144-5.

<sup>44</sup> George Buchanan, *De Jure*, 259.

<sup>45</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, III, 401.

<sup>46</sup> Plato, *Laws*, II, 662.

<sup>47</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1336b3.



Conversely, for Plato it was not only children who were to be protected from morally debilitating influences, but adults also. In particular, he advocated a regime where magistrates should avoid actively learning about injustice. Instead, it should come, 'only late in life, "from long observation of its nature in others"'. This meant that the upright magistrate was to 'remain ignorant of evil' as much as possible, and 'education in the Republic must foster this ignorance, not dispel it'.<sup>48</sup>

### III. CHARTING A RESPONSE

I hope this tour of the thought world of the early Victorians has been instructive, and perhaps enjoyable, too. If so, I apologise for bringing us back to our comparatively unpleasant contemporary situation—but return we must. How should educators respond to the crisis of child exposure to pornography? How can the perspective of early nineteenth century British reformers help to shape our response?

As one who is not a professional educator, I feel ill-equipped to answer these questions. Nonetheless, I will offer a general, suggestive direction, focusing on three aspects.

First, educationally: it is important to remember, as I've tried to show tonight, that porn is the culmination of liberal ideas which have deep roots in Western culture—ideas about knowledge, about freedom, about desires, about autonomy, and about the body. Some of these ideas we may believe to be spot on, and to represent progress. Yet their full flower in porn culture—and our society's seeming helplessness to offer a coherent response—presents us with an opportunity to do some deep thinking about what the French call our *idées reçues*—our 'received ideas'. In particular, we need to re-examine our prejudices about the historical victory of openness over reticence, and the demise of what I have termed the 'ethic of innocence'. We all like to think that we are engaging critically with our surrounding secular culture. Indeed, I'm sure that we are at multiple levels. Yet, as C. S. Lewis was fond of reminding us, we are much more shaped by our own time than we often realise—even in our disagreements we unwittingly reflect the bias of our time:

Nothing strikes me more when I read the controversies of past ages than the fact that both sides were usually assuming without question a good deal which we should now absolutely deny. They thought that they were as completely opposed as two sides could be, but in fact they were all the time secretly united—united with each other and against earlier and later ages—by a great mass of common assumptions.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Barish, *The antitheatrical prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 25.

<sup>49</sup> C. S. Lewis, 'Introduction', in Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993).

Lewis suggested that the anti-dote to this was to read lots of old books—I can think of no better advice. Let me add to this that the Christian moralists and educators of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—the likes of Hannah More, William Wilberforce, Thomas Gisborne, and Sarah Ellis—would not be a bad place to start for a bit of deculturation. One does not need to agree with everything that they wrote to find their perspective instructive.

With respect more specifically to the issue at hand, let me zero in on one example of how we need to be on our toes. In public health and educational circles, the standard response to the porn crisis is often a call for more and better education, for both parents and children. This sounds unobjectionable on the face of it: certainly, no one would wish to deny the importance of drawing attention to the problem and providing resources and guidance, especially to parents who need to be informed of the current realities and their resulting responsibilities. However, 'education' can easily become a cover for bringing in precisely the kind of banalisation of sex which eviscerates it of its meaning, and corrupts the innocence of children. Thus, some radical feminist opponents of porn have suggested that part of the answer may be promoting 'good porn'—i.e. porn which is kind, consensual, realistic, non-objectifying. In Denmark, a pilot program has been launched where adolescents are exposed to different kinds of porn so that they can learn to make 'informed choices'.

There is an unavoidable philosophical divide here, which goes right to the heart of the meaning of sex. As Christians, we need to think very carefully about this aspect of our response, and strive to be consistent with a comprehensive Biblical frame of reference. In particular, we need to provide educational resources which coherently reflect a Christian view not only of sexuality, but of knowledge, and of humanity. Will we have the courage to offer an alternative anthropology as we respond to this issue? In spite of our brave talk, we are often quite craven in failing to forthrightly reject the materialist underpinnings of our culture, and of the porn culture in particular. We ought not only to fight against porn because it demeans women—though of course we should do that, too—but because it demeans humanity, making us mere bodies and appetites.



The image shows a YouTube video player interface. At the top left is the YouTube logo with 'AU' next to it. A search bar is located to the right of the logo. The video itself shows a man with a beard and long hair, identified as Russell Brand, sitting on a bed in a bedroom. He is wearing a white towel draped over his shoulders and is looking directly at the camera. The room has a brick wall behind him and a lamp on a bedside table to the right. Below the video player, the title of the video is displayed: '50 Shades - Has Porn Ruined My Chance Of A Happy Marriage? Russell Brand The Trews (E261)'. Below the title is the channel name 'Russell Brand' with a 'Subscribe' button and the subscriber count '1,204,876'. To the right of the channel information, the view count is '709,554 views'. At the bottom of the player, there are icons for 'Add to', 'Share', and 'More', along with like and dislike counts: '11,053' likes and '360' dislikes.

“If you’re constantly bombarded by great waves of filth, it’s really difficult to remain connected to truth” Russell Brand

[Slide 9]

If Russell Brand can speak out against porn as being bad for his spiritual life and his connection to truth surely Christians can as well.

Secondly, administratively: I believe the goal, as with sexual harassment or drugs, should simply be zero tolerance in the educational environment. In some aboriginal communities where porn is rife, the elders have put up ‘no porn’ signs at the entrance of towns. Perhaps is it worth considering whether the time has come for something similar in our schools, announcing ‘porn-free zones’.



[Slide 10]

Whether or not this is a good idea—it certainly runs the danger of inflaming curiosity—educators and administrators need to be aggressively and urgently addressing the need to make porn inaccessible in schools. It is a forgone conclusion that kids today will see porn eventually; your goal should be that they don't see it at school, and that the school environment is one which stigmatises porn and provides a counter-narrative to the values which it promulgates.

I suspect that there is little disagreement on this as a goal, and yet the reality is that it has so far received much less attention and energy than it should have, resulting in the headline making lapses which some of us are familiar with. There are also some technical challenges involved—so I will say a brief word about that.

The easiest part of making porn unavailable on a school campus is to filter the internet service made provided over Wi-Fi—and most schools do this already. This involves either an ISP level filter, such as the one offered by Telstra, or one installed at the router level at the school itself (software-based solutions are much inferior, since they 'out-source' the filtering to each device, multiplying the possibility of lapses).

The harder part is to ensure that porn is not viewed on student devices which access the internet through a mobile connection. All smartphones, and most tablets have this capability, and there is no way for the school to block or filter this data stream. In theory, a school could require either that mobile data be turned off on all devices, or that all devices have filtering software—however, this would be nearly impossible to monitor. The fact is that at present every phone or tablet is effectively a potential porn portal. This places every student at risk while at school, and jeopardises the school's capacity to meet its duty of care to provide a safe environment.

The only effective answer to this threat would be for a school to completely disallow the use of smartphones and student-owned tablets on school premises. Many schools already place restrictions on the use of phones during the school day, but a total ban would probably require that devices be deposited in the school office during the day, and only made available for emergencies. This may seem like a draconian solution, and one which would encounter resistance from parents. However, if we are unwilling to consider such drastic steps, it is a sign that we have yet to fully acknowledge the severity of the crisis. Furthermore, while parents may initially push back, if the matter can be framed around the safety of their children, and as a demonstration of the seriousness of the school's commitment to the protection of students, they may well be not only appeased, but supportive. Indeed, it is often the parents who are asking the schools to do more in this area. Many parents are deeply alarmed about this issue but feel helpless to do anything about it. This would provide a useful opportunity both for educating them about the dangers of child exposure to porn, and for recruiting them to take a more pro-active stance, in particular by making filtering resources available to them. (This in turn would further reduce risk to students: if, for example, the majority of students have parent-installed filtering software on their phones, then students are less likely to see porn on the phones of other students when not on the school premises.)

Lastly, educators' response to the porn crisis must include a political aspect. I think it's fair to say that those in the educational community are often shy about direct political involvement in issues that stray beyond the confines of education policy. Yet governments have a duty of care to ensure the safety of minors, including safety from harmful media content: the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that 'mass media... should not promote material that could harm children' (Article 17). This is a society wide issue, and therefore it is a political issue: we don't expect parents and schools alone to ensure that drinking water is free from lead—we expect governments to provide safe water. The internet should be no different: parents and schools alone simply are not able to provide an online environment which is safe from harm.

The attitude of many on this issue is that the internet is simply too big and the technology is too complex to allow for any adequate regulation. Yet the UK has shown that this is not so, instituting a regime of provider-level filtering which has been adopted by all four of the major fixed-line telcos (covering over 90% of the market), and all mobile providers. Former Prime Minister David Cameron provided courageous leadership on this front, and offered a spirited justification for the new regime in a speech he gave on 22 July 2013. A few extended excerpts are appropriate, both because the UK is only Western nation to have implemented such a universal filtering scheme, and because Cameron offers a cogent response to the objections often levied at such proposals:

Now, of course, a free and open internet is vital. But in no other market and with no other industry do we have such an extraordinarily light touch when it comes to protecting our children. Children can't go into the shops or the cinema and buy things meant for adults or have adult experiences;

we rightly regulate to protect them. But when it comes to the internet, in the balance between freedom and responsibility we've neglected our responsibility to children...

Now there's some who might say, 'Well, it's fine for you to have a view as a parent but not as Prime Minister. This is – this is an issue for parents not the state.' But the way I see it, there is a contract between parents and the state. Parents say, 'Look, we'll do our best to raise our children right and the state should agree to stand on our side, to make that job a bit easier not a bit harder.' But when it comes to internet pornography, parents have been left too much on their own. And I'm determined to put that right.

... all the actions we're taking today come back to that basic idea: protecting the most vulnerable in our society, protecting innocence, protecting childhood itself. That is what is at stake, and I will do whatever it takes to keep our children safe.<sup>50</sup>

[see appendix for full speech]

The UK system is not a panacea, but it represents a huge step forward for the safety of children from online porn. By requiring porn blocks to be actively removed before porn can be viewed, the burden is placed on the adults who want to access porn rather than on parents who do not want their children to view it. This is as it should be: the balance of effort should always tilt in favour of those who are weakest.

Momentum is now beginning to form in Australia for something similar. A Senate Inquiry into harms to children from internet pornography was adopted in December 2015, and is due to provide a report at the end of November.<sup>51</sup> Over 400 submissions were received, and many of these urged further regulation in Australia, and better enforcement of existing rules. In February of this year, the largest anti-porn conference in Australian history was held at the University of New South Wales, and the UK model was presented as a possible way forward for Australia. Finally, an online campaign has been launched with the aim of drawing increased attention to the harms being done by child access to porn and promoting something along the lines of the UK model here in Australia.<sup>52</sup> Educators in Australia, and Christian educators in particular, have the opportunity to throw their weight behind solving what is arguably the most pressing social crisis of our generation.

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<sup>50</sup> David Cameron, 'The internet and pornography: Prime Minister calls for action', 22 July 2013 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-internet-and-pornography-prime-minister-calls-for-action>)

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[http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Environment\\_and\\_Communications/Onlineaccesstoporn45](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Environment_and_Communications/Onlineaccesstoporn45)

<sup>52</sup> [www.pornharmskids.org.au](http://www.pornharmskids.org.au)





[Slide 11]



## Speech

# The internet and pornography: Prime Minister calls for action

**From:** Cabinet Office (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/cabinet-office>), Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/prime-ministers-office-10-downing-street>) and The Rt Hon **David Cameron MP** (<https://www.gov.uk/government/people/david-cameron>)

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## This speech was published under the 2010 to 2015 Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government

David Cameron made a speech about cracking down on online pornography and making the internet safer for children on 22 July 2013.



Thank you to the NSPCC for hosting me today and thank you for all the amazing work you do for Britain's children.

Today I am going to tread into territory that can be hard for our society to confront. It is frankly difficult for politicians to talk about, but I believe we need to address as a matter of urgency.

I want to talk about the internet, the impact it's having on the innocence of our children, how online pornography is corroding childhood and how, in the darkest corners of the internet, there are things going on that are a direct danger to our children and that must be stamped out. Now, I'm not making this speech because I want to moralise or scaremonger but because I feel profoundly, as a politician and as a dad, that the time for action has come. This is, quite simply, about how we protect our children and their innocence.

Now, let me be very clear right at the start: the internet has transformed our lives for the better. It helps liberate those who are oppressed, it allows people to tell truth to power, it brings education to those previously denied it, it adds billions to our economy, it is one of the most profound and era-changing inventions in human history.

But because of this, the internet can sometimes be given a sort of special status in debate. In fact, it can almost be seen as beyond debate, that to raise concerns about how people should access the internet or what should be on it, is somehow naïve or backwards looking. People sometimes feel

they're being told almost the following: that an unruly internet is just a fact of modern life; any fallout from that is just collateral damage and that you can as easily legislate what happens on the internet as you can legislate the tides.

And against this mind-set, people's, most often parents', very real concerns get dismissed. They're told the internet is too big to mess with; it's too big to change. But to me, the questions around the internet and the impact it has are too big to ignore. The internet is not just where we buy, sell and socialise; it's where crimes happen; it's where people can get hurt; it's where children and young people learn about the world, each other, and themselves.

The fact is that the growth of the internet as an unregulated space has thrown up 2 major challenges when it comes to protecting our children. The first challenge is criminal and that is the proliferation and accessibility of child abuse images on the internet. The second challenge is cultural; the fact that many children are viewing online pornography and other damaging material at a very early age and that the nature of that pornography is so extreme it is distorting their view of sex and relationships.

Now, let me be clear, the 2 challenges are very distinct and very different. In one we're talking about illegal material, the other is legal material that is being viewed by those who are underage. But both the challenges have something in common; they're about how our collective lack of action on the internet has led to harmful and, in some cases, truly dreadful consequences for children.

Now, of course, a free and open internet is vital. But in no other market and with no other industry do we have such an extraordinarily light touch when it comes to protecting our children. Children can't go into the shops or the cinema and buy things meant for adults or have adult experiences; we rightly regulate to protect them. But when it comes to the internet, in the balance between freedom and responsibility we've neglected our responsibility to children.

My argument is that the internet is not a side-line to real life or an escape from real life, it is real life. It has an impact on the children who view things that harm them, on the vile images of abuse that pollute minds and cause crime, on the very values that underpin our society. So we've got to be more active, more aware, more responsible about what happens online. And when I say we I mean we collectively: governments, parents, internet providers and platforms, educators and charities. We've got to work together across both the challenges that I've set out.

So let me start with the criminal challenge, and that is the proliferation of child abuse images online. Obviously we need to tackle this at every step of the way, whether it's where the material is hosted, transmitted, viewed or downloaded. And I am absolutely clear that the state has a vital role to play here.

The police and CEOP, that is the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, are already doing a good job in clamping down on the uploading and hosting of this material in the UK. Indeed, they have together cut the total amount of known child abuse content hosted in the UK from 18% of the global total in 1996 to less than 1% today. They're also doing well on disrupting the so-called hidden internet, where people can share illegal files and on peer-to-peer sharing of images through photo-sharing sites or networks away from the mainstream internet.

Once CEOP becomes a part of the national Crime Agency, that will further increase their ability to investigate behind the pay walls, to shine a light on this hidden internet and to drive prosecutions and convictions of those who are found to use it. So we should be clear to any offender who might think otherwise, there is no such thing as a safe place on the internet to access child abuse material.

But government needs to do more. We need to give CEOP and the police all the powers they need to keep pace with the changing nature of the internet. And today I can announce that from next year we'll also link up existing fragmented databases across all police forces to produce a single, secure database of illegal images of children which will help police in different parts of the country work together more effectively to close the net on paedophiles. It will also enable the industry to use digital hash tags from the database to proactively scan for, block and take down those images wherever they occur. Otherwise you have different police forces with different databases; you need one set of all the hash tags, all the URLs, in one place for everybody to use.

Now, industry has agreed to do exactly that because this isn't just a job for government. The internet service providers and the search engine companies have a vital role to play and we've already reached a number of important agreements with them. A new UK-US taskforce is being formed to lead a global alliance with the big players in the industry to stamp out these vile images. I've asked Joanna Shields, CEO of Tech City and our business ambassador for digital industries, who is here today, to head up engagement with industry for this taskforce. And she's going to work both with the UK and US governments and law enforcement agencies to maximise our international efforts.



Here in Britain, Google, Microsoft and Yahoo are already actively engaged on a major campaign to deter people who are searching for child abuse images. Now, I can't go into the detail about this campaign, because that might undermine its effectiveness, but I can tell you it is robust, it is hard-hitting; it is a serious deterrent to people who are looking for these images.

Now, where images are reported they are immediately added to a list and they're blocked by search engines and ISPs so people can't access those sites. These search engines also act to block illegal images and the URLs, or pathways, that lead to these images from search results, once they've been alerted to their existence.

But here to me is the problem. The job of actually identifying these images falls to a small body called the Internet Watch Foundation. Now this is a world leading organisation, but it relies almost entirely on members of the public reporting things they've seen online.

So the search engines themselves have a purely reactive position. When they're prompted to take something down they act, otherwise they don't. And if an illegal image hasn't been reported it can still be returned in searches. In other words, the search engines are not doing enough to take responsibility. Indeed, in this specific area, they are effectively denying responsibility.

And this situation has continued because of a technical argument. It goes like this: the search engine shouldn't be involved in finding out where these images are because the search engines are just the pipe that delivers the images, and that holding them responsible would be a bit like holding

the Post Office responsible for sending illegal objects in anonymous packages. But that analogy isn't really right, because the search engine doesn't just deliver the material that people see, it helps to identify it.

Companies like Google make their living out of trawling and categorising content on the web, so that in a few key strokes you can find what you're looking for out of unimaginable amounts of information. That's what they do. They then sell advertising space to companies based on your search patterns. So if I go back to the Post Office analogy, it would be like the Post Office helping someone to identify and then order the illegal material in the first place and then sending it on to them, in which case the Post Office would be held responsible for their actions.

So quite simply we need the search engines to step up to the plate on this issue. We need a situation where you cannot have people searching for child abuse images and being aided in doing so. If people do try and search for these things, they are not only blocked, but there are clear and simple signs warning them that what they are trying to do is illegal, and where there is much more accountability on the part of the search engines to help find these sites and block them.

On all of these things, let me tell you what we've already done and what we're going to do. What we've already done is insist that clear, simple warning pages are designed and placed wherever child abuse sites have been identified and taken down so that if someone arrives at one of these sites they are clearly warned that the page contained illegal images. These so-called splash pages are up on the internet from today and this is, I think, a vital step forward. But we need to go further.

These warning pages should also tell people who've landed on these sites that they face consequences like losing their job, losing their family or even access to their children if they continue. And vitally they should direct them to the charity Stop it Now! which can help people change their behaviour anonymously and in complete confidence.

On people searching for these images, there are some searches where people should be given clear routes out of that search to legitimate sites on the web. Let me give you an example. If someone is typing in 'child' and 'sex' there should come up a list of options: do you mean child sex education? Do you mean child gender? What should not be returned is a list of pathways into illegal images which have yet to be identified by CEOP or reported to the Internet Watch Foundation.

Then there's this next issue. There are some searches which are so abhorrent and where there could be no doubt whatsoever about the sick and malevolent intent of the searcher – terms that I can't say today in front of you with the television cameras here, but you can imagine – where it's absolutely obvious the person at the keyboard is looking for revolting child abuse images. In these cases, there should be no search results returned at all. Put simply, there needs to be a list of terms – a blacklist – which offer up no direct search returns.

So I have a very clear message for Google, Bing, Yahoo! and the rest: you have a duty to act on this, and it is a moral duty. I simply don't accept the argument that some of these companies have used to say that these searches should be allowed because of freedom of speech.

On Friday, I sat with the parents of Tia Sharp and April Jones. They want to feel that everyone involved is doing everything they can to play their full part in helping rid the internet of child abuse images. So I've called for a progress report in Downing Street in October with the search engines coming in to update me.

And the question we've asked is clear. If CEOP give you a blacklist of internet search terms, will you commit to stop offering up any returns on these searches? If the answer is yes, good. If the answer is no and the progress is slow or non-existent, I can tell you we're already looking at legislative options so that we can force action in this area.

There's one further message I have for the search engines. If there are technical obstacles to acting on this, don't just stand by and say nothing can be done, use your great brains to overcome them. You're the people who've worked out how to map almost every inch of the earth from space. You've designed algorithms to make sense of vast quantities of information. You're the people who take pride in doing what they say can't be done.

You hold hackathons for people to solve impossible internet conundrums. Well hold a hackathon for child safety. Set your greatest brains to work on this. You're not separate from our society, you're part of our society and you must play a responsible role within it. This is quite simply about obliterating this disgusting material from the net, and we should do whatever it takes.

So that's how we're going to deal with the criminal challenge. The cultural challenge is the fact that many children are watching online pornography and finding other damaging material online at an increasingly young age. Now young people have always been curious about pornography; they've always sought it out.

But it used to be that society could protect children by enforcing age restrictions on the ground; whether that was setting a minimum age for buying top-shelf magazines, putting watersheds on the TV or age rating films and DVDs. But the explosion of pornography on the internet, and the explosion of the internet into our children's lives, has changed all of that profoundly. It's made it much harder to enforce age restrictions. It's made it much more difficult for parents to know what's going on. And as a society we need to be clear and honest about what is going on.

For a lot of children, watching hard-core pornography is in danger of becoming a rite of passage. In schools up and down our country, from the suburbs to the inner city, there are young people who think it's normal to send pornographic material as a prelude to dating in the same way you might once have sent a note across the classroom.

Over a third of children have received a sexually explicit text or email. In a recent survey, a quarter of children said they had seen pornography which had upset them. This is happening, and it is happening on our watch as adults. And the effect that it can have can be devastating. Effectively our children are growing up too fast. They're getting distorted ideas about sex and being pressurised in a way that we've never seen before, and as a father I am extremely concerned about this.

Now there's some who might say, 'Well, it's fine for you to have a view as a parent but not as Prime Minister. This is – this is an issue for parents not the state.' But the way I see it, there is a contract between parents and the state. Parents say, 'Look, we'll do our best to raise our children right and the state should agree to stand on our side, to make that job a bit easier not a bit harder.'

But when it comes to internet pornography, parents have been left too much on their own. And I'm determined to put that right. We all need to work together, both to prevent children from accessing pornography and educate them about keeping safe online. This is about access and it's about education. And I want to say briefly what we're doing about each.

On access, things have changed profoundly in recent years. Not long ago access to the internet was mainly restricted to the PC in the corner of the living room with a beeping dial-up modem – we all remember the worldwide wait – it was downstairs in the house where parents could keep an eye on things. But now the internet is on the smartphones, the laptops, the tablets, the computers, the games consoles. And with high speed connections that make movie downloads and real time streaming possible, parents need much, much more help to protect their children across all of these fronts.

So on mobile phones, it's great to report that all of the operators have now agreed to put adult content filters onto phones automatically. And to deactivate them you have to prove you're over 18 and operators will continue to refine and improve those filters.

On public wi-fi, of which more than 90% is provided by 6 companies – O2, Virgin Media, Sky, Nomad, BT and Arqiva – I'm pleased to say we've now reached an agreement with all of them that family friendly filters are to be applied across public wi-fi networks wherever children are likely to be present. This will be done by the end of next month. And we're keen to introduce a family friendly wi-fi symbol which retailers, hotels, transport companies can use to show that their customers – use to show their customers that their public wi-fi is properly filtered. So I think good progress there; that's how we're protecting children outside the home.

Inside the home, on the private family network, it is a more complicated issue. There's been a big debate about whether internet filters should be set to a default 'on' position, in other words with adult content filters applied by default, or not. Let's be clear, this has never been a debate about companies or government censoring the internet, but about filters to protect children at the home network level.

Those who wanted default 'on' said, 'It's a no-brainer: just have the filter set to 'on', then adults can turn them off if they want to and that way we can protect all children whether their parents are engaged in internet safety or not.' But others said default 'on' filters could create a dangerous sense of complacency. They said that with default filters parents wouldn't bother to keep an eye on what their kids are watching, as they'd be complacent; they'd just assume the whole thing had been taken care of.

Now, I say we need both: we need good filters that are preselected to be on, pre-ticked unless an adult turns them off, and we need parents aware and engaged in the setting of those filters. So, that is what we've worked hard to achieve, and I appointed Claire Perry to take charge of this, for the very simple reason that she's passionate about this issue, determined to get things done and extremely knowledgeable about it at the same time. Now, she's worked with the big 4 internet service providers – TalkTalk, Virgin, Sky and BT – who together supply internet connections to almost 9 out of 10 homes.

And today, after months of negotiation, we've agreed home network filters that are the best of both worlds. By the end of this year, when someone sets up a new broadband account, the settings to install family friendly filters will be automatically selected; if you just click next or enter, then the filters are automatically on.

And, in a really big step forward, all the ISPs have rewired their technology so that once your filters are installed they will cover any device connected to your home internet account; no more hassle of downloading filters for every device, just one click protection. One click to protect your whole home and to keep your children safe.

Now, once those filters are installed it should not be the case that technically literate children can just flick the filters off at the click of the mouse without anyone knowing, and this, if you've got children, is absolutely vital. So, we've agreed with industry that those filters can only be changed by the account holder, who has to be an adult. So an adult has to be engaged in the decisions.

But of course, all this only deals with the flow of new customers, new broadband accounts, those switching service providers or buying an internet connection for the first time. It doesn't deal with the huge stock of the existing customers, almost 19 million households, so that is where we now need to set our sights.

Following the work we've already done with the service providers, they have now agreed to take a big step: by the end of next year, they will have contacted all their existing customers and presented them with an unavoidable decision about whether or not to install family friendly content filters. TalkTalk, who've shown great leadership on this, have already started and are asking existing customers as I speak.

We're not prescribing how the ISPs should contact their customers; it's up to them to find their own technological solutions. But however they do it, there'll be no escaping this decision, no, 'Remind me later,' and then it never gets done. And they will ensure that it's an adult making the choice.

Now, if adults don't want these filters that is their decision, but for the many parents who would like to be prompted or reminded, they'll get that reminder and they'll be shown very clearly how to put on family friendly filters. I think this is a big improvement on what we had before and I want to thank the service providers for getting on board with this, but let me be clear: I want this to be a priority for all internet service providers not just now, but always.

That is why I am asking today for the small companies in the market to adopt this approach too, and I am also asking Ofcom, the industry regulator, to oversee this work, to judge how well the ISPs are doing and to report back regularly. If they find that we're not protecting children effectively, I will not hesitate to take further action.

But let me also say this: I know there are lots of charities and other organisations which provide vital online advice and support that many young people depend on, and we need to make sure that the filters do not, even unintentionally, restrict this helpful and often educational content. So I'll be asking the UK Council for Child Internet Safety to set up a working group to ensure this doesn't happen, as well as talking to parents about how effective they think that these filter products we're talking about really are.



So, making filters work is one front we're acting on; the other is education. In the new national curriculum, launched just a couple of weeks ago, there are unprecedented requirements to teach children about online safety. That doesn't mean teaching young children about pornography; it means sensible, age-appropriate education about what to expect on the internet. We need to teach our children not just about how to stay safe online, but how to behave online too, on social media and over phones with their friends.

And it's not just children that need to be educated; it's us parents, too. People of my generation grew up in a completely different world; our parents kept an eye on us in the world they could see. This is still relatively new, a digital landscape, a world of online profiles and passwords, and speaking as a parent, most of us do need help in navigating it.

Companies like Vodafone already do a good job at giving parents advice about online safety; they spend millions on it, and today they're launching the latest edition of their Digital Parenting guide. They're also going to publish a million copies of a new educational tool for younger children called, 'The digital facts of life.'

And I'm pleased to announce something else today: a major new national campaign that is going to be launched in the new year, that is going to be backed by the 4 major internet service providers as well as other child focused companies, that will speak directly to parents about how to keep their children safe online and how to talk to their children about other dangers like sexting or online bullying.

And government is going to play its part, too, because we get millions of people interacting with government. Whether that's sorting out their road tax or their Twitter account, or soon registering for Universal Credit, I've asked that we use these interactions to keep up the campaign, to prompt parents to think about filters and to think about how they can keep their children safe online. This is about all of us playing our part.

So, we're taking action on how children access this stuff, how they're educated about it, and I can tell you today we're also taking action on the content that is online. There are certain types of pornography that can only be described as extreme; I am talking particularly about pornography that is violent and that depicts simulated rape. These images normalise sexual violence against women and they're quite simply poisonous to the young people who see them.

The legal situation is, although it's been a crime to publish pornographic portrayals of rape for decades, existing legislation does not cover possession of this material, at least in England and Wales. Possession of such material is already an offence in Scotland, but because of a loophole in the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008 it is not an offence south of the border. But I can tell you today, we are changing that: we are closing the loophole, making it a criminal offence to possess internet pornography that depicts rape.

And we're going to do something else to make sure that the same rules apply online as they do offline. There are examples of extreme pornography that are so bad you can't even buy this material in a licensed sex shop, and today I can announce we'll be legislating so that videos streamed online in the UK are subject to the same rules as those sold in shops. Put simply: what you can't get in a shop, you shouldn't be able to get online.

Now, everything today I've spoken about comes back to one thing: the kind of society we want to be. I want Britain to be the best place to raise a family; a place where your children are safe, where there's a sense of right and wrong and proper boundaries between them, where children are allowed to be children.

And all the actions we're taking today come back to that basic idea: protecting the most vulnerable in our society, protecting innocence, protecting childhood itself. That is what is at stake, and I will do whatever it takes to keep our children safe.

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