Preschool Screen Time & Internet Safety: Helping Young Children Use Digital Devices Safely (and How to Respond if They See Pornography)

CultureReframed

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Today, digital screens and the internet are an inherent part of young children's everyday lives. Around the world, preschoolers grow up with online devices: phones, tablets, laptops, desktops, gaming consoles, televisions, and more. The 'screenification' of childhood has no precedent. That this is a consequential issue is evidenced by the fact that one of the preeminent medical centers globally for young people, the Boston Children's Hospital, now staffs a Clinic for Interactive Media and Internet Disorders. "We have," they write, "been evaluating and treating increasing numbers of children…whose excessive online activities have caused problems with sleep, school, social functioning, and various aspects of physical and mental health."[1]

Globally, the closure of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic understandably increased children's screen time (e.g., Nopembri et al., 2023; Hedderson et al., 2023). But there was no dramatic post-pandemic decline in usage (Rideout et al., 2022) or in screen time-related mental health harms among young people (e.g., Shoshani, Kor, & Bar, 2024). In fact, young people everywhere are far exceeding recommended daily limits on screen time. This is harming their social, emotional, and cognitive development – as is their exposure to pornography.

This report specifically focuses on preschoolers (ages 4-6). Our ultimate aim is to provide data-driven guidelines on how parents can effectively respond if their young children encounter online pornography. In other words, this report covers digital safety. In that spirit, we first review several other safety-related matters, including the latest research on screen time and its negative impacts on young children, the social and emotional development of preschoolers, and how parents can help children master bodily boundaries. Afterwards, we turn to how parents can prepare themselves and their children for encounters with inappropriate adult content.

Parents who feel confident in monitoring their children's use of digital devices and teaching them digital safety tend to raise children with less problematic media and screen use (Coyne et al., 2023). Young people, too, need and appreciate parental mediation (Bickham et al., 2023).

How Much Screen Time is Too Much?

Children, we have seen, are increasingly watching and using digital screens.[2] They are also exceeding any and all limits established by medical and other authoritative agencies. But how much screen time is too much?

The World Health Organization (2019) recommends no more than one hour each day for children under five. The American Academy of Pediatrics (2016a, 3), the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (2024), and the American Psychological Association (2024) all suggest likewise for children aged two to five – and then, says the latter, only "high-quality

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[1]Boston Children's Hospital, Clinic for Interactive Media and Internet Disorders, 2024, https://www.childrenshospital.org/programs/clinic-interactive-media-and-internet-disorders-cimaid.
[2]Children can attend to screen media at around 6 months of age; "substantial comprehension" begins around 2 years of age (Anderson 2017, S60).

programming." The Canadian Paediatric Society adds that parents and caretakers should "ensure that sedentary screen time is not a routine part of child care for children younger than five years" (Ponti, 2023, 188). As the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (2019) states, "face-to-face social interaction is vital to the development of language and other skills" for young children. "Screen-based interaction is not an effective substitute for this."[3] This statement is backed by ongoing research (e.g., Webb et al., 2024).

These limits do not pertain only to Western nations. The Japanese Pediatric Society "recommends limiting screen time to two hours or less per day for children aged two years and above" (Arai et al., 2023, p. 668-69). The Indian Academy of Pediatrics urges no more than one hour daily for children aged two to five, and fewer than two hours of screen time for youth aged five to ten, "lesser the better" (Gupta et al., 2022, p. 238).

The consensus is clear: screen time should be limited to one to two hours per day for preschool children. Yet most children around the world are exceeding these limits (e.g., McArthur et al., 2022). Is this a problem?

Is Too Much Screen Time Bad for Preschoolers?

The answer is, in short, yes.

Minimal screen time of mainly educational programs or apps provide limited benefit to young children (e.g., Ricci et al., 2023). It can increase certain aspects of literacy (Coulanges et al., 2024). But the benefit mainly, if not always requires co-viewing with an adult (Griffith et al., 2021; Alroqi, Serratrice, & Cameron-Faulkner, 2023). And the vast majority of children's screen time is not educational (Radesky et al., 2020). Indeed, too many so-called educational apps are not educational at all (Meyer et al., 2021).

In fact, any putative benefits of screen time do not outweigh the potential for detriment (e.g., Massaroni et al., 2024; Sanders et al., 2024). No credible study has recommended increasing screen time. Even investigations that highlight possible advantages still advocate a reduction in screen use (e.g., Fitzpatrick et al., 2023). In general, the more time that young children are attuned to digital screens, the more frequently and deeply they exhibit social, emotional, and cognitive impairments.

The data on this linkage is extensive and worldwide. In one Canadian study, children who used screens for at least two hours a day had "an increased likelihood" of behavioral problems as well as delayed achievement of developmental milestones and poor vocabulary acquisition (McArthur, Tough, & Madigan, 2022). In another, "high persistent screen use" predicted higher inattention and aggression among five-year-old children, and lower language, social, and motor skills (McArthur et al., 2020, p. 5). A third Canadian study reported that children's daily screen use in excess of one hour was "positively associated with vulnerability" in language and cognitive development, communication skills, social

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[3] See, e.g., That said, most authorities support the use of screens (e.g., Zoom, FaceTime) for children under adult supervision to communicate with far-away kin and friends (Strouse et al., 2021).

competence, physical wellbeing, and emotional maturity (Kerai, 2022, p. 7; see also Cerniglia, Cimino, & Ammaniti, 2021).

These findings were mirrored in studies of preschoolers from Germany (Schwarzer et al., 2021). Likewise for China, where researchers found "a negative relationship between screen time and children's language and cognitive skills, self-regulation, and self-efficacy and a positive relationship with problem behaviour" (Zie et al., 2024, p. 271). In China, too, "time spent on digital media was significantly associated with preschoolers' risk of social-emotional delay" (Gou & Perceval, 2023, p. 10; see also Xiang et al., 2022). Among Chinese adolescents, too, screen time was "significantly" linked to depression (Zhang et al., 2019).

Similar findings have been reported from Australia (Tooth, Moss, & Miushra, 2021), Brazil (Rocha et al., 2021), Pakistan (Ishtiaq, 2021), and India (Varadarajan et al., 2021). Among young children in Taiwan, the use of digital devices "was always negatively and concurrently associated" with "social competence development" and also "their parents' engagement" (Ma, Li, & Chen, 2024, p. 19). Studies repeatedly show that screen use impairs a child's development of language (e.g., comprehension, vocabulary), communication skills, problem solving, and cognitive development more generally – in the Philippines (Dy, Dy, & Santos, 2023), Indonesia (Amanda & Shareeff, 2024), and in general (Bhutani et al., 2024). Screen time is especially risky for young children with pre-existing speech and language delay (Vohr et al., 2021).

A study of children aged 18-36 months concluded that "young children who spent more time on touch screen devices were more likely to have emotional problems, anxious/depressive symptoms, somatic complaints, social withdrawal symptoms, attention problems, and aggressive behaviors" (Lin et al, 2020; see also Bozzola et al., 2022). A meta-analysis found that screen time has "significant" correlations with behavioral problems in children under 12 (Eirich et al., 2022; see also Santos et al., 2022). Similar results have been reported from Egypt (Zoromba et al., 2023) and Japan (Arai et al., 2023). These many problems include aggression, oppositional behavior, inattention, hyperactivity, anxiety, and depression. Digital media, especially images featuring violence and pornography, is particularly harmful to young people who already struggle with mental health, family relationships, and social skills (Helsper & Smahel, 2019).

The gender of a child is also a relevant factor. One study found that screen time afflicted girls, in particular, with depression, poor emotional well-being, and greater body image concerns (Mougharbel & Goldfield, 2020). Another found that "boys were more prone to report total difficulties, conduct problems, hyperactivity problems, peer problems, and prosocial behavior than girls, while girls were more likely than boys to report emotional problems" (Liu et al., 2021).

Screen time is also associated with children's loss of sleep (Li et al., 2020)[4]. Studies also tie the digital devices to young children's refusal to eat regular meals and to go to the bathroom. They would rather focus on the screen (Yazıcı Çakıroğlu & Sapsağlam, 2024). Too much screen time causes children to consume more sweets and sugared beverages, to engage in less physical activity, to develop obesity, and to show less competence in performing daily tasks (Han et al., 2023; Robinson et al., 2017; Nagata et al., 2023).[5] They also show poor self-regulation (Munzer et al., 2018; McNaughton et al., 2022). Similarly, excessive screen time daily among preschoolers has been linked with ADHD and autism spectrum disorders (Qu et al., 2023; Hill et al., 2020; Kushima et al., 2022).

The phrase "executive function" refers to the ability to effectively manage general cognitive functions (Hughes, Katus, & Cragg, 2023).[6] It requires working memory and cognitive flexibility, and allows one to solve problems, stay focused, exercise self-control, make plans, adapt to changes, and achieve goals. Executive functioning develops rapidly during ages three to five but is not fully formed until a person's mid-20s. Too much screen time impairs a child's executive function (Leppänen et al., 2020; McHarg et al., 2020; Panjeti-Madan & Ranganathan, 2023; Kim & Tsethlikai, 2024). They are "significantly more likely to display poor emotion regulation (not staying calm, arguing too much, being difficult to get along with), an inability to finish tasks, [and] lower curiosity" (Twenge & Campbell, 2018).[7] In fact, preschoolers who overuse screens show physiological changes in brain structure, specifically, "lower microstructural integrity of brain white matter tracts" and "lower cortical thickness and sulcal depth" (Hutton et al., 2022; see also Zhao et al., 2022; Song et al., 2023).

Screen Time and Family Characteristics

At least 95% of all American children have access to digital devices, even in low-income homes (Rideout and Robb, 2020). In fact, children's screen time tends to be greater in lower socioeconomic households and also by children of color (Common Sense Media, 2021) and for many, digital exposure is a pervasive in their lives. Urban minority youth, too, are more likely to see violent and sexual online content (Stevens et al., 2019).

The causal relationships noted above between screen time and adverse outcomes are especially worrisome when we consider that many parents, especially in economically stressed homes, use mobile technology to calm toddlers with 'difficult' temperaments or socio-emotional impairments (Radesky et al., 2015). In turn, this makes it all the more difficult when trying to reduce screen time, since removing devices may cause extreme emotions in

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[4] For negative impacts among adolescents, see Spina et al., 2021, Mougharbel et al., 2023, van der Schuur, Baumgartner, & Sumter, 2019, and Boer et al., 2020. Girls are especially at risk (Twenge & Farley, 2020; McDool et al., 2020; Wigg, Duncan, & Wich, 2020; and, more generally, Popat & Tarrant, 2022).

[5] In adolescence, girls are at particular risk of falling prey to social media that promotes eating disorders (e.g., Mento et al., 2021) and self-harm Giordana et al., 2022).

[6] An accessible source is "What Is Executive Function? And How Does It Relate to Child Development?," Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University.

[7] Adolescents with problematic internet use also display emotional dysregulation (Gioia, Rega, & Boursier, 2021; Maftei & Diaconu-Gherasim, 2023).

their children (Coyne et al., 2021). In the US, "higher media exposure was associated with lower expressive language skills," particularly "for toddlers from low-income homes" (Dynia et al., 2021). Studies have linked children's excessive screen time with lower maternal education (Brushe et al., 2023) as well as general parental stress (e.g., Hartshorne et al., 2021; Shin et al., 2021). All this suggests that harm from screen time exacerbates, and is exacerbated by, existing household stresses.

Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Development of Preschoolers (4-6 years old)

To help us understand the impact of excessive screen time and inappropriate screen content on preschool children, and to formulate appropriate responses, it is useful to summarize certain aspects of their social, emotional, and cognitive development.[8] It is also useful to indicate what preschool children need in this regard from parents and caretakers.

Relevant and developmentally appropriate behaviors you can expect preschool children to exhibit include:

- Self-oriented and self-centered. But starting to understand the feelings of others - albeit largely when encouraged by caregivers.
- Showing basic signs of independence, such as forming their own opinions and helping with rudimentary everyday tasks (e.g., getting dressed).
- Developing friendships outside the family.
- Greater exploration of the world around them.
- Extensive make-believe, including imaginary friends and attributing human-like qualities to objects. They may shift back-and-forth between reality and fantasy, confuse the two, and believe things that adults know to be false. By age 5-6, however, they are also better at distinguishing reality from fantasy.
- Playing with their identity, e.g., morphing into fantasy characters, switching and combining gender roles.
- Asking "big questions" that parents often struggle to answer simply: what happens after death, why is the sky blue, and so forth.

Language and Cognitive Development

By age 3-4, children:

- Understand the concept of "same" and "different."
- Use sentences of three-four words.
- Approach problems from a single point of view.

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[8]Sources include: "Ages & Stages," American Academy of Pediatrics; "Family Digital Wellness Guide," Boston Children's Digital Wellness Lab; "Developmental Milestones," Children's Hospital of Philadelphia; "UNICEF Parenting," UNICEF; "Complete Guide to Developmental Milestones," Child Mind Institute; "Pregnancy and Parenting," HealthLinkBC; "Growth and Development Milestones," Kaiser Permanente; "The Growing Child," Stanford Medicine; and Zubler et al. (2022).

- Follow three-part commands.

By age 5, children:

- Use four to six words.
- Keep a conversation going with more than three back-and-forth exchanges.
- Count 10 or more objects.
- Pay attention for 5-10 minutes during activities.
- Dress and undress; start to learn to tie shoes; care for their bathroom needs.
- Follow simple rules when playing board games or card games.

By age 6, children can:

- Write some letters and numbers.
- Read some simple words.
- Speak in simple but complete sentences with upwards of eight words.
- Follow a series of three commands in a row.
- Start to understand that some words have more than one meaning; they may use this in jokes and puns.
- Better understand cause-and-effect; "Magical thinking" fades.

Rules, Routines, and Punishment

- Toddlers are always testing limits. This may include sassiness. They are still learning to understand the nature of rules, authority, and their own independence. They may repeatedly violate the same rule.
- At the same time, they tend to follow rules, not because they understand the meanings behind them, but because rules are rules, or they fear the consequences.
- They have an inability to grapple with moral ambiguity and complexity. For you, the child didn't intend to break the vase, but they were misbehaving. For them, it was an accident.
- It is more effective to tell your child what to do than what not to do. They are more apt to understand and follow concrete affirmative commands ("Please pick up your toys") than vague negative ones ("Don't make a mess").
- For the same reason, don't bark "Stop doing that!" but redirect them to an alternative activity.
- Children violate rules. That is age appropriate. When they do, remain calm. An explosive overreaction may encourage repeat behavior. If needed, pause for a few deep breaths, so you act rationally rather than re-act out of fear or anger.
- Then, explain calmly and simply, using few words, that what they did was wrong. Explain what will happen if the behavior continues. Expect to repeat this process since a child does not possess adult understanding.
- If you punish, use "natural consequences" that are reasonable, proportional, simple, and logical. For not sharing a toy, it makes no sense to withhold dessert or television. It would be rational to temporarily deny them the use of the toy.

- The purpose of a time out is not to punish a child, or to give yourself a break from parenting, but to allow a child to re-group. They should be in time out for no more than one minute for each year of a child's age.
- Unless it is a matter of immediate safety, it is best to warn preschoolers that if they continue to do X, the consequences will be Y. Give them an opportunity to self-correct. If they do, praise them.
- In fact, you should often praise positive behavior so your child feels loved, secure, and valued, and doesn't think that you only care or pay attention when they do something wrong. Parenting should not just be negative.
- Always separate the child from the behavior. Hence, the behavior might be bad, but not the child.
- Never slap or hit. Physical punishment is an illogical consequence, which science shows can lead to worse behavior and harm children (Heilmann et al., 2021).
- Preschoolers often play make-believe that seems violent. But this is not real violence or evidence of violent tendencies. If this play bothers you, redirect them to other activities but do not overreact.
- If your child's violent play, however, is all-too real, they have likely witnessed realistic or true violence. Reassess what they watch, or what occurs in the home or neighborhood. Consider consulting a mental health clinician or therapist.

Empathy, Friendships, and Relationships

- Preschool children are learning about their growing independence. They are also learning about friendship, relationships, and that others have their own points of view and feelings. They need guidance to balance autonomy and empathy. You can say things like, "Do you think Jose wants a turn, too?" and "What do you think a good friend would do in this or that situation?"
- It helps to talk about your own feelings. While reading a book or watching a video, ask them how this character feels, or what that character should do in the situation to be a good friend.
- Children under your care will mirror your own behavior. You therefore should model appropriate responses to emotions. If you have an explosive temper, snap at others in frustration, or curse when stressed, they will do likewise.
- If they do see or hear you behave poorly, acknowledge to them that you were inappropriate, apologize, commit to working hard to not repeat it, and keep to your word! (The old adage, "Do what I say, not what I do," always fails.)
- Teach your children when they are frustrated or clash with peers to stay calm, to not yell or lash out, and to never hit, push, or grab. Help them build the confidence and skills to communicate honestly and politely. Here, the suggestion "Use your words" is truly helpful.
- Of course, you also need to teach them the appropriate words for emotions. The ability to label different feelings is an important tool for emotional regulation.

- You also need to teach children that no one has the right to hurt anyone else, and that it is important to say sorry when they have hurt someone's feelings. Here, too, you should model suitable behavior.
- Help them solve conflicts with peers. Review what happened. "What were you and Jane doing just before you were pushed?" Discuss and perhaps practice the words she will use when resolving a particular conflict.
- If you see physical conflict between your child and peers, make sure that everybody is safe. Restrain them from hurting each other. Separate them if they cannot quickly calm down. Never diminish or mock a child's feelings but say that there are better ways of dealing with emotions and conflict than violence.
- Last, at this age, sex or gender makes no real difference to social and emotional development. So, treat all kids the same.

What Else Do Preschoolers Need from Parents and Guardians?

- Set and enforce limits. You want to nurture their growing independence by giving them increasing freedom. But you must fully control their lives, which will make them feel safe and secure as they explore their emerging autonomy.
- Set up daily routines. Children do best when they know what to expect. They need certainty and predictability.
- Assign them daily tasks (e.g., putting dirty clothes in a basket). This encourages independence, responsibility, and self-esteem. Set them up for success – say, by getting their clothes ready at night so they can dress in the morning. They will need reminding, and often assistance. Praise them when they do well.
- Reading at bedtime helps them settle down after a busy day. It also teaches literacy and, to repeat, you can use these times to talk about the feelings of characters.
- Have meals together whenever possible. This establishes good eating habits.[9] It also fosters communication and closeness. Share the day ahead. Ask them about theirs – what was the best part, the hardest, the most frustrating. This helps them learn to manage the full spectrum of emotions.
- Be sure to turn off all screens at mealtime.[10] Yours, too!
- Children feel important when adults take the time to talk with them. Ask your child about their friends, activities, and opinions. These conversations help children gain self-confidence and improve their social skills.
- Do not mock or laugh at their fears and anxieties, even if they concern imaginary events and friends. But don't use the threats of imaginary creatures to control their behavior. If you say, "Put away your clothes or the monster in the closet will get you while you are sleeping," you may unduly frighten them.
- If your child plays video and online games, you should join them. Playing digital games together can enhance family closeness (Wang, Taylor, & Sun, 2018). It can also reduce the negative impacts (e.g., aggression, anxiety) associated with solo gaming (Coyne et al., 2011). Action-oriented and open-world games can positively impact a child's

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[9] Family dinners can protect against the harms of social media (Dorol-Beauroy-Eustache & Mishara, 2021).

[10] As per, e.g., the Canadian Paediatric Society (2017).

attention and ability to learn (Zhang et al., 2021). Cooperative gaming among older grade schoolers can promote prosocial behavior (Shoshani & Krauskopf, 2021).

- Be sure your child plays age-appropriate games with no violence or nudity. Violent games are causally linked to increased aggression, decreased empathy, impaired schoolwork, and mental health problems (e.g., Calvert et al., 2017).

There are two further points, which are elaborated below. Preschoolers learn best from direct, face-to-face interactions with other people. So, limit their use of screens – and be sure you know what they are watching. In fact, you should watch with them. Second, preschool children need you to establish rules for their safety. These rules must include not only screens but their own bodies.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

Much of what we just reviewed pertains to the concept of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). This movement arose in the mid-1990s as part of the idea that teaching should develop the 'whole child.' A founding charter of SEL defined social and emotional competence as:

> the ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of one's life in ways that enable the successful management of life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, [and] solving everyday problems. (Elias et al., 1997)

It is important to draw on and nurture a preschool child's SEL when addressing screens, bodily boundaries, and online sexuality.

The general framework for SEL was formulated by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2024). This schema centers on five competencies: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness (see, for a recent revision, Dussault & Thompson, 2024). In sum, SEL develops the skills necessary to care for self and others. It fosters self-control, honesty, self-motivation, leadership, time-management, thinking about consequences, setting and achieving goals. It helps one manage stress, disruptions, and emotions such as anger, frustration, and anxiety. SEL also assists with cooperation, listening, clear communication, respect for differences, cultivating trust, understanding other perspectives, respect for authority, following directions, and completing assignments.

For preschool children, SEL emphasizes basic skills: getting along with peers, using words, teamwork, helping, impulse-control, following rules, understanding how others feel, and labelling and managing emotions (Durlak, Domitrovich, & Mahoney, 2024).[11] It requires clear

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[11]For age-appropriate books to assist SEL with preschoolers, see, e.g., "22 Children's Books that Support Social Emotional Learning," BetterKids; "40+ Books about Emotions and Feelings for Preschool and Pre-K," Pre-K Pages; "Children's Book List," The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning, Vanderbilt University; "Social Emotional Learning for Children," Boston Public Library; "54 Best Social Skills Books for Kids," We Are Teachers. Two of the many guidebooks for adults are *Confident Parents, Confident Kids: Raising Emotional Intelligence in Ourselves and Our Kids--from Toddlers to Teenagers*, and *Raising Resilient Kids in a Challenging World: A Practical Guide to Nurturing Your Children's Inner Strength, Confidence, Adaptability, Grit and Independence*.

guidelines to create "mutually supportive relationships" so children can honestly share their feelings and make mistakes without fear of shame or mockery. These rules, too, must also respect children's privacy to help them develop their autonomy and boundaries. In all this, there is no place for violence.

Scientific studies have shown that SEL enhances life outcomes and academic achievement (e.g., Murano et al., 2020; Durlak, Mahoney, & Boyle 2022; Cipriano et al., 2023; Close et al., 2024).[12] Children who learn SEL in kindergarten show "statistically significant" evidence of beneficial outcomes in their 20s in education, employment, criminal activity, substance use, and mental health (Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015).[13] It helps children, as The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2023) recognizes, later avoid bad decisions and unhealthy behaviors both off- and on-line.

Watching Screens with Children

Many of the harms to young children from screens and digital devices are not immediately evident. Yet parents and caregivers should pay attention to any obvious impacts. Do your children want to forsake meals, or playing with friends, to watch screens instead? Does digital content, especially certain kinds of content, cause changes in attention, sleep, anxiety, depression, aggression, and other behaviors? When not in front of screens, are they irritable, disengaged, unfocused, or unable to amuse themselves? But paying attention is not enough. You must also watch content with your children and work together to establish rules. Before we discuss how to co-view, here are some preliminary guidelines.

First, we know that children need age-appropriate privacy. But as the Child Exploitation and Online Protection agency of the British government states, "Children under five should not access the internet unsupervised in private spaces, such as alone in their bedroom or bathroom" (CEOP Education, n.d.).[14]

Second, you must monitor their content. Privacy aside, it is essential to keep watch on the online activity of preschoolers as well as tweens, adolescents, and teens (e.g., Canadian Paediatric Society, 2019; American Psychological Association, 2023). There are many general ways to oversee a child's digital life (Beyens, Keijsers, & Coyne, 2022; Meeus et al., 2018). One is restrictive monitoring. It entails little more than imposing prohibitions on children. It is more common among parents with lower cyber-skills (Livingston et al., 2017). While restrictive monitoring leads to fewer risks, it fails to develop a child's efficacy and agency, and restricts their online opportunities and digital inclusion. Yet the opposite, or permissive monitoring, is even worse. It provides no supervision, and so exposes your child to harmful content such as pornography and violence, and leads to problematic social media use and negative health outcomes (Paakkari et al., 2021).

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[12]Despite its proven success, more than two-dozen states in the U.S. have introduced legislation to bar SEL programming in schools (Abrams 2023).
[13]Among adolescents, emotional intelligence – that is, SEL – moderates the relationship between problematic internet use and suicidal ideation (Arrivillaga, Rey, & Extremera, 2020).
[14] CEOP Education provides downloadable stories for young children about online safety.

We recommend active or autonomy-supportive monitoring. This requires parents and caregivers to continuously discuss, explain, and evaluate screen time and screen content with their children. It also requires listening carefully to a child's views on the topic. Not only is this the most effective way to monitor preschoolers' digital use, but it will also have the best outcomes later during their adolescence (Padilla-Walker, Stockdale, & McLean, 2020; Ren & Zhu, 2022).[15]

Third, parents and caretakers must set clear limits on screen time and screen content with preschoolers. This is both age-appropriate, as discussed earlier, and developmentally helpful. Consistency and agreement among all caregivers is important (Martins, Mares, & Nathanson, 2019).

Fourth, family screen limits and rules on digital content must also apply to yourself. Studies show that your child's screen habits will mirror your own (e.g., Nagata et al., 2024). If you exceed the limits, your kids will try to do so, too. Likewise, you should never view adult-themed content around children. And sneaking or hiding this kind of content will inevitably fail.

Fifth, most authorities, such as the U.S. Office of the Surgeon General (2023), recommend creating a social media, screen, or tech contract with your children. You can readily find an example at the Culture Reframed website. Other easily accessible templates include "An English and Spanish Family Media Plan" by the American Academy of Pediatrics,[16] "Family Guide to Creating Shared Media Use Agreements" at The Boston Children's Digital Wellness Lab, "Family Tech Planner" (English and Spanish) of Common Sense, and the "Family Agreement" at Childnet." You should write up a contract when your child first starts to use screens, and modify it regularly as they mature, up through their teen years.

Sixth, beware of "technointerference" or "phubbing" (phone snubbing). Parents who disrupt interactions with their children by checking their devices, even momentarily, are liable to cause their children behavioral problems (McDaniel & Radesky, 2018). These disruptions, too, can negatively impact a child's executive functioning (Yang, Jiang, & Zhu, 2023). Children who perceive higher rates of technointerference at home, in fact, report more conflict with their parents and less emotional support (Meeus et al., 2021).

Seventh, it is important to recognize that rules are not enough. Kids, at least by their adolescent years, often frankly ignore media or screen limits. When that happens, many parents simply dig their heels in and double-down on restrictions, which their kids again try to ignore. Even worse, these more stringent rules often push children – even as young as five – away from wanting to speak to their parents about online activities (Lafton, Wilhelmsen, & Holmarsdottir, 2024). To be sure, rules are vital. But more is needed: regular conversations, paying attention to your children's needs and questions, learning about their online lives, honoring their trust, and taking their opinions seriously. In so doing, you display an active

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[15]It is also the most effective parenting style to use with content-controlling programs and apps (Stoilova, Bulger, & Livingstone, 2024).

[16] The American Academy of Pediatrics also provides useful resources at its Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health.

interest in them. This helps create a positive parent-child relationship, which helps mitigate problematic media use (e.g., Hefner et al., 2019; Swit et al., 2022).

Last, most of the time children enjoy screens. So, presenting cyberspace and digital devices as inherently harmful and dangerous is unhelpful. You want to teach your children to use the internet and technology safely – to become competent digital citizens and critical consumers, users, and producers of online content and media (see Masoumi & Bourbour, 2024). You do not want to urge them to avoid the cyber-future altogether. That would be futile. It would also do them a grave disservice.

Now we can turn to co-viewing. It is, as noted above, necessary to activate any benefits of screens. But co-viewing is also essential to counteract the negative consequences of too much screen time on the cognitive, social, and emotional development of preschoolers and even infants (Supanitayanon, Trairatvorakul, & Chonchaiya, 2020; Heller, 2021; Mallawaarachchi et al., 2024). Co-viewing is more than just being present in the same room. It requires interaction with your child. Their neurological development hinges on joint or "brain-to-brain neural synchrony" (Hutton et al., 2024). These "genuinely shared, nurturing experiences" are not replicated through a child's solo interaction with an app, video, computer program, or any other screen.

Talk about what you are both watching. Highlight important features. Ask your child what they learned, or if they connect the content to daily situations (Strouse & Ganea, 2021). You can expand on the information. You should also help your child with digital media literacy and SEL (see also Hunt, 2023; Eyal & Te'eni-Harari, 2024). The Boston Children's Digital Wellness Lab offers helpful prompts (Dong, 2022).[17] While co-viewing, for example, you can ask your child:

- "What does this program or commercial want you to think?" (Encourages critical thinking about media messages and credibility.)
- "Why does the program want you to think this way?" (Fosters the consideration of others' motivations.)
- "How does this message make you feel?" (Helps children identify and label emotions.)
- "What do you want to do after seeing this?" (Builds self-awareness and self-regulation by asking children to notice and manage their behaviors.)
- "How would this program make other people feel?" (Cultivates empathy.)

You can model other types of digital media literacy by identifying and questioning stereotypes (Ponti, 2023). Ask your child who speaks and who does not.[18] Explore the perspectives of different characters. Have them propose alternative endings. In sum, do not passively watch the screen with your child. Engage them in active conversation so you can hone their social and emotional skills as well as their resilience to troublesome content.

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[17] There are many instructional guides for teaching media literacy to children, e.g., Rogow (2022), Sperry & Scheibe (2022), LaGarde & Hudgins (2021), and Hobbs (2025). You can find many more simply by searching "media literacy children" in your local public library or online. Note that these resources rarely discuss violence or pornography.

[18] Here, we borrow from Kim & Hachey's (2020) use of fairytales in kindergarten.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (2016b) called on entertainment media to only show violence "thoughtfully as serious drama, always showing the pain and loss suffered by the victims and perpetrators." Of course, this rarely happens. This is partly your role during co-viewing: to provide your child with a proper context to understand that violence and other disturbing content, including pornography, is hurtful, even if it is falsely portrayed as otherwise.

In your conversations about their digital lives and during co-viewing, be sure to ask your children what makes them happy on the screen or device, and what makes them sad, worried, or angry. As they get older, you can ask them to imagine giving advice to friends who were upset with certain types of online content and images. This will help your child problem-solve around inappropriate content, and also build resilience.

It is essential to cultivate trust in regard to screen use and digital content. Let your children know that you will not shame, criticize, or punish them for any online content they bring to your attention. Otherwise, they may simply not speak with you. They need to feel safe in coming to you, knowing that they will not get in trouble. You should work with your child to identify five or so trusted adults – parents, friends, teachers, and so forth - they can speak to if they ever encounter online content that makes them feel uneasy.

Some screen content – say, violence on the news - will inevitably make your child uneasy or fearful. Never make fun of their concerns. Listen and then provide comfort. Reassure them that they are "safe, loved, and valued" (Children and Screens, 2023; Common Sense Media, 2024a). Then redirect by watching or doing something cheerful.

It might be helpful for you and your child to come up with a general phrase for digital content that makes them feel uncomfortable, anxious, sad, or confused. This makes it easier for young children to bring worrying content to your attention even if they are unable to define or label that content. Common Sense Media recommends the phrase "red flag feeling" (James, Weinstein, & Mendoza, 2021, p.16).[19]

For years, research has shown that adolescents put pornography and violence at the top of their lists of online risks (Livingstone et al., 2014). From our own research at Culture Reframed, we know that many young people are upset upon seeing pornography. Yet many, too, are reluctant to tell the adults in their lives. By cultivating trust and digital competencies at a young age, we better prepare adolescents and teens to resist the harmful messages of online pornography and violence and also to seek the assistance of adults. For years, too, we have known that parental monitoring of a young person's online activity, and their awareness of this, helps protect against online predators and grooming (Whittle et al., 2013).

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[19] They also have excellent early childhood materials in a variety of languages on their "Digital Citizenship Resources for Family Engagement" page.

Preschoolers & Body Safety

Before we turn to age-appropriate responses if your preschool child sees online pornography, it is useful to talk about the related topic of body safety. By around the age of four or five, preschoolers often show interest in bodies, sexuality, sexual differences, and where babies come from. They may play with their own genitals, show an interest in those of other children, and talk about marrying the parent of the other gender. All of this is developmentally appropriate. They are simply exhibiting appropriate curiosity about themselves, other people, and the world around them.

These are understandably awkward moments for parents and caregivers. But remember that preschool children are not showing an interest in adult sexuality. They are unable to understand it or even want the details. These discussions will not lead to premature sexual activity. Try not to overreact, panic, or silence these questions. It is important to not be evasive, too, or surround the topic with secrecy and shame. Your children should feel comfortable coming to you with these sorts of questions. It is also important that they know you will give them direct and accurate answers. Otherwise, they will eventually look elsewhere – say, to online pornography. Then, they will only learn about unreal, violent, and harmful sexuality.

How, then, should you respond? There are basic and agreed-upon guidelines for how to discuss sexuality and bodies with preschool-aged children.[20] These include:

- The idea of having "The Talk" once and only once, when your kids are older, is outdated and ineffective. You must have regular and short conversations, starting when they are in preschool and continuing through their teens.
- At each developmental stage, tell them only as much as they want or need to know. Let their questions guide you. Do your best to not talk down to them, but also not above their level of understanding, either.
- Try not to make up answers or ignore or refuse questions. These conversations must center on your children's needs, not your level of comfort.
- Although preschoolers are interested in sexual and body differences, your approach to this topic, and your responses, should not vary depending on your child's sex or gender.
- Preschoolers need brief, simple, and concrete answers.
- Many age-appropriate books address these matters. Visit a local library with your child. Ask the librarian for suggestions and read some of the books together at home.[21]

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[20] Sources include: "Emotional Development in Preschoolers," American Academy of Pediatrics; Flais ed (2018); "10 tips for parents to teach children about body safety and boundaries," American Academy of Pediatrics; "8 Ways to Teach Kids about Consent and Healthy Boundaries" (which has excellent book suggestions, too), Connecticut Alliance to End Sexual Violence; "Teaching Kids About Boundaries," Child Mind Institute; "Five Safety Rules to Teach Your Child Before They Start School," Child Abuse Prevention Services (CAPS); "Seven Steps to Teaching Children Body Autonomy," Rady Children's Hospital-San Diego.

[21] Some relevant titles are: *My Body Belongs to Me from My Head to My Toes*; *Body Boundaries Make Me Stronger: Personal Safety Book for Kids about Body Safety, Personal Space, Private Parts and Consent that Teaches Social Skills and Body Awareness*; *Teach Your Dragon Body Safety: A Story About Personal Boundaries, Appropriate and*

- It is imperative to not teach that any part of the body is bad, evil, dirty, offensive, disgusting, never to be seen, touched, mentioned, or discussed. This will confuse your child and make it harder for them to control their bodily boundaries.
- Teach correct anatomical terms. "Making up names for body parts may give the impression that they are bad or a secret and cannot be talked about" (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2023b). Euphemisms can confuse a child and mystify the body, especially women's bodies (El-Hamamsy et al., 2022; Geddes, 2021).[22] Idiosyncratic or incorrect terms also make it harder for children to communicate about boundaries, and to identify and disclose abuse (Zhang et al., 2020; Kemer & Dalgıç, 2022). Visit your local library for age-appropriate books you can read with your children.[23]
- Teach children that it is healthy and natural to take an interest in their genitals and body, but that nudity and sexual play are private and should never occur in public.
- When teaching children about body safety, do not just stress strangers. A child is at far greater risk of abuse from family, friends, and acquaintances (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2022).[24]
- Teach your child the "underpants rule:" the "private" area of the body is covered by their underpants or swimsuit. It belongs to them alone. Others cannot touch or look there.[25] We must also respect other people's bodies and not touch or look at their private parts without their permission. This rule must also include the mouth.
- Teach OK and Not-OK touches (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2023b). An OK touch "is a way for people to show they care for and help each other - like when caregivers help with bathing or toileting, or when doctors and nurses check to make sure their body is healthy." A Not-OK touch "is one they don't like, hurts them, makes them feel uncomfortable, confused, scared, or one that has anything to do with private parts."
- Even trusted adults should ask before touching them. When you help your child get dressed, say "I'm going to button your shirt, okay?" You want to respect your preschooler's modesty and privacy even as you supervise their bathing, dressing, etc.
- If a trusted adult, such as a doctor, touches your child for a legitimate purpose but does not ask beforehand, you should discuss it with your child later to avoid their confusion. Indicate that you will pleasantly speak to the adult, so they do not repeat the mistake.

Inappropriate Touching; *I Said No! A Kid-to-kid Guide to Keeping Private Parts Private*; *Consent Ninja: A Children's Picture Book about Safety, Boundaries, and Consent*; *Consent (for Kids!): Boundaries, Respect, and Being in Charge of YOU*; *Let's Talk About Body Boundaries, Consent and Respect: Teach children about body ownership, respect, feelings, choices and recognizing bullying behaviors*; *Body Boundaries Workbook for Kids: Activities to Establish Personal Boundaries, Recognize Safe and Unsafe Touches, Say 'No', Understand Body Signals, and Identify Safety Network for Kids Ages 4-7*; A*n Exceptional Children's Guide to Touch: Teaching Social and Physical Boundaries to Kids*; *Body Safety Book for Kids: A Children's Picture Book about Personal Space, Body Bubbles, Safe Touching, Private Parts, Consent and Respect*; and *My Body Belongs to Me: A Book about Body Safety; C is for Consent*.

[22]According to a 2023 in the UK, 45% of male university students, and almost one-third of their female peers, said they could confidently locate the "nubis" on a woman's body. But it doesn't exist. It was entirely made up (Smith Galer, 2023).

[23]For diverse books on the body, see the recommendations by The Enough Abuse Campaign of Massachusetts.

[24] Still, see "Stranger Danger and Stranger Safety," Johns Hopkins Medicine.

[25]See, e.g., the well-known children's book by Kate and Rod Power, *My Underpants Rule*.

- You and other adults in the home should model proper behavior for bodily boundaries and privacy. Again, don't do the opposite of what you are teaching them.
- Work with your child to identify five or so trusted adults – you, their other parent, family friends, teachers, and so forth - they can speak to if anything happens to their body or makes them sad, worried, upset, frightened, or confused.
- Tell your children that they will never be punished for bringing to these trusted adults anything that makes them feel uncomfortable.
- Tell them, too, that it is never their fault if someone makes them do something involving their privates - even if that person says otherwise.
- The UK-based National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children suggests teaching about good and bad secrets. Good secrets are things like surprise parties. Bad secrets make you feel sad, worried, frightened, or uncomfortable. Your child should always talk to a trusted adult when anybody asks them to keep a bad secret.[26]
- Never force a child to accept or give physical affection, even to loving relatives. This includes hugs, kisses, touches, and sitting on laps. Let them control their body. You do not want children to think they must give up their body when asked by adults. (Instead of hugs and kisses, they can wave, high-five, blow a kiss, fist bump, etc.) You want to teach them not only about safety but also about consent.
- Link body safety to empathy. "You would not like it if someone grabbed you, pushed you, or touched your private parts without asking, so you should not do the same."
- If someone ever tries to touch your child's privates, or ask them to touch theirs, tell your child to firmly say "no," to try and run away as far and as fast as possible, and to find and tell a trusted or other adult. This is sometimes called the "No Go Tell" rule.
- It may be difficult, but we should not teach a child to scream during an abusive situation. That may provoke a violent response.
- Tell your child to speak to a trusted adult if anyone shows them a picture of a naked person or wants to take a picture of their private parts.
- Young children often mimic adult behaviors, including flirting. But your child does not have mature sexual intentions. There is no need to worry unless they imitate or talk about sex explicitly.
- If your child's behavior seems too explicit, try to learn if they have seen inappropriate screen content from a movie, digital game, or the internet. Did someone show them at home? At a friend's house? Do you have adult material on your devices that they could access? If so, we recommend removing it entirely.[27] If none of this seems likely, contact your pediatrician to learn if your child's behavior is a sign of abuse.
- When watching movies, videos, and media in general, criticize any representations that violate the basic rules you are teaching your children.
- Always let your children know that they can ask you for help about these matters at any time – when they do, make it a priority. Never dismiss their concerns.
- Review this material regularly and revise as necessary.

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[26]This is part of their PANTS rule for children, which is an acronym for Privates are private, Always remember your body belongs to you, No means no, Talk about secrets that upset you, Speak up, someone can help.
[27]See "Social Development in Preschoolers," American Academy of Pediatrics.

What to do if Your Child Sees Porn

Despite your best efforts at keeping your children safe from the harms of online pornography, the likelihood is that they will someday see it. They may even be exposed, as difficult as it is to contemplate, during their preschool years. Parents often ask for guidance (e.g., Dawson et al., 2024). In this section, we detail specific action steps.

Know that the best advice is to take a proactive approach and start building your child's resilience to pornography before they first encounter it - and certainly before they are given their first phone or online device. The guidelines below will help you frame age-appropriate conversations. After all, as children grow into tweens and teens, your influence on their online behavior decreases while the influence of their peers increases. So, act now – and often, too. This is not a "one and done" conversation.

To begin, we offer general guidelines on how to discuss pornography prevention with young children. Then, we turn to what to do if they have seen it. Our suggestions are driven by a range of research-driven sources.[28]

- Include pornography as part of your wider and ongoing conversations about online, digital, and bodily safety.
- Keep these conversations casual and brief. The attention span of a preschool child is a few minutes at best. Have a quick chat while walking, driving, or doing some activity.
- Be clear in your mind what you want to communicate. Maybe write it down. You only have a few minutes. If you stumble and say nothing concrete, you may leave your child more confused.
- Don't be so severe about the topic that you scare your child away from their curiosity about bodies, feelings, and the internet. Humor can help you both relax.
- If you make pornography a taboo subject, they may never come to you with questions and concerns. To lighten the conversation, you can talk about your own experiences as a young person – online mistakes you made, and what you learned.
- Reassure your child that if they ever see anything on a screen that makes them feel scared, confused, sad, or uncomfortable, they can speak with you. Emphasize that you will not get mad. A useful rule is, "If you are ever unsure about something you see on the screen, ask me."
- When they do bring to you any unpleasant online experiences, praise them for their honesty and for telling you.

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[28]Sources include Children's Commissioner for England (2021, 2023), various resources at CEOP Education (click on "Young people online"), Common Sense (2023), Children and Screens (2020, 2023); "Help and Advice: Digital Wellbeing," Childnet,; "Help and Advice: Online Pornography: Children & pre-teens," Childnet; "Keeping children safe online," NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children); "7 Strategies For When Your Child Accidentally Finds Pornography," Happy Families; "When your child sees online pornography," The Modern Parent; "(Free) Parents' Guide to Internet Pornography," Reward Foundation; "Talking to Your Kids About Pornography," Canada's Centre for Digital Media Literacy; "My Kid Watched Porn. What Do I Do?," Sheryl Ziegler; "I Found My Child Watching Inappropriate Videos," SI Parent. Note: There are many other useful websites and internet resources on this topic. Our only caveat is to make certain they are aligned with scientific and scholarly research.

- Explain that the online world, like the real world, has both safe and unsafe content. Most of the time, it is good and fun. But there is unsafe content. This includes violence, hate, scary things, making fun of other people, being mean, and pictures that show the private parts of bodies and naked people touching their private parts. This is called "pornography."[29]
- Make it clear that your child should not try to find pornography or other inappropriate types of pictures or videos. You can say, "I do not want you to see these kinds of pictures. If you do, it is not your fault. But, I want you to tell me so we can talk about it."
- Explain that pictures and videos of naked people and private parts might make children feel worried, scared, or sad.
- Say that these types of images are not healthy for anybody to see since they show people being unsafe, harming other people, touching bodies without asking permission, and not respecting others. It is not good to support activities that hurt people.
- You can explain that some things are for adults, like driving, kitchen knives, matches, and so forth, as well as pictures of naked bodies and people. These things are not safe for children since they could hurt themselves or others.
- You should teach your preschool child not to click on any links, websites, pop-up ads, and so forth without first asking a trusted adult.
- You should review the various settings on your devices and search engines, to turn off pop-up ads, autoplay, and so forth. Consider installing parental control software on your devices[30] and using child-friendly search engines.
- Make sure that your child cannot access any devices which would allow them to accidentally click on adult content. Similarly, when they visit friends or relatives, ask them to not leave screens lying around that the kids could use without supervision.
- Work with your kids to devise a positive plan of action for when they do come across inappropriate or disturbing content. For example: "If you see pictures of naked people, or something that you don't like, put down or turn away from the phone, table, laptop, or computer, walk away, and come find a trusted adult for help."
- The same guidelines apply if anybody tries to message or contact your preschool child, asks them to do anything with their body, or makes them feel uncomfortable – no matter how nice they might seem.[31] Remind them that you will never get mad at them for speaking to you about these things.
- Just as we discussed earlier for body safety, tell your child that they should come to you if any adult or child online asks or tells them to keep a secret – even if they say that you will get mad if you find out. You will never get mad if they bring this information to you.

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[29]A good picture book that you can read with your child is Kristen A. Jenson, *Good Pictures, Bad Pictures: A Simple Plan to Protect Young Minds* (Glen Cove Press, 2017).
[30]Culture Reframed has partnered with Canopy. But there are many others, too.
[31]When your children are older and using social media, you will add information on blocking offensive users, never forwarding naked content, reporting inappropriate posts to platform moderators, and so forth.

- Tell them, too, that they should never take photos or videos of their or anybody else's private parts. They should never send these kinds of pictures in messages or email. If anybody asks them to do this, or shares this kind of picture, they should immediately tell a trusted adult.
- Tell them that these are not just family rules, but in many cases, the law. They are intended to keep everybody safe. People who do these things need help so they no longer hurt others or themselves.

What should you do if your child does see online or digital pornography? Best practices suggest the following:

- Stay calm. Do not erupt in anger or horror. Try not to panic or shout. Take a few minutes – even longer - to settle your feelings so you can talk rationally and soothingly. The center of attention should not be your reaction, but how your child goes forward.
- It is critical not to be judgmental, blame, shame, or scold your preschool child. They did nothing wrong. Nor are they responsible for online content. You must not frighten them away from coming to you again with concerns about digital content or sexuality and relationships more generally. The American Academy of Pediatrics (2023a) reports that "teens with worse parent-child relationships and parents who have more of an authoritarian ("my way or the highway") style are more likely to intentionally seek out porn, so it can help to not overreact or make your child feel ashamed."
- Before you begin to speak, gauge your child's emotional state. Are they feeling upset, worried, scared, or confused? You should try to soothe any of their anxieties, so they feel safe and supported. Reassure them that they are not in trouble, too.
- To start the conversation, you can say, "I saw (or heard) you were looking at a video of naked people. I'm curious about that. Can you tell me how you found that video?" Or, "I am sorry you saw that because it's not safe for children to see that kind of video."
- Ask about their feelings at the time. "Can you tell me what you were feeling inside or thinking when you saw it? How did your body feel? What did you do afterward?" Ask them, too, if the images are coming back to them in their mind.
- Reassure them that whatever their feelings were at the time – scared, uncomfortable, curious, embarrassed, excited, repulsed, horrified, etc. – were normal. You should also say that pornography can create confusing feelings and odd sensations in their body. Validating their feelings will encourage them to come to you again. If you tell them that their feelings were bad or wrong, they may not do so.
- Ask how the exposure happened. Did they click on a link or pop-up ad? Were they looking for something online? Did a peer or another adult show them? This will help you together make a plan.
- You may be curious as to what they saw – or think they saw. You should not, however, press children to elaborate.[32] They do not have the language, understanding, or cognitive abilities, as we discussed earlier, to process these images like adults. If they

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[32]On this point, see Kristen A. Jenson, "Should Kids Describe the Porn They've Seen? Experts Advise Mom," Defend Young Minds.

found the images disturbing, moreover, you do not want to encourage dwelling on them.

- If your child is not immediately forthcoming in answering a question, or scared, you can return to it later. Be sure you do not show any frustration with them. You do not want your child to fear your reaction and so not come to you again.
- You do not want to imply that it is wrong, unhealthy, shameful, dangerous, or inappropriate for children to be interested in their own bodies or the bodies of others, as discussed above. The issue is not sexuality and nudity. It is pornography.
- How do you explain the difference to a preschooler? To paraphrase from the Department of Social Services of the Australian Government,[33] you could say:

> "Pornography is pictures or videos of grown-ups who are naked and often touching their private parts. Pornography isn't real life, however. It's a kind of make-believe, like a movie, that shows people acting weirdly and often hurting each other. It's not good for anybody to watch people hurting others. It is also not good to watch people doing private things or to look at their private parts and naked bodies without asking their permission." You can also explain that OK pictures show people kissing and hugging, say, at a family celebration. "But pictures of people doing things without their clothes on are not OK for children to see. It can even be scary and upset you."

- Stress that pornography shows people doing things to each other without asking permission, and so breaks the rules about privacy, touching, and control over our own bodies that help keep us safe.
- Pornography often shows violence. You can say it is: people hurting each other. Pornography tries to make what is hurtful seem normal and okay. But it is not.
- Say that pornography is fake. It lies about what real people do in real relationships. It does not show love, caring, or respecting feelings.
- Say that most adults do not act like that.
- You may also want to say that most adults do not look like that. "You will someday grow to look like an adult and have an adult's body – but your body will not look like the bodies in pornography. They have fake bodies."
- Remember that preschool children, as discussed earlier, do not understand adult sexuality and are also not good with ambiguity. Nuanced conversations about sex and eroticism can happen when they are older. Your goal now is to protect them from pornography.
- It may be appropriate, depending on what they have seen, to also say that pornography is especially unhealthy for girls and women. It does not treat them with respect or treat men and women equally.
- Your child may have questions about sex and relationships, especially if they have seen pornography. You may need to talk about why people have sex and get naked

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[33] "Pornography: Talking with children 7-8 years." Another helpful resources by the same department is "Preschoolers: Media & Technology."

together. For assistance, we again recommend visiting the [Culture Reframed website](#) and asking for help finding suitable books that you can read together with your child. This way, too, your child will see you as someone who helps them find answers to questions.

- It is critical to expand the conversation to media literacy. You can discuss the differences between acting and reality, and truth and falsehood. Watch television together to talk about the commercials – how they make things look better than they really are, and people using them seem happy, in order to get people to buy them.
- You can also say that it is not healthy to watch pornography because you then might try someday to repeat what you see.[34] "Then you would be hurting people, too."
- Make it clear, at the end of any conversation, that it is not okay to watch porn.
- But remember that children lack fully developed "executive functioning," as noted above, and so they will make mistakes. If they do err, tell them to please inform you and that you will not get angry. You will thank them for their honesty and taking responsibility, and discuss with them how to avoid a repeat mistake.
- Should you punish a preschool child for a mistake? No. A conversation is far more effective, even when they are older. Taking away devices does not build trust or reinforce communication. Fear of this happening is a major reason why adolescents and teens do not speak to parents about disturbing content.
- End these conversations by asking, "Do you have any questions about what you saw – of what we talked about?" As always, answer truthfully, but not inappropriately, and visit the [Culture Reframed website](#) with your child if you don't know the answer.
- If you have reason to think that your child has had an abusive online encounter, is seriously traumatized by screen content, or becomes unusually obsessed with violence or pornography, seek out a licensed mental health professional for yourself and your child. Your pediatrician can advise you.
- One final and obvious point: If you don't want your kid to view porn, then you shouldn't either.

Conclusion

How should parents and caretakers respond when young children come across online pornography? Researchers at Culture Reframed have distilled the best practices into a simple guide called "[COMPOSE](#)." The model reiterates many of the above suggestions. It consists of:

CALM. Avoid overreacting. Slow your breathing. Collect your thoughts before speaking with a child so you act with purpose and not react from fear or shock.

OWNERSHIP. The pornography industry wants to rob your child's rightful ownership over their own body and sexuality in order to make a profit. You need to take control of the situation and your child's safety. Stay engaged, clarify the details of what happened, find out if anyone else was involved, and assess the risks.

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[34]For evidence of this, see "[A Conversation with Culture Reframed Clinical Consultant Heidi Olson](#)," 2023.

MOOD. Explore how the exposure impacted your child. Let them know that their feelings are a normal reaction rather than anything to be ashamed about.

PARENT. Pornography can traumatize a child. Ensure they feel supported, comfortable, and safe in order for them to talk about what happened and ask you questions.

OVERRIDE. Your child did not cause this situation. Nor did technology or the internet. The multi-billion-dollar porn industry did. Override their power with positive actions and empathic listening.

STRATEGY. Develop a plan to prevent further exposure and to refute the unrealistic and harmful messages of porn about sex, bodies, consent, and violence. That plan can include guidance from your pediatrician or a licensed therapist.

EVALUATE. Check in with your child regularly. A "one and done" conversation will not help them build resistance and resilience to pornography and inappropriate screen content. It is a long-term project to guide children to develop the skills to make healthy decisions. They should know that you will partner with them.

The COMPOSE model is intended, like this research report, to equip parents and caregivers with the tools to help provide our youngest digital citizens with safe online and off-line environments.

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