

CONNECTED

How Strong Family Relationships Lead
To Internet-Safe Kids

Get our 7 day email challenge by texting HOME to 66866

Foreword

When we recognize the value of being connected, opportunities arise for our families to grow together. Our families contain the most important people in our lives, and though we may experience times of disconnection, there is hope that we can experience the profound closeness that we all desire!

In this book, we are going to focus on a few key relationships.

God. In order to connect with ourselves and others, we first need to connect with God. He is the one who knows us best. Through our relationship with God we learn to be truly human, fully ourselves, while being in relationship with others.

Ourselves. In order for us to connect with others well, we must be connected to ourselves. Grounding ourselves in who we are, as children of God, will help us develop healthy relationships with others.

Our spouses. Strong marriages make happy parents, which makes happy children. When the relationship between husband and wife is strong, open, and selfless, that connection flows throughout the rest of the family.

Our children. We were created to bond with our children. When children feel seen and heard by their parents, they

are able to connect with God, themselves, and others in a healthy and positive way.

This book is the third of a three-book set published by Covenant Eyes. These books are essential for parenting in today's culture:

- ***Equipped: Raising Godly Digital Natives***
- ***Confident: Helping Parents Navigate Online Exposures***

These two ebooks are available in English and Spanish, for both Catholics and Protestants.

To download Equipped, go to <http://info.covenanteyes.com/equipped-raising-godly-digital-natives-ebook>. To download Confident, go to <http://www.covenanteyes.com/when-your-child-is-looking-at-porn/>

Connected, which is the book you are currently reading, is the third book in this series. It is written to be a proactive resource that explores how a strong family connection can protect children and teens from the dangers of hidden pornography use.

One thing is certain: technology cannot provide the close, personal connection a person deeply desires and *needs*. Over the next few chapters, you will gain insight from real-life stories and receive practical tips for maintaining or re-establishing connection in your family.

It is our hope that this resource will reaffirm your desire for connection and strengthen your family against the assaults of pornography.

The Covenant Eyes Team

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Getting Started

Covenant Eyes has created the *Safe Digital Family Challenge* to use with this book. To sign up, **text HOME to 66866**. We'll wait....

All set up? Great! Now, let's begin.

Introduction

The Problem of Disconnection

Patrick (not his real name) contacted me for guidance and prayer related to issues he was having in his marriage. Even though he had only been married a few years, he and his wife were already dealing with constant fights that made the honeymoon phase less than blissful. The slow rise of despair in him was worrisome. Patrick was struggling with his reactions to his wife during their fights. He found himself feeling confused, frustrated, angry, and lonely.

I told him how impressed I was with his honesty and courage for wanting to make his marriage better. He loved his wife and sincerely desired to reconnect with her. When he asked me how he could get his wife to sit down and talk to me, I just smiled. Patrick didn't yet realize that God's plan was to first work with him and his own struggles.

Patrick and I began with prayer, asking God to bring to light the source of his struggles. To Patrick's surprise, that prayer helped him remember that around eleven years old, he inadvertently viewed pornography on the family computer. As he



I told him how impressed I was with his honesty and courage

told me the story, he began to re-experience the feelings from that day. Patrick placed his elbows on his knees and covered his face with both of his hands. He said that moment changed the trajectory of his life. Unbeknownst to his parents, Patrick's early exposure got him hooked on pornography. His viewing lasted into marriage. He allowed a few tears to fall as he experienced the weight of shame that he carried.

I encouraged Patrick to stay, just for a moment, in the memory of the first day he saw pornography. I invited him to find Jesus in the room with him. As many of us would, he pictured Jesus sitting on a throne high above him with a look of disappointment on His face.

I expressed to Patrick that Jesus was not disappointed in him! I whispered, "Patrick, when Jesus saw you, he wanted to scoop you in His arms rather than condemn you. He wanted to hold you close, and tell you that He loves you. He wanted to tell you that what you saw unintentionally wasn't your fault."

Still bent over and visualizing the scene, Patrick saw and felt Jesus' heart for him. As Patrick let love sink into his own heart, I witnessed a physical change. His hands dropped from his face, and he leaned back, relieved.

Negative events in a person's life, such as Patrick's first exposure to pornography, can be a place of disconnection

with God. Patrick's first image of an angry, disapproving Jesus was an image contrary to the truth. It is not uncommon for us to entertain false ideas about who God is and who we are, especially since pornography creates so many lies.

The Lies You Tell Yourself

Watching pornography introduced a high level of shame in Patrick, which led him to hide from God. I introduced Patrick to the idea that when bad things happen to us, lies are sown into our hearts. When I asked him to think about what those lies may be for him, he shared the following:

- I can't tell anyone.
- There is something wrong with me.
- No one can know the real me.
- I can't be forgiven.

That day, Patrick renounced those lies so they wouldn't continue to have power over him. He forgave himself for believing those lies for so long. And, he took the extra step of forgiving his parents for leaving him unprotected online.

Disconnection with Parents

Patrick shared with me that at one point during his middle-school years, his mother walked in on him viewing pornography. Shocked, his mother scolded him: “You should be ashamed of yourself. These images are gross and disgusting! No woman is ever going to like you if you do that. Do you know how bad this is? I better never find you doing this again.”

As an adult, Patrick easily forgave his mother for her outburst because he knew that she had no idea how shaming him in that moment would have long-term effects on how he felt about himself. Out of fear and unintentionally, Patrick’s mother had created a disconnect between the two of them. The way she spoke to him became his inner voice. Because of that reaction, his inner voice coincided with the lies he was already telling himself, which, in turn, solidified and anchored themselves as permanent fixtures in Patrick’s vision of himself and the world around him.

Parents who have a shame-based approach to parenting often find it difficult to repair parent-child relationships. After the encounter with his mother, Patrick never shared his continued use of pornography with anyone, which set up a conflicting “triple life” within him:

- **The truth:** God loves Patrick as His son, no matter what he does. (Patrick didn’t know this as an eleven year old, but it was still true.)

- **The lie:** Patrick saw himself as unforgivable and unlovable.
- **The facade:** Patrick portrayed himself as perfect to others.

Patrick was able to maintain two sides of himself: the “pornography viewing” Patrick and the facade of perfection. But once Patrick got married, the two “selves” collided.

Disconnection with Spouse

The reality of married life is that it tends to quickly reveal faults and uncover incongruencies. Patrick’s wife could sense, even if she couldn’t articulate it, that Patrick was holding back. Their relationship was being frustrated by Patrick’s inability to be vulnerable. His lack of vulnerability was tied to a lie that “no one can know the real me, because if they did, they would reject me.”

The truth is that relationships of any kind require vulnerability, which opens us up to the possibility of pain, especially emotional pain. As C.S. Lewis wrote in *The Four Loves*:¹

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round

with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.

In order to overcome loneliness and disconnection and form meaningful relationships, vulnerability becomes a prerequisite. Allowing yourself to be seen, especially the places that hurt, turns the pain to joy. Brené Brown, a professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work who specializes in social connection, offers a resounding message: “Courage starts with showing up and letting ourselves be seen.”²

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Patrick courageously revealed to his wife his childhood experiences with pornography. He was able to share the lies that took root from those experiences and the restoration he found through prayer ministry. Having shared his story, she came to understand his struggles with intimacy.

Disconnected and Unrestricted

Patrick’s story is not unique. Disconnection and exposure to pornography can happen to anyone and at any age,

and with the advent of smartphones and tablets, it happens at younger and younger ages.

As a mother of preteen girls, I am in close contact with their friends and moms. Recently, while driving a carload of girls home from a sporting event, the girls started to talk about what it's like when they come home after school. Olivia (not her real name), a sixth-grader, chimed in. After school, she drops her backpack at the door, grabs a snack, and heads to her room. She shuts the door and flops on her bed and binge-watches Netflix.



Sometime after seven, her mom texts her that dinner is ready. She brings her iPad with her knowing that she will eat alone. She said it doesn't bother her that the iPad is her company during her meal. Sometimes she FaceTimes her best friend while she eats, but she primarily texts and entertains herself with Instagram. The reason for eating alone, she says, is because each family member is doing their "own thing". Her mom is exhausted from a busy day at work and is holding down the family while her husband travels extensively for his job. Her mom retreats to her own bedroom to relax by looking at Facebook and watching shows. Her oldest brother is either out with his friends or working. Her younger brother

is usually playing *Grand Theft Auto* (a violent video game) in his room.

In retrospect, after hearing Olivia's story, it became clearer why I was noticing changes in her. She was dressing more provocatively, she was not making eye contact like she used to, and I noticed that her friends were pulling away from her. I asked Olivia's mom how she thought her daughter was doing. Her mom was immediately defensive, telling me that quite a few families have stopped allowing their daughters to hang out with Olivia because of her behavior and unrestricted online access, which the mom thought was ridiculous.

Olivia didn't say that her online activity had led her to pornography, but that was certainly a possibility, and the reality of her disconnection with family members left Olivia vulnerable to many online and offline dangers. When we feel alone, we fill the void with other people and/or things, and this grasping, especially for Olivia with unrestricted access to the internet and feeling disconnected from her family, will leave us at risk for a variety of online dangers.

Olivia's situation seems to be more common than what we would like to believe.

In 2016, a large U.S. Catholic high school anonymously surveyed the majority of their male students on pornography use. A high percentage of pornography consumption by high school students happens on smartphones (57%), in the

bedroom (61%), and/or when they're bored (48%). Only 11% of the students said they did not watch pornography at all.³

These statistics should be deeply disturbing to us. The Olivias of today become the Patricks of tomorrow, struggling in their relationships with God and others. There is a whole host of research showing how pornography impacts people psychologically and neurologically. A person who watches pornography is hard-wiring themselves to bond to porn, not a spouse. They learn to see others as body parts, not people. (For more details, see the Appendix and the recommended resources at the end of this book.) And with the prevalence of smartphones and tablets, the likelihood of stumbling across pornography at an early age is becoming greater and greater.

Patrick and Olivia are two of millions of children who are affected by an epidemic of disconnection and an increase of inadvertent exposure to pornography that will have very serious repercussions on their lives. The troubling fact is that many parents do not even realize that their family is in a hidden crisis. But what are we to do as a parent?



On the internet, porn is the norm. Learn how to protect your home by signing up for *The Safe Digital Family Challenge*.

Text HOME to 66866 today!

01.

Made to Connect

The Original Connection

For ten years, I was an executive director of a teen girls leadership program, and subsequently became a spiritual mentor to many of them. Discovering the inner world of a teenager's heart was one of the most amazing experiences of my life. Teens deeply desire to know who they are and how to authentically connect with others.

In an effort to explain their desire for connection, I would often facilitate an activity called "The Trinity." Three volunteers were assigned to represent the three persons of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The teens positioned themselves in a way that they thought best represented how the Trinity exists from all eternity. After several attempts they usually ended up facing each other in a circle with their arms



around each other's backs, pulling each other close. Approving cheers would erupt from the audience, and it was clear that their spirits recognized and actually *felt* the love of the Trinity in that image.

God is a relationship! And we were made like Him—for relationship. From a purely biological perspective, the human body reveals this truth. How do we know? As an individual, we have biological systems that can function autonomously, like digestion or breathing. However, our reproductive systems are incomplete. The male body does not make sense without the female body, and the female body does not make sense without the male. A natural reality, like our bodies, points to a profound truth that we were made for one another.

After my students formed a tight circle for the Trinity, two people were chosen to represent Adam and Eve.

Adam and Eve wanted to be in the center of the Trinity, of course! They loved it in the center of the Trinity and said it felt “warm, close, whole, and protected.”

The two portraying Adam and Eve were then invited to place themselves in relation to the Trinity *after* the Fall. Adam and Eve slipped out from underneath the Trinity’s arms, and the pair, who had been holding hands, let go of each other too. They walked to different sides of the room and faced away from each other. By doing this, the teens illustrated a profound truth: the disconnection from God and others is real. When asked how they felt about their new positions, they would say things like, “cold, sad, unprotected, exposed, and lonely.”

When God made a helpmate for Adam, the relationship between people began. But when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, the relationship between man and God, and between man and woman, was broken.

Brené Brown says, “A deep sense of love and belonging is an irresistible need of all people. You are biologically, cognitively, physically, and spiritually wired to love, to be loved, and to belong. When these needs are not met, you don’t



function as you you are meant to. You break. You fall apart. You numb. You ache. You hurt others. You get sick.”⁴

Loneliness is the longing for connection.

When a spouse or child feels like they do not belong in their family, they suffer loneliness and inner distress. Over time, lonlienss may be transformed into depression and other negative feelings. Left untreated, they could lead to hostile or delinquent behaviors and further develop into addictive behaviors in the future. Each person’s experience of being either loved and accepted or lonely and rejected is different. However, each child is yearning for connection.

“A connected childhood is a key to happiness,” says Edward Hallowell, M.D., a child psychiatrist and author of *The Childhood Roots of Adult Happiness*.⁵ Dr. Halloyoull points to the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. Studying some 90,000 teens, “connectedness” —a feeling of being loved, understood, wanted, and acknowledged—emerged as, by far, the biggest protector against emotional distress, suicidal thoughts, and risky behaviors including smoking, drinking, and using drugs.

Assume They Want To Connect

As children grow, it becomes more difficult to stay connected. Adolescents undergo physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual growth spurts. As teens move

toward more independence, the parent/child relationship also often changes. More conflicts and less time together may make us feel less connected with our kids. Sometimes we get as far as “How was your day?” and end up satisfied with “I’m fine.”

Technology creates an additional challenge. Parents are often concerned with how to handle their teen’s privacy. We may worry about invading our children or teen’s privacy by being too intrusive, but when we pull away to give them privacy, we make it more difficult for our children to come to us when they have a need. I can’t tell you how many conversations I’ve had with teens who have told me, through tears, that they miss the connection that they used to have with their parents. I remember a freshman girl telling me that she missed her dad so much because he traveled extensively. When his chair at the dinner table was empty, she felt a sense of loss. I asked her if she told her parents about her sadness, and she said no, “that it wouldn’t matter to them anyway.” Now, I don’t believe that is true, but that is the lie she was telling herself. A few years have passed since she confided her struggles with her absent father to me. Today, she’s struggling with anxiety and depression, potentially from bottling up the feelings of loss.

Even out of their teens, young adults struggle with the distance between themselves and their parents. I spent time working with an eighteen-year-old young man who was fighting and losing his battle with pornography.

He was suffering from the weight of shame and guilt, which drove him further into loneliness. He told me that because of his age, he felt alone in trying to find a solution. He did not have a close relationship with his parents, yet confessed he wished that he could tell them how much he's hurting. Isolation and helplessness echoed in his voice. If his parents knew how lonely he felt, I knew they would certainly do whatever it took to help him.

The Institute for Family Studies reports that:

Among teens, loneliness, isolation, despair, and depression appear to be increasing, along with rates of teen suicide. Concerns over these trends have led many to ask, "What's changed?" Some factors seem to be tied to how technology has changed our world. Teen access to mobile devices is approaching 100%, and near constant connectivity is a reality of teen development. For at least some teens, disappearing into their devices may be linked to negative emotional, identity, and relationship health.

Much has been said about how social media and gaming may contribute to feelings of isolation and loneliness among teens and

young adults. For some teens, a significant amount of screen time is also spent accessing pornography, which may also be a significant contributor to teen loneliness, isolation, and relationship void.⁶

Our children want to connect with us even if it may not feel like it. They long for our presence and our comfort and guidance in their lives. When our children are young, they don't always have the words to express how they are feeling or what they need from us. Sometimes they have the words to communicate it, but we may not be available proximately or emotionally. Even as they grow into young adulthood, children want to connect with us authentically and frequently.

02.

Preparing Ourselves to Connect

Being engaged as parents is crucial for our children's wellbeing for a number of reasons. One study found that 87% of people struggling with sexual compulsions in adulthood came from a disengaged family system.⁷ When we as parents withdraw, even if we think we're doing it to protect their privacy or to give them freedom, counselor Jay Stringer reports:

Children grow up with a profound sense that they are not prepared for the world they are encountering and roam through life never fully knowing they are loved and delighted in. These children learn that life is not found within a

family but outside one. In adulthood, this belief remains operative. These adults may be in marriages or committed relationships, but they can never trust them to offer what their hearts so desperately desire.⁸

As parents, we recognize this to be true and important. And we must start by preparing *ourselves* to engage.

More of What You are Made For

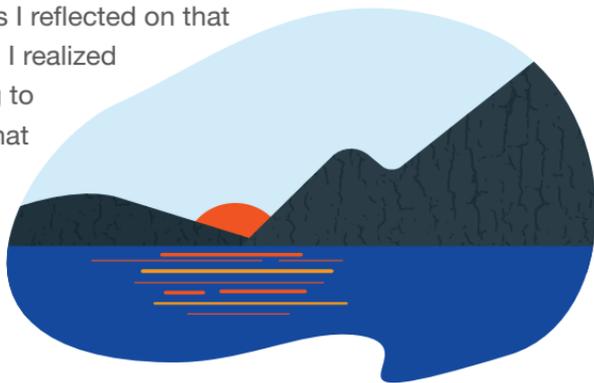
Becoming more aware of our thoughts and feelings allows us to parent more consciously and avoid projecting our own emotional needs onto our children. Being in tune with ourselves allows us to recognize when lies are entering into our thoughts and when they are affecting our emotions. Changing our habits to create a warm, welcoming place for our children to come to when life gets hard or when they make a mistake will help our families connect more quickly and successfully while creating an environment more conducive to healing and growth.

I recently read an article about a mom, a self-professed iPhone addict, who put her phone down for an entire week. She observed:

It started innocently enough. I would check email throughout the day, mostly for work.

Soon I found myself checking Facebook first thing in the morning and sneaking peeks at my blog before going to bed. Eventually I reached the point where I'd even check my weather app for a fix. It became common for me to hollowly promise my children "just one more minute" while sitting in the grocery store parking lot, the children strapped impatiently in their car seats, while I desperately scrolled past LinkedIn invitations and kitchenware sales, looking for something I couldn't define.⁹

A few months ago, I was at a gorgeous North Georgia estate looking out at a large lake. As the sun was falling in the sky, vibrant colors of reds and oranges reflected off the lake. Wooded mountains filled in the background. Taking in the serenity and beauty of the moment, I wanted more. I wanted to grasp, hold, keep it. I was left longing for more. I wanted to fold up the experience, put it in my pocket and keep it forever. Later, as I reflected on that beautiful scene, I realized that I was trying to find in the gift that which can only be found in the giver.



Just think about how most of us scroll through information on our phones. Only one more picture. One more message. One more “like.” Just one more. But our children, waiting to play ball in the back yard, are a gift that can never be exhausted. The connection we will find in our children far outweighs what we can find on our phone any day. That amazing *something* we’re looking for in our phone is actually in our real life relationships—our spouses, our kids, our friends—but we feel that these demand more of us than our phones do.

Too Busy

Have you ever had a moment when you wondered if this is all there is or how you got to this point in your life? Or, have you wondered why do you feel so disconnected? We wake up and turn on auto-pilot in a world that continues to demand more.

“Busy” used to be a sufficient word to describe an average day, but as of late, “busy” isn’t enough on its own to describe how we feel. “So busy,” “too busy,” “exhausted,” “overwhelmed,” or “buried.” It is important to take a moment to reflect on our own busyness:

- Do I exhaust myself by doing things exactly right so that I won’t be criticized?
- Do I work to the point that it negatively affects my family in order to be noticed or valued?

- Do I spend hours on my physical appearance (exercising, dressing perfectly, etc.) in order to be liked or feel accepted?
- Do I involve my children in every possible extracurricular activity in order to look like a good mom or dad?
- Am I burned out because if I stay busy, I will feel less anxious?

Does your worth come from what you do? Are you trying to earn love and acceptance?

Busyness can be a distraction from deeper feelings or a more profound reality that needs to be dealt with. However, regardless of the reason, working ourselves to exhaustion is not healthy. Father Henri Nouwen understood that:

exhaustion, burnout, and depression are not signs that you are doing God's will. God is gentle and loving... Once you have allowed yourself to experience that love fully, you will be better able to discern who you are being sent to in God's name.¹⁰

The Past is in the Present

Consider for a moment the last time you lost your temper with your children. What was happening? Did your three-year-old hit another child, or your oldest child accidentally slam the youngest child's fingers in the door because she was reckless?

Our little ones—and big ones—have the power to push our buttons. Most parents have “lost it” with their children at some point. It happens! We should not criticize ourselves for creating a disconnection point. Instead, by reflecting on the “why” behind losing our cool, we can proactively keep that outburst from happening again.

Sometimes, when our emotions flash out of nowhere, it may mean that we have discovered a hurt part of ourselves. These intense feelings can often surprise us. According to psychotherapist Sandra Flear, “A past hurt can stem from any experience where the relational support to be able to process and shed the feelings at the time they occur wasn't there.”¹¹ These hurt-forming experiences can happen to our children at any time, anywhere, and include a variety of events like encountering an aggressive dog, living with tense or distracted parents, experiencing yelling, bullying, rejection, and more.

When a child experiences a painful or confusing event, and they don't have the opportunity or help to process the emotions, those unprocessed feelings remain.

Often this happens on a subconscious level. Now that you are a parent, you may still have unprocessed emotions from childhood. If you find yourself acting harshly, yelling, threatening, or harmfully reacting to a child's behavior and later feel guilty for the overreaction, you may have a past hurt.

Think of these overreactions as an opportunity. They are an invitation to pause and ask God, "What are you trying to heal in me?" What a powerful prayer! He may bring to mind a memory, and you may feel the emotions again. Just calmly remain with Him there and ask Him to heal it. More difficult memories can best be processed with someone who can accompany you, like a counselor or spiritual director.

People don't usually like to work through these tough emotions, but we experience fewer and less intense feelings when interacting with our children if we are willing to work on ourselves. As parents, these memories can get stirred up merely from something a child says or does. All unhealed emotions from the past are still in the present until they are healed.



Are you creating an environment of connection in your home? Learn how with *The Safe Digital Family Challenge*.

To sign up, text HOME to 66866.

03.

Connected to Your Spouse

The connection between husband and wife is the first and foremost relationship in a family. It is the relationship from which everything else arises. This relationship is the first and most intimately witnessed relationship for the child. The habits exhibited between spouses—good or bad—will influence the relationships a child forms more than any other relationship. According to Gary Chapman and David Code, connection between spouses is arguably more important than relationship between parent and child. Gary Chapman explains:

For over 30 years, I have been sitting in the counseling office listening to couples pour

out their pain. For me, nothing has been sadder than those couples who have focused on parenting their children while neglecting their marriages. They were deluded into thinking that the best thing they could do was to seek to meet the children's needs. Yet, they failed to recognize that when they didn't meet each other's needs, they were setting the worst of examples for their children.¹²

David Code, author of *To Raise Happy Kids, Put Your Marriage First*, posits that children need less attention while marriages should be given more. He states:

I think today's parents are trying to provide the perfect trauma-free childhood, so that their children can grow up without any of the problems that you and I take for granted. And I don't think that's possible. All of us suffer; suffering is part of life. So what happens when parents try to create this perfect childhood? The parents aren't having fun; they're anxious and exhausted. The kids aren't having fun, they're anxious and troubled and entitled. What I'm looking for is a balance. In many families, it almost seems like we're marrying our kids

instead of our spouses. We think it's a child-friendly, great way to go. But what we're doing is escaping our relationships; relationships are hard, and it's so easy to throw yourself into parenting instead. It becomes almost a flight response from your spouse, and that's where I think the problem lies.¹³

Rather, Daniel L. Buccino explains, "The most important relationship in any family is the marital one, and the best thing parents can do for their children is to love one another."¹⁴

A Love Worth Emoji-ing For

My husband and I were in the midst of a pointless argument when he frustratedly suggested that I buy an emoji magnet to put on the refrigerator. He told me that I look the same on the outside regardless of my internal emotional state. He theorized that if he could visualize what's going on inside, then we would be able to communicate better.

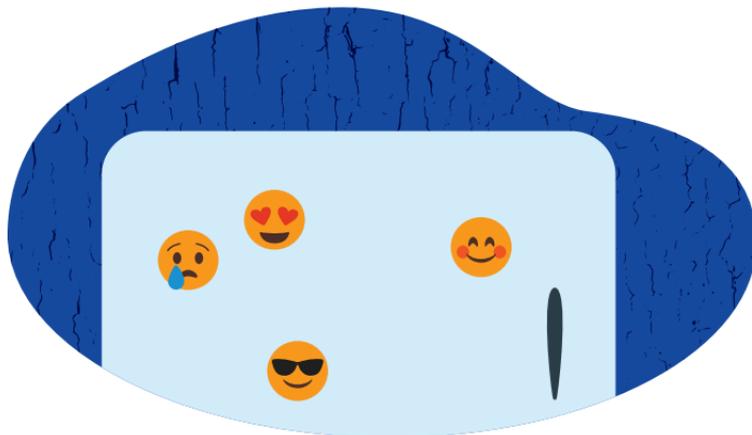
Though offended at the absurd suggestion, Amazon delivered the perfect solution within two days. The background of the magnet says, "Today, I feel..." and I can add one of the *fifty* separate emoji magnets that fits my mood. Sometimes the emoji magnet stays the same

all day. Some days the magnet changes from blushing to one-tear face to heart-eyes with a matter of a few hours.

Our new communication tool worked! My husband would notice the change in emojis and would inquire about how I was feeling. He would approach the refrigerator and say from behind the open doors, “So, what’s going on? You have the sunglasses emoji up.” My favorite was, “Melissa, what does this emoji even *mean*?”

Although the initial purchase of the magnets was out of frustration, it helped us communicate better and allowed us to respond with kindness, affection and support. It helped us to feel connected.

Making an effort to be transparent with our spouses about how we are feeling is a major step in connection. Being able to explain to one another what we need can be difficult, but



taking steps to build communication in small ways allows us to get a glimpse of what's going on inside of one another rather than making assumptions.

Disconnected by Pornography

While there are many ways to build the connection between spouses, there are just as many or more ways to disconnect. Pornography is an extremely powerful problem that continues to disconnect spouses. Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend explain:

Marriage is the soil of parenting. Basically, the more warmth and love between you and your spouse, the happier and healthier your child is. The more alienated your relationship, the more your child can be affected. It is much like growing plants. If the soil you use is rich, fertile, and full of good ingredients, the plant will most likely flourish. However, if the soil is depleted, empty, neglected, or has toxins in it, the plant will show that also.¹⁵

A close friend of mine, Jennifer (not her real name), disclosed to me about a year ago that her husband's attitude toward her and their children had changed. He had become angry,

distant, and increasingly disrespectful to her. She would tell me often that he wasn't the man she married long ago and that she had no idea what was causing his slow, downward spiral.

A few weeks ago, I received a panic-stricken call from Jennifer. Through her trembling voice she told me that she picked up her husband's iPad from the night stand and curiously unlocked it. When she clicked on Safari, she found pornography—lots of it. Her world was crumbling underneath her feet, and she repeated over and over, "What did I do wrong? I stay home with our kids. I do everything for my family. He hates me. I'm not good enough for him. Why is he doing this to me?" She felt shock, betrayal, hurt, anger and confusion.

Jennifer sent him an email from the iPad with some still shots of what she found. Immediately upon receiving the email, her husband called, but she refused to answer the phone. She couldn't stomach hearing his voice. Debating on what to do next, she vacillated between her sleeping in the guest room forever or putting his suitcase on the front porch. Her heart was shattered.

When he came home that night, Jennifer was already in the guest bedroom and he did not even try to talk to her. They both went to their separate beds, lonely and desperate for help.

The next day she got up the courage to tell him that they were going to get Covenant Eyes on all their phones, iPads, and computers. He agreed and they are now moving toward healing the wounds in their family.

Jennifer is not alone. A survey published in 2016 found that divorce rates doubled when a husband started watching pornography, and tripled when the wife started watching.¹⁶

If you find yourself in a similar situation as Jennifer in your marriage, there is hope to rebuild and grow trust. Because the topic of pornography use is so serious, I recommend that you visit **covenanteyes.com**. There's an extensive blog that addresses topics and answers questions such as:

- Sex isn't the solution to your husband's porn problem.
- Can you be really free from porn?
- 3 Tools every marriage needs to fight porn addiction
- Rebuilding trust and respect in your marriage
- When fantasy invades your marriage
- 12 secret ways porn changed our marriage
- Hope after porn

Part of spouses knowing each other fully means being open about how we use our devices and having access to our spouse's activity. In other words, it is not that we're spying on each other, but that we are open books about what we do. The best way to do this is through an accountable relationship, best achieved online through Covenant Eyes software. Spouses (or other chosen allies) receive accountability reports from each other, which provide highly blurred screenshots of device activity. It's blurred enough that you can't read anything, but clear enough that you can tell if something truly inappropriate went on. Again, this software helps us think more critically about how we use the web and allows us as a couple to support each other as we draw closer to God and an eternity with him in Heaven. Covenant Eyes bridges the gap between relationships and technology. In today's high-tech age, this is an indispensable tool to support marriage and family life.



Covenant Eyes monitors the screens of your devices and identifies potentially pornographic images. These are highly blurred and sent to a parent or ally to talk about where people actually struggled. Learn more at www.covenanteyes.com.

(It is important to note that in the case of one partner's habitual porn use, Covenant Eyes does not encourage spouses to serve as one another's sole ally. While the spouse has the right to know as much as they need to know to feel safe, it is usually better for both partners' recovery for them to work together to pick a neutral third party to receive the porn user's accountability reports and to take point in encouraging healthier behaviors.)

Being a Soft Place to Land

Recently, I had an enlightening, heart-convicting conversation with a man about his pornography use and his marriage. I asked my friend, "Let's say you fall into viewing pornography. What happens when you tell your wife and ask for forgiveness?" His immediate response was, "It's terrible." Curious about the strong reaction, I asked him to tell me more about his objections. He went on to say that it's complicated for men to be vulnerable with their wives because wives are not typically a safe place for men to share their struggles, emotions, fears, and mistakes.

That idea was not surprising to me. As wives, we *deeply* desire to be emotionally close and connected to our husbands, but when it comes to pornography, that struggle can be excruciating.

How does it feel to know he *wants* to be close, he *wants* to share his deeper feelings, but is scared to?

My friend explained that he and other husbands try to share their faults and failings and even ask for forgiveness, but their words are used against them in the future. He wondered, “Why can’t wives just forgive and move on? When women bring up their husband’s faults, the men are driven back to their “emotional cave,” as he put it. He said six months might go by, and the husband comes out of the cave to re-connect again, but he ends up getting burned.

That’s when I said, “She keeps bringing up your stuff after you’ve apologized because she is still hurting. It’s hard for wives to ‘move on’ and ‘let it go’ because our husband’s pornography use is painful. His pornography use makes us feel like we are not good enough. Until true healing has taken place in our hearts, and in the marriage, we can’t let it go.”

So then, how *do* you become a soft place to land for your spouse?

Men desire a soft place to land. Women’s hearts can be guarded against past hurts, mistrust, and cultural lies. Yet, they are told to be strong, in control, and independent. Women feel that they need to be a rock both in and outside the home. They desire to be in control of the family, their spouse... everything, and it creates rigidity. When is the last time you wanted to rest your head on a rigid pillow?

I’ve been married for over twenty-four years, and there was a moment, almost six years ago, when I asked God to heal

me in all the places that I needed His touch, to heal the past hurts, the mistrust, the lies. I took my soul in for an overhaul! And it's only recently that I started to become the wife my husband needs and deserves.

But women *also* desire a soft place to land. They need a place where they can feel their feelings safely, even when their feelings have to do with their husbands' sin. Men and women both need to learn to listen to each other's pain without reacting to it. When we fail, we need to be prepared to apologize. If the sin involves habitual pornography use, remember to look not just the porn user's recovery, but the spouse's as well. Covenant Eyes encourages both husbands and wives to seek professional guidance on how to do this well. In addition, search **www.covenanteyes.com** for "boundaries" for helpful resources on creating safe spaces within your marriage.



Perhaps you can start to see how we can so quickly become disconnected. Husbands' and wives' needs and desires are so similar, yet find it difficult to find each other in the dark.

When husbands and wives work together to be a soft place for each other to land in times of vulnerability, they are able to understand each other better. With the ups and downs that life presents, having a spouse who we can be vulnerable with strengthens our connection with each other. The positive habits and practices that grow from this connection will then bear fruit in the family as a whole.

04.

Connecting With Your Children

Children grow up fast. It may not seem that way when our nine-month-old cries all night because their first tooth is erupting or our two-year-old has a diaper blowout. But by the time he blows out nine candles on their birthday cake, he's halfway to eighteen.

The day I left our son at college is seared into my memory. Between my flashbacks of moving into my freshman dorm room and the knowledge of the loneliness that would soon envelop him, I was a mess. Standing next to the car with my heart in my stomach, I said goodbye to my boy. He gave me one last very long hug, tears streaming down my cheeks. During the two-hour drive to the airport, all I could think of was what I didn't tell him or teach him. What if I hadn't given

him enough love, what if he doesn't call us, what if... Although my mother tears were streaming down my face, I had a river of faith in our son. I trusted the connection we built over the years and knew that we would work hard to maintain it throughout our lives.

As parents, we often wonder and worry whether we are capable of providing the love and guidance necessary for children to become the person God created them to be. Our hearts beat for their happiness, safety, confidence, and wholeness.

Heaven-Bound Parenting

We are often tempted to think that our number one goal for our children is that they become good, productive members of society, but perhaps there's more. Our primary responsibility is to help our children to know, love, and serve God, and spend eternity in Heaven with Him. When we look at the decisions that we make for our children, are they reflective of a heaven-bound goal?

One of the biggest temptations for parents is what is often seen as the overarching goal: to get our children to college. If we can get them to college with a sports or academic scholarship, even better. But, there are eternal consequences to this cultural mindset. Once the child makes it to college, or even finds their first job, they have achieved exactly what we have told them is the goal. Then what?

A heaven-bound mindset opens the doors of their hearts for meaning, service, love, joy, and a tremendous eternal reward. Especially today, intentional parents raise their children with faith. It's the *most* important gift we can give them. Introducing them to God and nourishing their faith along the way is the way to build strong, connected families.

How would you describe your parent-child relationship?

Fostering Greater Connections

As a stay at home mom, there are days when, while tucking my children into bed, I realize that I didn't connect with them that day. When I am focused on tasks, like cleaning, driving, and feeding (which are all good) but forget to intentionally connect with them, to build our relationship, it's easy for me to let the connection moments slide.

Along with our college-age son, we also have two preteen girls. Recently our eleven-year-old, while I was putting her to bed, told me that I love her older sister more. Typically, I would have dismissed her absurd claim by telling her "that's silly," but when that phrase was just about to escape my lips, I stopped and asked myself if that would build a connection or create more disconnection. Immediately, I realized that it would generate disconnection, and I needed a new plan. Instead of dismissing her claim, I could use the moment to create a connection. I asked her what happened to make

her feel that way. She told me that over the previous few days, she timed me as I was tucking my oldest daughter into bed. Apparently, I was spending more time with my oldest daughter during the bedtime routine than with her. Ready to defend myself, I stopped and considered her observation. She was right. We proceeded to have a conversation about my love for her, her sister, and my desire to be more aware of her feelings about the bedtime routine. I asked for her forgiveness and told her I would try to be better. Through tears, she forgave me. Let me tell you: there was a connection built that night that helped me to further understand her heart.

Parenting in the Extremes

When we connect well with our children, we tap into our natural parenting instincts to know when something is going well with them or when something is wrong. When we have this closeness, our kids will naturally want to make us happy in return.

Unfortunately, it's often hard to tap into our parenting instincts because of personal busyness and distraction. Is it safe to say that many of us try to parent in our spare time?

Parenting in our spare time means that we let the moments to teach and form our children pass by because there's no time in the schedule to stop and correct, stop and re-direct, or stop and love. The actual "parenting" moments become

inconsistent and fragmented. Remember Olivia from the beginning of this book? Her parents were disengaged, and Olivia was clearly struggling because of it, even if neither she nor her parents realized it.

Helicopter parenting lies on the other end of the spectrum. A helicopter parent is overprotective or takes excessive interest in the life of the child. They try to clean up the child's messes or actively work to make sure the child doesn't experience anything negative. The problem with this is that it doesn't allow the child to develop skills which will help them later in life like resilience and independence. Even though it seems like the parent is working for the child by giving them what they want (grades, tablets, friends), the child really just wants the parent to focus on building a relationship with them.



The better family structure, as we hinted at in the previous chapter, is one where the parents share the closest bond in the family. Remember the Trinity scenario? Imagine doing something similar as a family. The modern, child-centered culture puts the child in the center of the family circle and the parents rotate around the child. The family revolves around the child. What does the child see from this perspective?

What if we put the parents at the center of the family, looking at each other, knowing that the sacred act of marriage means that there is an unbreakable bond between Christ and the couple? The complete picture would be Christ at the center, the couple holding hands and looking in each other's eyes, and the child revolving around the parents as he or she watches and learns how to love. This is the ultimate connection in parenting.

How do you feel when you read about the family structured this way?

Ask Yourself

Close relationships are built from shared experiences that allow us to connect with each other deeply or intimately in unspoken ways. You don't have to do anything complicated to connect; it's like falling in love. When my husband and I were dating, family and friends used to joke with us that they could see little birds chirping and flying around our heads. It was true love. But it wasn't until I was putting *My Little Pony*

Band-Aids on our children's cuts or found myself sitting on the front porch discussing tough topics with my teenager that I experienced love at its best. Our day-to-day encounters with one another grows intimacy and connection within our individual relationships and within our family as a whole.

Children, and even teens, may not have the language or emotional maturity to tell the parent what they need, so they act out. We should try to see this behavior as a form of communication. It's their way of saying, "I need help." Pam Leo, who developed *Connection Parent and Optimal Child Development*, says, "The level of cooperation parents get from their children is usually equal to the level of connection children feel with their parents."¹⁷ She suggests that when we need to respond to a child, we can ask ourselves, will the response create a connection or a disconnection? We feel disconnected when we feel hurt and unheard. We feel connected when we feel listened to and loved.

Ways to Create More Connection

Consider the following as ways to create more connection in your family. Even picking one or two areas to focus on will help build your connections with your children:

Engage. Spend at least fifteen minutes a day engaging with your child. Your child's emotion-centered brain thrives off uninterrupted, warm, loving one-on-one special time with you. Pour your love into him or her as you follow their lead for

the time you spend together. This is what it takes for a child to feel safe, connected, and loved.

Attention. Your child needs to have your full attention to connect. Your full engagement is also necessary. If you want to connect with your children, I learned that it's not enough to watch them play; we need to play with them (that's the engagement part)! Avoid the urge to suggest or direct, but rather follow your child's lead. Playing with little ones or talking with older ones about their day is a challenge after a long day at work, but the benefits far outweigh the cost. When I take the time to engage my children at their level, they are happier, calmer, and more cooperative for hours afterward. When they are feeling loved, they will make better eye contact, smile more, giggle and laugh, give spontaneous hugs and shows of affection, and obey better! Your child will feel deeply nourished and connected, and so will you, which will become a cornerstone of your relationship for years to come.

Playing and talking with your children shows that you love them more than anything else you can do or say. What in your schedule can shift to allow for more play time?

No device times. Studies show that the mere presence of mobile phones negatively impacts how we interact with each other. In the age of buzzes, dings, and beeps, we need to

emphasize human contact that is totally device-free. We have to teach skills now that, in the past, came naturally. Some of those skills are how to share a meal, how to have meaningful conversations, and how to live a life that does not require distraction. If our children learn how to interact with others, they will be less likely to end up isolated and suffer from anxiety and depression. Consider having “no device” times that include all meals, rides in the car, on hikes or walks, or any moment when the goal is to be together and connect.

One of the most profound moments I recall regarding parent-child connection is when I witnessed a mother feeding her newborn baby a bottle with her left hand while scrolling through Instagram with her right hand. My heart sank. It’s easy in our hectic lives not to slow down enough to look people in the eyes. Children particularly thrive off the emotional connection that comes via eye contact. Every time a child asks for attention or flat-out asks us to put down a phone, iPad, or laptop, we should do so immediately and look them in the eyes.

I’m not saying all technology is bad for families. In fact, some of our family’s best moments involve FaceTiming grandparents and cousins who live in different parts of the country. Our son learned to change the oil in the car and how to solve a Rubik’s Cube on YouTube (safe search on, of course!). One daughter wanted to rearrange her room and asked to download a room design app so we can configure her space to be exactly how she envisioned. My daughters

and I have played endless rounds of Bingo on the iPad, too. You can have fun! Grandma's Facebook posts are topics of hilarious conversation. (Maybe take a break from Facebook for a day or two, Grammy.)

What needs to change in the schedule so that we can slow down and be present with those we love? We won't be able to pull this off all the time, but the more we do, the more we will find ourselves shifting into being fully present (and our hearts melting) more often. It will take some serious work, but it will truly be worth it!

Welcome emotion. It may sound a little scary, but if a child does not have an opportunity to share his or her emotions, the feelings will come out later, and usually sideways. Healing our children's upsets as soon as possible will bring them relief and will bring us closer to them. There will be times when our children are angry, and we may not know what to do with that strong emotion, but we can look beyond that anger to the underlying emotion, such as sadness or fear, just under the surface. He or she may feel comfortable enough to share that strong emotion if we can acknowledge all those feelings and offer an understanding of the pain. That creates safety so that he or she can move through those emotions and back into connection. Afterward, he or she will feel more relaxed, cooperative, and closer to us. (Yes, this is really, really hard. Regulating emotions in the face of an upset child is one of the hardest parts of parenting. But, that doesn't mean we are excused from trying.)

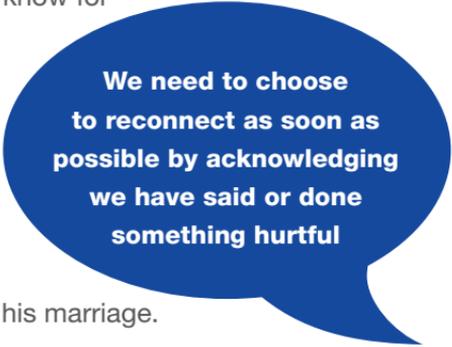
The *Happy You, Happy Family* blog offers a number of helpful phrases to help you as your child grapples with emotions:¹⁸

- ▶ *“Tell me how you are feeling. I want to understand.”* This is an empathic statement that is most effective when you are sharing eye contact, and you are listening.
- ▶ *“It’s okay to feel…”* Suppressed emotions tend to intensify. Let him or her know you will work it out together.
- ▶ *“Can I give you a hug?”* A six-second hug is the recommended time to get oxytocin and serotonin (connection chemicals in the brain) flowing.
- ▶ *“How can I help you?”* This question gets him or her thinking about solutions so the focus is no longer the negative emotion.
- ▶ *“I’m sorry for…”* Yes, you need to apologize for your bad behavior, for not listening. However, keep the phrase “but, you…” out of your apology. No buts allowed! Even better to add to your apology is the specific way you promise to change.

When You Lose It With Your Child

We will lose it with our children; it is just the reality of being imperfect people. Coming unglued can happen for different reasons, such as feeling tired, afraid for their well-being, hungry, or upset for our own reasons. When a child makes a poor decision or acts out, it can push our buttons. It's easy to react rather than respond. Once we realize that we have created a disconnection, we need to choose to reconnect as soon as possible by acknowledging we have said or done something hurtful, apologizing and asking for forgiveness, and choosing to respond from that point with listening and loving.

Remember Patrick from the beginning of this book? His mother lost it with him when she caught him watching pornography. What if she had come back to him the next day and asked for forgiveness for responding out of anger? What if she had sat with him and said, "I'm sorry for how I responded. I want you to feel like you can trust me with these tough issues"? We can't know for sure, of course, but it's possible Patrick would have confessed to watching pornography and he would have received the help he needed then instead of carrying that weight into his marriage.



We need to choose to reconnect as soon as possible by acknowledging we have said or done something hurtful

That said, we will not always have the perfect response, and let's not even set that as an expectation because it will just give us a reason to berate ourselves for doing poorly. We have all had times of accusing ourselves of being a "bad mom" or "bad dad." That is a lie that we all need to fight. We should remind ourselves that we are doing the best we can and leave the rest to God. The more often we can give our children what they need, the better they will be able to work through the times when we are less nurturing.

Connected to Your Teen

Yes, we need a section dedicated only to teens. All of the pointers suggested above still apply to teenagers. However, some of them will need to be adapted to fit their needs. They think they are so cool and grown-up, but they still need and crave parental love and affection. One of the greatest tactics in working with teens is not to pay attention to what they are projecting, but rather see them in their wholeness. See their remarkable qualities, and comment on all the wonderful things you notice about them. If we can become a true mirror for them, it will build a tremendous connection between us and our teens.

Here are a few pointers for loving and connecting with teens.

Affirm them in the truth. Simple statements like "good morning," "goodnight," and "I love you" are natural ways to acknowledge them. However, there is a more profound

way of connecting with them that tells them the truth about who they are. We all need that truth, but teens especially need it because being a teen is difficult. I liken it to entering a tunnel. On one side is their childhood and on the other side is adulthood. You never know which end of the tunnel they will be near on any given day or hour! Like I said, we shouldn't worry about how they are acting, but love them right where they are. When difficult things come up, we can remind them of certain truths like:

- **You are not what others think or say about you.** For example, let's say a teen daughter just saw a mean post about her on social media. You can tell her that she is not what others think or say about her. Help to ground her in her identity as a daughter of God. Remind her that God thinks she is awesome and so do you.
- **You are not what you do.** For example, your teen son just failed a test and is noticeably upset. Reaffirm him in that he is a child of God, and God does not measure his worth on what he does. He loves us no matter what. Even if he failed 100 tests, you and God would still love him.
- **You are not what you have.** For example, if your daughter uses Instagram she will inevitably begin to compare herself, especially noticing what she does not have. Remind her that there was a day

that God thought of her for the first time. He thought about the gifts He would give her so that she could reflect His love. He thought about the parents she would need, the place she would be born, and the people she would have in her life. Every detail about herself was planned and was deemed good. She has everything she needs and will lack nothing in her life because she is the daughter of the King.

- **You are not how you feel.** The teen years bring with them strong emotions. Encourage them to use the proper descriptions about how they are feeling. For example, “I feel depressed” versus “I am depressed,” “I feel angry” versus “I am angry.” This helps with keeping the distinction between their identity (which cannot change) and how they feel. When your son or daughter develops this skill and becomes able to articulate proper descriptions of how they’re feeling, this will help you to see them for who he or she is rather than his or her behavior.

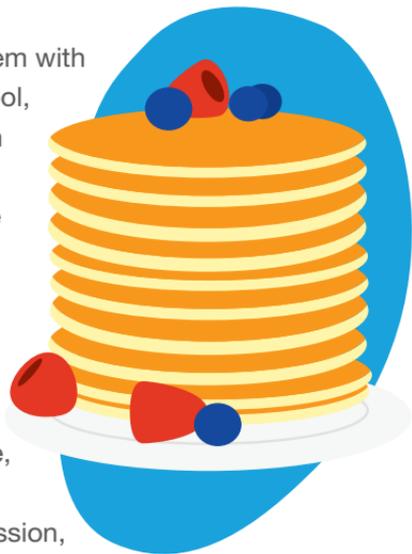
I’m not going to lie: affirming teens is difficult because they tend to make us feel like we are unwanted. We need to fight that in ourselves, too. Affirmation and approval are crucial at this time in their life. Young men are struggling with, “Do I have what it takes?” “Are you proud of me?” “Am I doing this right?” “Am I becoming a man?” Young women

are questioning, “Am I good enough?” “Am I beautiful?” “Am I worthy of love?” “What does it mean to be a woman in your eyes?” Teens are working out important, life-long foundational truths about themselves. Our job is to be their best encourager, whether or not they show gratitude. (I hope that someday they will come back to thank us!)

Here are a few other things we can do to show them we are their biggest fan and nurture our connection with them. Adding something small can make a huge difference.

Do small things. Surprise them with their favorite snack after school, make them a big breakfast on a Saturday morning, or bring a Frappuccino for the car ride home after school. A good, random GIF is fun, too.

Make a date. Make an effort to schedule regular “dates” with your teen. Catch a movie, go fishing, go for a hike, take them on a practice driving session, or book a mom/daughter mani-pedi date. Play online games with your children. Spending more time together is a surefire way to keep your bond tight and have fun doing so!



Be available. Another adjustment in raising teens is being available so that when they are ready to talk, we are there. I have spent countless nights staying up with our son waiting for him to go to bed, just in case he wanted to talk. It was quite a sacrifice going to bed late, but it was worth it for those few precious moments we connected. The need to be available for them is a challenge and requires adjustment to schedules in order to accommodate this new reality.

Just listen. Teenagers need parents who are genuinely interested in what they have to say. They face challenges like struggling with grades, rejection, the temptation to view pornography, bullies, or just feeling overwhelmed. We should welcome and encourage our teens to come to us anytime they need to talk, ask questions, or cry it out in a judgment-free zone.

When A Teen Doesn't Want to Connect

Depending on the strength of our relationships with our teens, they may not want to connect with us. We have to give ourselves a little break here. As parents, we try our absolute best in raising our children, but the truth is that we may have damaged our relationship with our teen along the way. They may not know how to reconnect with us. Perhaps the teen distances themselves from us due to shame or guilt. Do not lose heart! There is nothing more they desire than to be connected to us. If the distance between us is vast,

then it will take some work on our part to close the gap. Here are a few suggestions to reconnect with a teen:

Prayer. Ask God to help you reconnect with your teen. Ask Him to show you how to arrange the circumstances in your lives so that reaching your teen's heart is possible. Beg God to be very present in his or her life.

Availability. The availability is the same as listed above but with an added twist. You can say, "When you're ready to talk, I'm here."

Patience. Reconnection does not happen overnight. Be patient. Actively work on the points listed previously, be diligent in putting yourself out there, be the encourager, and affirm them in the truth about who they are as a child of God. All people, including teens, enjoy soaking in all that truth and positivity. You'll win them over with your steadfast love.

Connections Prepare for Hard Times

The parent-child relationship during the teen years is similar to the terrible twos. The teens are experiencing new things, expanding boundaries, pushing buttons, and melting down. The teen years are essential for learning how to manage independence. The difference between the terrible twos and the tricky teens is that the teens are making decisions that can have real, serious consequences in their lives. Looking at Patrick's story again, his mother created a disconnect

and set up performance-based love. When she shamed him for looking at pornography, an immediate disconnection occurred, which drove him deeper into pornography use.

Studies conducted on teenager's brains suggest that their frontal lobes are not fully developed until they are well into their early twenties. The frontal lobe is responsible for behavior inhibition. Decisions about right and wrong are made in this location, as well as cause and effect in relationships. Gargi Talukder explains,

The results from these studies do not mean that a teenager will always make irrational decisions. They do, however, suggest that teenagers need guidance as their brains develop, especially in the realm of controlling emotional impulses in order to make rational decisions. It is becoming clear that the adolescent brain is a work in progress, and that parents and educators can help this progress along through open communication and clear boundaries.¹⁹

Creating healthy, open communication with teenagers will give them a safe place to come when their spontaneous decisions lead them awry. They'll be more willing to approach a parent when they encounter difficulties. In the case of

pornography, a history of secure connection with the parents will help them confide in a parent when they are scared or worried about an inadvertent pornography exposure, peer pressure, or continued pornography use. This in turn will reduce the risk of pornography addiction.

You can learn more about how to talk to your teens about pornography in the Covenant Eyes ebook *Confident*.

No Prayer Goes Unanswered

Talking about connection may make us feel like we have missed out on some opportunities with our children. Being a parent is the hardest thing we will ever do! Now is not the time to beat ourselves or our spouses up for past failures. Now is the time, however, to be receptive and willing to move forward anew.

We may feel like we are not the best parent, but we are part of God's plan. He gave our daughters and sons to us. He desires to work through us to form the masterpiece he created our children to be. We are an instrument in the Artist's hands. God chose us to be the parents of our

“Children and teens are like phones roaming for a signal, and they are hoping to have enough bars of reception to get through to you.” What are ways you can be open today to your children's signals?

children, and he will work miracles in us precisely through our efforts to connect with our children. God has given us the mission to bear “good fruit” (Matthew 7:17)! He is pouring out abundant graces on us as the parent so that we will succeed. We must ask Him to give us the eyes to see our sons or daughters the way He desires us to see them. He sees everyone in their wholeness! If we ask for the same eyes to see, then we can respond with a life of prayer and sacrifice for our children. No prayer for their wellbeing goes unanswered.

Unconditional Love

Love is the most basic of human needs. When our children, teens, and even our spouses know that we love them, they will feel valued and significant. The deep security that comes from our unconditional love is a mere reflection of the love that God has for them.

I remember working with a young woman, about sixteen years old, regarding her relationship with God. She was very open about her hesitancy in allowing God to come close to her. She said that if He were to come close to her, He would see “what a mess I am.” For clarification, I asked her, “What happens if God sees what a mess you are?” She confidently said that He would love her less.

I offered her another way of seeing God. Sometimes we put human ideas on God based on our experiences, such

as believing he will love us less according to what we do. For example, if she does well on a test, her parents might seemingly love her more than if she does poorly on a test. God's love, however, is unconditional. He never withholds His love. He is Love, so to hold anything back would deny His very nature.

The moment she realized that God's love was not based on her performance, tears began to stream down her precious cheeks. She sat quietly for what seemed like five minutes as God re-introduced Himself to her. It was a beautiful encounter.

If we only express love when our son makes a goal in a lacrosse game or our daughter earns the first chair in band, he or she can interpret our response as loving them more because of their actions. Conditional love is either "love if" or "love because of." Conditional love is mostly subconscious on our part as parents, but has the potential to be a destructive force in our children's hearts.

As Christians, we are called to love as God loves—unconditionally. The love we give can be *regardless* of whether our daughter got the lead role we both hoped for or whether or not our son successfully blocked the other team from scoring. Unconditional love responds by putting our arms around their shoulders or, even better, by hugging them and saying, "You did your best. I am so proud of you." God-like love means, "There is nothing you can do to make me love you more. You will never lose my love."

05.

Bringing It Together

Family relationships are a primary means God uses to perfect us and challenge us to become everything we are created to be. The Catholic Church even calls the family a “domestic church” because families are the smallest group of the faithful gathered together.²⁰ To protect and grow our little churches in the home, we may gather together at mealtime, pray and worship together, and have regular one-on-one time as spouses and with each child. Ideally, our loving, focused, daily interactions as spouses and parents strengthen the foundation of our relationships with God and one another. Love is worth striving for, and each moment spent feeding a heart the intimacy it longs for is time eternally well-spent.

Pornography is a serious connection threat for our families. Because it is so accessible, and given its long-term, adverse effects on relationships, we must take seriously our

responsibility to protect our marriages and children. To be successful in protecting and guiding our children, three things are necessary:

- ▶ healthy relationships
- ▶ ongoing education
- ▶ accountability

This entire book has been about building healthy relationships with our kids. What about the other two things?

The Right Information

Parents before us did not have the daily concern of when or if their child would be exposed to explicit images. Nor did parents need to prepare their kids for a potential chain reaction, set off by inadvertent exposure to pornography, of lies and distortions about the truth and meaning of their God-given human sexuality, worth, self-image, and how they view others. We, on the other hand, have to learn to parent tech-connected children. We will need to fearlessly help them navigate online exposure and dangers from relationship-damaging content.

Our children navigate minefields on a daily basis, so we can't look the other way or be afraid of difficult conversations. Let's embrace a new parenting challenge with confidence! Learn

about the dangers of pornography, know how to repair disconnected relationships, and help others do the same. Look in the resources section at the back of the book for helpful tools to keep yourself educated.

An Accountable Home

In previous chapters, we explored the importance of connection and openness between parents and their children, as well as between spouses. Technologies that allow us to hide what we do online have threatened connection and openness in our families, and subsequently, that technology has opened the door to lies, isolation, and bifurcated lives. **What would it look like in your home if accountability was one of your family values?**

For years, when parents sought to protect their children online, they put filtering tools in place to limit access to explicit online content. There is certainly a need for filters, particularly for young children, because inadvertent exposure usually is how the majority of children are exposed to pornography. Filters can help, but filters alone are not enough because they do not provide the interpersonal connection that is required to ensure ongoing conversations. Accountability, on the other hand, becomes more important as children grow. The once inadvertent exposure can turn into curiosity and a seeking out of explicit material. Connection and conversations, however, provide a safe space for that natural curiosity to happen and for the child to get the answers they are looking for from you.

Accountability requires openness and respect between child and parent, and between spouses. It is within conversations that parents impart needed wisdom, extend encouragement, and provide necessary correction.

Covenant Eyes accountability software that is downloaded to your devices is a valuable tool for families. The software monitors your screen, looking specifically for any sign of pornographic imagery. The parent receives a report of concerning activity. With the report, the parent has the information necessary to start a loving, concerned conversation.

Time has shown that children who grow up with accountability are better able to self-govern their online actions. Knowing that they are accountable makes people think more critically about what they do online. When children and teens are not experiencing long-term exposure to pornography, they don't make pornography a go-to coping tool when they are bored, lonely, or stressed. Instead, since pornography isn't an option, they seek healthier outlets. Learning the proper way to deal with feelings will pay major dividends later in life when your children have to deal with the stress of work, financial challenges, or new relationships.

A study conducted by the Barna Group in 2016 showed that parents have greater success in passing along their values to their children when both accountability and a robust Christian faith are present. When asked if porn is good or bad

for society, 44% of the general population, ages 13-69, were “indifferent”, meaning pornography was neither good or bad, and 11% thought that pornography was good! When the same question was posed to users of accountability software; in this case, Covenant Eyes, 99% said pornography was bad for society. Similar



Time has shown that children who grow up with accountability are better able to self-govern their online actions

results were found when asked about sexting: of the general population, 41% said they had sent a nude image; of Covenant Eyes users, that number fell to 14%.²¹ Results of this study shouldn't come as any surprise; rather, it should give us hope, and fortify us for the struggles that will undoubtedly ensue between parent and child, particularly during the adolescent years.

Like most parents, my husband and I experienced first-hand the weekly push-n-pull with our son. As adolescents do, he wanted more access to the internet, fewer barriers, and less accountability. We, however, tried to find the right balance of access with fewer filters, while at the same time remaining convinced that accountability had to stay in place. Our persistence was rewarded when, after the completion of my son's first semester at college, we received a Christmas letter from him thanking us for not giving in when he pushed the limits.

Parents, there is inevitable push-back when boundaries are established with our children. When limits are set from a place of prudence and right-judgment, and not fear, we can feel secure in knowing that we are doing the best for our child.

Statistics like those provided in the above Barna Study show us that technology boundaries given at a young age pay dividends, and they are likely to prevent our children from a normalized view of pornography, as all too often happens with today's youth.

The Ultimate Power Source

There is no such thing as a perfect family, but healthy families do exist! We all desire to feel loved, secure, warm, and in relationships where we belong. With intentionality and courage, we can make the necessary little tweaks here and there so that our relationships are fulfilling. Healthy families grow from strong relationships. A well-connected family happens through quality time, excellent communication, teamwork, appreciation, and of course, with a rock-solid foundation in the Christian faith.

May God teach us how to love each other as He loves us so that we can all be...**connected**.

Prayer for a Connected Family²²

Lord, help us to develop into a healthy family who...

Affirms and supports one another

Shows appreciation for each other clearly and regularly

Shares affection

Has good communication patterns

Is committed to each other in good times and in bad

Has a sense of shared responsibility

Shares faith together

Values service to others

Spends time together

Finds a good balance of time together and time alone

Shares fun

And has meaningful family traditions and celebrations.

Let our love for each other point the way to your infinite, unconditional love and forgiveness.

Amen.



***The Safe Digital Family Challenge* will give you practical tools for creating healthy connections in your home. Text HOME to 66866 to begin the Challenge today!**

Connected Appendix

Why is Porn So Bad Anyway?

This book was written under the assumption that you believe pornography is bad, whether just as sin or as a physically and socially harmful activity. But you may not understand why and how porn harms people, and particularly kids. This appendix is designed to provide a high-level overview of some of the ways porn is harmful, both as a sin and as a physical issue. For more information about the science of porn use, please visit www.covenanteyes.com.

Porn Hurts Our Relationships

If God has indeed designed sex to be sacred between one man and one woman, then anything that deviates from that plan must be understood as a sin—including pornography.

Porn hurts our relationship with God, who has called us into a holy and perfect communion with Himself. Take what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount:

But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matthew 5:28).

What is porn if not looking at someone on the screen with lust?

Porn hurts our body. Saint Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:18-20:

Avoid immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the immoral person sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been purchased at a price. Therefore, glorify God in your body.

This isn't metaphorical either. Neuroscience has now proven porn hurts the viewer's own brain. We will dive more deeply into that in a moment.

Porn hurts the Church— As Saint Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6:15, “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take Christ's members and make them the members of a prostitute? Of course not!”

Every unconfessed and unrepented pornographic video a person watches or sext they send become a barrier between that person and the Church, the body of Christ. The sense

of guilt or shame may hold the viewer back from serving to their fullest ability. Even if they are masking their sin with service, chances are good they are withholding a piece of themselves, hiding behind an illusion, and unintentionally hurting their local faith community in the process.

Porn hurts our spouse (even if we're not married yet).

The Theology of the Body expands on the scriptural passages exploring how two become one. Mark Houck, Co-Founder and President of The King's Men and guest writer for the Covenant Eyes blog, uses *The Theology of the Body* to explore porn's impacts on marriage:

[Pope Saint John Paul II] tells us that “the fundamental fact of human existence at every stage of its history is that God ‘created them male and female’ (*Theology of the Body*, p. 74). Man and woman were created for marriage, and “in the mystery of [this] creation, man and woman [become] a mutual gift” (p. 75). Pornography, and more specifically masturbation, represents a privation of the gift and therefore the exact “opposite of this ‘welcoming’ or ‘acceptance’ of the other human being as a gift” (p. 70).

In its truest form, the conjugal act should always reflect the “reciprocal ‘acceptance’ of the other” (p. 70). **Pornography perverts the conjugal act because it reduces the mutual self donation of husband and wife to an object of lust.** Pornography trains a spouse to look at his or her spouse as an object for their pleasure only. In other words, the conjugal act becomes an act of using and as a result spouses use one another for their own selfish objectives.¹

Again, we’ll dig into the science that supports this shortly, but it’s worth noting that this sin against spouses is true even if the viewer isn’t married yet. Remember Patrick’s story from the beginning of this book? The porn habits he developed as a child had very real repercussions on his marriage as an adult.

Porn hurts other relationships. Porn makes us look at *everyone* differently. One study showed that men who watched 5 hours of porn over a 6-week period showed a 46% drop in support for women’s rights compared to those who did not watch porn at all. Among women, it dropped 30%.² Porn use makes people see each other as something less than fellow children of God. It makes the viewer elevate the status of men and lower the status of women when,

in reality, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

Porn hurts porn stars and exploited women and children.

In addition to committing adultery in your heart with porn stars, porn is a major social justice issue. Even if you only watch amateur porn and never spend a dime on it, porn is a feeder system for sex trafficking. Increased viewership leads to a need for more variety, meaning more porn stars, who are often drugged and abused for the audience’s viewing pleasure.

Porn as a Health Issue

If knowing the moral issues of pornography isn’t enough, there are significant health impacts as well. Every time a person views or participates in a sexual activity, their brain mixes up a gigantic health cocktail, wiring them to get turned on by their partner (whether the partner is physical or digital). Here are just a few of the chemicals in play:

- **Dopamine** helps the brain remember what is interesting and how to respond to it. It focuses the mind on a specific task while others are ignored, saying, “Hey, do this now!” It provides a neurological reward that feels good and assists in cravings for more of the activity.

- **Norepinephrine** is a neurotransmitter often associated with stress and the fight-or-flight response, helping people to be more alert. It also acts as a hormone for sexual arousal and sexual memory, and it helps us burn emotional experiences in our minds. Whether it's a wonderful sexual experience with our spouse or a provocative sexual image, the information is stored for easy recall with the help of norepinephrine.
- **Oxytocin and vasopressin** also encourage the feelings of bonding and are released during sexual activity and at climax. Their release during porn viewing and masturbation works to cement a person's attachment to this behavior.

These and other chemicals work in concert to create a bond with your spouse. In a marriage the way God designed it, where one man and one woman are the only sexual partners, these chemicals help strengthen that bond. Essentially, we keep training ourselves to be turned on by our spouses, and only our spouses.

Porn, on the other hand, triggers the same chemical reactions, but they result in bonding to images, not people. Additionally, these chemicals train the viewer to require variety, not monogamy. Rather than forging a strong bond with your spouse, the viewer creates bonds with hundreds or thousands of different faces.

Particular Risks to Children

As a pediatrician for over 30 years and a consultant for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, Dr. Sharon Copper has seen the devastating impact pornography can have on the mind of a child. She explains pornography is neurologically more damaging to a child than to an adult for at least two reasons.³

1. **Children have an abundance of “mirror neurons” in their brains.** Mirror neurons convince us that when we see something, we are actually experiencing it. When a man watches pornography, his mirror neurons activate, eventually triggering an erection because his body now believes it is experiencing sex.⁴ With the abundance of mirror neurons in children, researchers believe this makes pornography more “real” to them.
2. **Children have an immature prefrontal cortex.** This is the area of the brain that controls judgement, controls impulses, and regulates emotion. This region of the brain isn’t mature until it is between the ages of 20-22. Because children have such a weak prefrontal cortex, they lack the “executive control” to stop the flow of emotions and sensations that come from watching porn.

This neurological implication is even more distressing when we understand how teens view porn. According to a 2016 survey, 53% of teens talked about porn in an accepting or even encouraging way; only 1 in 10 believed it is a bad thing.⁵ The same survey found that 51% of teen and young adult women porn users had sent a sext.⁶ In other words, teens just acknowledge that most of them use pornography, and they're engaging in risky behaviors as a result.

Parents, we *must* assume our children will be exposed to pornography at some point. But if we focus on building strong connections with them and preparing them to respond when they're exposed to it, we can successfully pass on our values to our kids and help them stay porn-free for life.

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THEIR PROTECTION IS IN YOUR HANDS

Protect Your Family from Internet Pornography

Parents today face increasing challenges in protecting their children's innocence. Pornography can enter the home through a variety of doors. Covenant Eyes Screen Accountability and Filtering can help parents monitor digital doors and teach their children to use technology well. While this could be an overwhelming task, Covenant Eyes has the resources you need to be the parent your children need.

Use the promo code **EQUIPPED for
a 30-day free trial at covenanteyes.com**

Resources

Protect Young Eyes

Protect Young Eyes uses a constantly updated website and engaging, in-person presentations to educate concerned, but busy parents and hyper-connected kids about how to use technology in a God-honoring way. They specialize in social media and device-level parental controls.

<https://protectyouneyes.com>

Common Sense Media

Common Sense Media is a secular organization that reviews popular movies, games, and apps that kids use today.

<https://www.commonsensemedia.org>

Clean Heart Online

Clean Heart Online is an educational website that provides resources for clergy, parents, educators, and even those who struggle with pornography. Available content includes video courses, online certification, information regarding local diocesan training workshops, local counselors and more.

cleanheart.online

The Chastity Project

Chastity Project is a ministry of Jason and Crystalina Evert that promotes the virtue of chastity through seminars, resources, clubs, and social media.

<http://chastityproject.com>

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