

## **Protecting Young People from Sexual Exploitation**

Remember when even just the thought of the word s-e-x would send us blushing into embarrassment?

Well, thanks to constant and overwhelming media influence, sexual images and explicit word references have become increasingly common among groups that are younger by the year.

Already the so-called “sex industry” in America has given us its own spin on the conversation. They’ve built a thriving business on the rationale that it’s just about “entertainment,” “servicing needs,” “gentlemen’s clubs,” “legitimate business,” “escort services,” “massage parlors,” “glamorous Web sites.”

Unfortunately, most Americans have come to accept this situation as commonplace. Many of America’s youth have gone beyond intrigue to become active participants, strippers, and candidates for prostitution as patrons and providers.

Even pastors and otherwise respectable adults have become discreet targets for this manipulation through Internet pornography. Some 6 million children in the United States are being involuntarily exposed to unwanted sexual materials through the Internet (according to a study from the University of Pennsylvania, September 2001).

As your congregation strives to feed and tend the sheep in its care, here are a few things you might consider.

What congregations can do:

- Be proactive about equipping youth and their parents with insights regarding sexual identity and development. Help children be aware of media influence, as well as potentially manipulative adults and organizations.
- Highlight information and Web sites in your congregation newsletter for exploring specific topics of interest. [www.adultssavingkids.org](http://www.adultssavingkids.org) provides insight on current realities and helps for adult leaders who are eager to consider this a ministry opportunity. One resource, “Wise As Serpents,” is designed to engage youth in considering the influence of the sex industry and some faith-based responses to it.
- Engage youth and adults in youth-friendly conversations about current realities and faithful reactions to them. Youth resources related to sex, sexuality and gender are available at [www.elca.org/dcm/youth/links.html](http://www.elca.org/dcm/youth/links.html)
- The ELCA is engaged in defining its perspectives on issues related to human sexuality. Read the ELCA’s “Message on Sexuality: Some Common Concerns.” Consider using the study guide titled “Journey Together Faithfully” as you nurture your congregation’s awareness and concern. These and other resources are at [www.elca.org/dcs](http://www.elca.org/dcs)
- Check out the ELCA’s “Message on Commercial Sexual Exploitation.” Call the ELCA Division for Church in Society’s Resource Request Line: 800/638-3552, ext. 2996, for a single free copy. Multiple copies may be ordered for 10 cents each plus shipping through Augsburg Fortress by calling 800/328-4648 (ISBN 6-0001-6286-3). Or go to [www.elca.org/dcs/commercial\\_sexual\\_exploitation.html](http://www.elca.org/dcs/commercial_sexual_exploitation.html)
- To research and study the issue, the online “Journal of Lutheran Ethics” offers a few places to find materials, insights, and contacts at: [www.elca.org/jle/bibliographies/commercial\\_sexual\\_exploitation\\_resources.html](http://www.elca.org/jle/bibliographies/commercial_sexual_exploitation_resources.html)
- Give youth opportunities to build their own self esteem as they address real issues and experience support and affirmation for articulating their insights and concerns.

- Nurture parenting skills, integrity, boundary-setting and healthy discernment through easy-entry adult Bible studies and conversations.
- Make it a priority in your congregation to address issues of health and safety for young people. Implement a policy on safety that includes volunteer screening.
- Pray for children, youth and their families in your congregation.

*Al Erickson, for Adults Saving Kids*