

# Online porn lures young children into problem sex, mother warns

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Jill Stark

It began with Beth's daughter complaining of a rash "down there".

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Illustration: Michael Mucci.

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Beth\* first realised something was wrong when her daughter complained of a rash "down there".

She was a happy nine-year-old. It was inconceivable this could be a sexual problem.

The truth, as it turned out, was even more horrifying.

"In the course of telling her that we might need to get some cream for the rash she told me that she and her brother had 'done some sexing'. I was trying not to go into too much shock but I got two soft toys and asked her to show me what they'd done."

While her daughter was confused on the details of her own anatomy, it was clear there had been an act of sexual penetration with her 12-year-old brother.

Beth and her husband were then confronted with the news that it had been their daughter's idea.

"We talked to them both about how this sort of behaviour was wrong and it was against the law and could never happen again. That's when we found out that when she was seven a boy in her class had performed a sex act on her in the playground."

Confused by what had happened at school, the girl began searching her iPod Touch for sexual images. Later, she suggested to her brother that they take their clothes off and "do some sexing".

The family contacted child protection authorities and the Department of Human Services for help. They had to give a statement to police and were told they could press charges against their son.

Beth's experience is part of a shocking trend with the [number of children sexually abusing other children rising steeply](#) and treatment services reporting that pornography and family violence are fuelling the problem.

Beth's family sought treatment through the Australian Childhood Foundation's Transformers program for children displaying problem sexual behaviour.

"I needed some help with counselling for my children. I didn't believe it was predatory or abuse. I didn't think that prosecuting and punishing would actually address the problem or get them help," Beth said.

Due to the Christmas and summer break it would be several months before they got their first appointment. Authorities recommended the children be

closely supervised.

But one night, left in the care of their grandparents, it happened again.

"This time she didn't want to do it and had tried to stop it at one point but was told by my son that 'no, you've got to wait for the good bit'."

The family went into lockdown and made sure the children were never left alone together, took away all their screens and stressed the gravity of the consequences for their son if there was a recurrence.

"Until then I don't think he realised how wrong it was. I think he thought it was fun and it felt good and he wanted to do it again but once we clamped down and stressed how serious it was it just didn't happen again."

Beth believes that instability in the family home contributed to the problem. Her husband had been declared bankrupt and the family were forced to move three times in five years, putting strain on their marriage and prompting a six-month separation.

Their son went through treatment in 2013, the family is reunited and the siblings have a healthy, healed relationship.

Joe Tucci, of the Australian Childhood Foundation, said that while this is the goal, a third of children who engage in problem sexual behaviour are unable to be reintegrated into the family.

"Parents are trying to find safety in their families for the child who's been the target and keep hope for the child who has engaged in the behaviour. It's a torturous situation for them," he said.

"It's too easy to treat these kids using an adult paradigm that says they're offenders. There's always a reason for the behaviour. They do it because they live in a community that gives them a diet of distorted sexuality, they've had something that's gone wrong in their lives and they don't have adults to comfort them and make them feel better."

Beth, who has not used her real name to protect her children, echoed experts' calls for parents and schools to introduce sex education on healthy relationships from an early age. If not, pornography will fill the vacuum, she said.

"We've had to have discussions about masturbation and sex which I certainly wouldn't have thought I'd have to talk to primary school children about. But porn has awakened something that can't be shut off now and we just have to find healthy ways to help them deal with those thoughts and urges."

\*Not her real name.

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