

## What if My Child Has Seen an Inappropriate Website?

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**Reader's Question:** My five-year-old daughter was at a friend's house and they accidentally saw a website that had inappropriate sexual content. They didn't get very far before the adults there stopped them, but I was horrified. My daughter insists that it didn't bother her and she doesn't remember anyway what they saw, but now she seems very anxious and unable to sleep at night. What should we do?

**Kidpower Answer:** It is so important that you are trying to figure out what to do rather than just letting this go. The myth that a child's innocence can be destroyed by accidentally learning or seeing something about sex is actually very destructive. The reality is that sexual innuendos and images are everywhere in our society. What can most harm children and take away their innocence are things like shame, isolation, or sexual exploitation.

Seeing you be horrified probably upset your daughter and got her worried that she might have done something bad. When adults get upset, kids get more upset – and when kids are worried that their adults might get even **more** upset, they are likely to try to pretend that whatever happened didn't happen. Children tend to think they are bad, even when they didn't do anything wrong at all. They often believe that anything wrong that happens is their fault.

Any threat to our children is an enormous trigger for parents. When children start to tell us things that are potentially upsetting, our job is to do our best to act calm and matter-of-fact, no matter how we feel inside.

However, your being horrified was a very understandable reaction. Most children are incredibly resilient and this is an opportunity to build a way to communicate with your daughter calmly about uncomfortable things.

The solution is to be a safe adult to come to by listening and by being reassuring. You can raise the subject with your daughter by saying something like, "I am sorry I got so upset about you seeing that website. I am wondering if you saw some things on the computer that might have bothered you. Can you please tell me

more about what happened?"

Hopefully, your daughter can tell you. Do your best just to listen calmly and to be reassuring. You might say, "Thank you for telling me. The reason I got worried was because I know this kind of thing can be confusing to kids. Anytime you see something that worries or upset you, even if you made a mistake, please tell me. You have the right to be safe in your feelings."

If your daughter won't tell you and just wants to forget about it, this is normal. It often feels worse at first to talk about things that bother you. Learning how to talk with adults you trust even when you don't feel like it and it makes you unhappy at first is an important life skill.

You might make up a story about a time when you did something as a child that confused you and worried you – and tell her that at the time you didn't want to say anything because thinking about it made you feel worse, not better. You might act out a story like this with your daughter's toys.

The message that you want your daughter to have is that her feelings are important and that her adults care about what she thinks and are safe people to talk with – and that she didn't do anything bad.

It is possible that your daughter might have seen more than the people there realized and this might have confused or frightened her. It is also possible that something might have happened to your daughter that what she saw reminds her of – this could be something a another child said at school or this could be something more serious.

If your daughter stays upset, an evaluation by a therapist is probably a good idea, but most likely this experience is actually an opportunity to build more "staying calm and talking about problems" skills that can serve a family well.