



## Bridging the Generational Divide to Help Youth with Porn Addiction

By [Kimball Call](#) and [Rance Hutchings](#)

### SEXUALITY & FAMILY

November 18, 2025

*How can recovery improve for digital natives? Studies show mentorship, separating habits, and small goals build lasting hope.*

When the internet was widely adopted in the 1990s, a “Great Rewiring of Childhood” took place and created a generational [divide](#) between [so-called](#) “digital immigrants” (those raised in the analog age) and “digital natives” (those raised in the internet age). Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt [describes](#) digital natives as “the test subjects for a radical new way of growing up,” and says the difference in childhood between the two groups is so large “it’s as if [digital natives] became the first generation to grow up on Mars.”

This has implications for older members (digital immigrants) of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who wish to parent, lead, teach, or mentor the rising generation of digital natives. One area where this gap presents serious difficulty is the subject of pornography and masturbation addiction.

We—Dr. Rance Hutchings (a digital immigrant and men’s mental and sexual health expert) and Kimball Call (a digital native and economics student at BYU)—believe it’s crucial to talk about why digital immigrants often struggle to effectively help digital natives who struggle with pornography addiction. **Where is the disconnect coming from? How can it be overcome, and how can older parents, leaders, and teachers better help younger Latter-day Saints?**

## Rance’s Experience

When Rance began mentoring men with pornography addiction in 2010, he could sense the generational divide between himself and the younger men he mentored. Growing up, he never struggled with pornography addiction, nor did he hear about pornography all that much. He can’t even remember pornography being mentioned in a single church lesson. Pornography was only ever discussed as a “one-off” situation that young men might experience at a party when someone brought a magazine or snuck in a video rented from an adult book shop. So when trying to help the rising generation with pornography, Rance felt like a “foreigner”—desperate to help, but unable to escape feeling inauthentic.

While serving in a bishopric, Rance felt that it was much easier to teach young men only how to prevent pornography addiction rather than how to overcome it. He’s not alone. Many parents and leaders find that “prevention” is the only method they can teach authentically, because it’s all they ever were familiar with themselves.

Fast forward 15 years – Rance now trains healthcare professionals, mental health professionals, ecclesiastical leaders, and parents on how to help digital natives address pornography addiction. When he shares that many if not most of digitally native single men currently struggle with pornography and that the vast majority of them will at

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## Kimball's Experience

Now contrast Rance's experience with Kimball's, who grew up seeing the other side of Rance's scenario. As one of the earliest digital natives, Kimball faced a fundamentally altered childhood landscape (or Mars, as Haidt describes it). Like many in his generation, Kimball discovered pornography as early as the 5th grade, and by the 6th grade had already developed a habit and discovered masturbation. Although his thoughtful and proactive parents tried to implement safeguards and filters, Kimball—as a digital native—found ways **around** each one.

By the time he was a deacon, Kimball was past the point where the “prevention” lectures were helpful. Because he already had a problem, these conversations made him feel isolated. He reasoned that he must be the only one viewing pornography if everyone else only talked about it in terms of staying away from it. This view was compounded when older people suggested “simply quitting,” spoke of pornography as simply a bad choice that could be stopped by willpower and agency, or suggested other silver-bullet solutions.

Kimball sought help from parents and priesthood leaders several times between the ages of 12 and 18. While he was generally received well, the focus continued to be on *prevention*, rather than on *overcoming* the underlying problems. Kimball continued to relapse into his pornography habit. It was only on his mission, when he entered the close confidences of other missionaries, that he realized how **widespread** pornography addiction was. He wasn't alone, nor was his experience with parents and leaders unique. Most young men believed, as he did, that a pornography problem meant they were abnormally weak or spiritually broken.

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## The Disconnect

We believe that these young men were neither weak nor spiritually broken when they first encountered pornography. They were simply “digital martians,” trying to survive on a new planet without adequate tools or preparation, being led by adults whose experiences were completely different. For digital immigrants growing up, viewing pornography required accessing – and often purchasing – physical media like VHS tapes and magazines. In homes or **communities** where this type of media was highly regulated, it was nearly impossible for most young men to access hardcore pornography. And if they did, it required much more effort to conceal.

Today, however, digital natives have unhampered access to *much more stimulating* forms of pornography with *much lower barriers* to access and *total* anonymity. Worse still, it *actively* gets inserted into social media feeds, movies, and video games, and is always just a few taps away on a device. This is why it’s unhelpful for digital immigrants to talk of pornography as a problem that can be dealt with through willpower, agency, internet filters, “remembering who you are,” or other simple prevention methods. These may have been sufficient once, but a new battle calls for new (and improved) tactics.

**At its root, the generational disconnect stems from the difficulty digital immigrants and digital natives have relating to each other.** Digital immigrants have carried over from their era a certain set of expectations for what “normal” looks like, and digital natives are caught in the dissonance between those expectations and the reality they experience. For instance, digital immigrants within the Church grew to expect pornography addiction to affect few people, generally those already in dire spiritual straits. This expectation makes it difficult for some to accept that a **majority** of young men—including the good, upstanding, and faithful ones—now struggle with a porn habit to some degree.

The first step to overcoming the disconnect will be to appreciate the new reality our youth are experiencing. Now that we’ve had three decades to observe, conduct research, and develop better approaches, it is incumbent on parents, leaders, and teachers to adapt, to learn, and to prepare the next generation for greater success.

## Bridging the Gap

After 15 years of professional work, Rance has learned that, for **most** young men, pornography habits will be forming *before* they enter priesthood service at 11. By that

age, it's often too late for the prevention lecture to be sufficient. But he's also learned that he has more in common with digital natives than he thought, and that knowledge can help parents and leaders who aren't sure what to do next.

Rance has found that digital natives and digital immigrants have nearly identical rates of masturbation use in adolescence (95%), and even discover the behavior at around the same age. But when digital immigrants learned growing up that masturbation was inappropriate behavior, 76% were able to quit within three months, while digital natives have nowhere close to the same success. The key distinguishing factor between the two age groups is that digital immigrants didn't have access to the unprecedented enhancement effect that pornography has.

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**Rance has found that using pornography as an enhancer to masturbation increases its addictive potential by more than tenfold.** For that reason, we believe an effective (and underappreciated) way to help a digital native recover from pornography use is to help them separate their pornography use from masturbation.

Viewing pornography and masturbating are two separate addictive behaviors, but we often lump them together under the umbrella term "pornography addiction." Generally, masturbation is the 'root addiction' while pornography is an enhancer. Once porn and masturbation are successfully separated, they can be treated without the compounding effect they have on each other, which allows the path to recovery to look a lot more similar to what digital immigrants experienced. This puts digital immigrants and natives on common ground, allowing more sympathy, patience, understanding, and authenticity.

## New (And Improved) Tactics

A new battle calls for new and improved tactics. Once parents, leaders, and mentors have shifted their own paradigm and can better understand the new challenges digital natives face, there are several resources, tools, and strategies they can use.

Begin by separating pornography use and masturbation so they can be tackled separately. Pornography use should generally be dealt with first, using a healthy mix of

prevention strategies (defense) as well as strategies addressing underlying spiritual, emotional, and physical problems (offense). Prevention will play a key role in the first few months of recovery, while offensive strategies will be crucial for long-term success. Once viewing pornography has been thoroughly addressed, these same tools can be used to slow—and eventually terminate—masturbation addiction.

An important part of this approach is understanding that it's a long-term, line-upon-line process. We echo the words of Brad Wilcox's 2021 [address](#) "Worthiness is Not Flawlessness," where he told the story of a young digital native named Damon: "Considering how long Damon had struggled [with pornography use], it was unhelpful and unrealistic for parents and leaders assisting him to say 'never again' too quickly or to arbitrarily set some standard of abstinence to be considered 'worthy.' Instead, they started with small, reachable goals. They got rid of the all-or-nothing expectations and focused on incremental growth, which allowed Damon to build on a series of successes instead of failures. He, like the enslaved people of Limhi, learned he could 'prosper by degrees.'"

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Kimball recently approached Brad Wilcox at BYU to ask if the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles is teaching the same principles when they teach about pornography use, and received adamant confirmation that they *are*. Evidence can be found in the recently published, First Presidency-approved [Missionary Resource Guide for Addressing Pornography](#) found on Gospel Library. This resource teaches missionaries, "While your ultimate goal is to be clean from pornography use, understand that you will not get there all at once. It will take sustained and consistent effort. Set small, achievable goals and build on successes rather than focusing on failures."

Members of the Church can apply this counsel by ending the practice of tracking "porn-free streaks." This tactic seems appealing, but it tends to perpetuate addictive behavior in the long run. As the [Missionary Resource Guide for Addressing Pornography](#) [states](#), "Setbacks don't take you back to square one." Instead, it will be more effective to find ways to decrease the frequency and intensity of slips over time. For example, a digital native just starting the journey to recovery might set a goal to view pornography less than three times in the first week and to not allow a slip to last for longer than five minutes. If successful, their next goal might be to go two weeks with less than three slips, then on to three weeks, a month, and so on.



This strategy decreases the chance of *binges*: the tendency to slip multiple times in a row once an abstinent streak has been broken. Binges can severely hamper long-term progress, so it's better to allow one or two minor slips within the goal period than to risk a binge. One or two minor slips are not indicators of an unsuccessful recovery; in fact, they are normal—taking a few steps forward, one step back, and so on until the gaps between small slips grow longer and longer. Sustainable and lasting recovery is much more likely with this method.

Crucial to recovery is strong accountability, so we recommend a mentorship model: choosing one trustworthy person for the recovering person to regularly communicate with weekly. It usually works best for this mentor to be an adult member of the same sex, but they don't have to have prior experience with pornography. Mentors provide many benefits, including an outside, unique perspective of the factors that play into pornography use and how to manage them. Check-ins with mentors should be judgment-free and focused on future action, not past mistakes.

Remember to augment recovery plans with the many faith-promoting helps that are available. Spiritual guidance from priesthood leaders will be critical, beginning early in the healing process. The spiritual strength [received](#) from confession is especially important in helping to realign behavior with personal values. The Church also offers gospel-centered porn recovery [resources](#) on the Gospel Library app, which we highly endorse. Prayer, regular scripture study, church attendance, and service will also play a very active role from the beginning of the recovery process and should not be seen as something for when recovery is complete.

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Any underlying emotional, mental, and physical health needs will also need to be addressed. We urge members to seek help from Church-aligned sources. There is a secular trend—which we reject—to excuse and tolerate pornography use as normal and harmless behavior, and seeking help from these kinds of sources frequently doesn't lead to a full and lasting recovery. Supplemental tools that we do endorse include cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and mindfulness-based cognitive

therapy (MBCT), both of which can be adapted for use to help with pornography and masturbation addiction.

While both generations should embrace new realities and methods for tackling pornography and masturbation, we *shouldn't* seek to change the moral standards of chastity. Lowering expectations is an unhelpful strategy for lifelong happiness. Parents and leaders will need to adjust their approach, be more open-minded, and grow more understanding, without lowering standards of moral cleanliness and virtue, even if our social environment makes it increasingly difficult. Therefore, we advocate for a Christlike approach, built on high expectations and ever-increasing love.

In Rance's experience, he doesn't know of anyone who sincerely wanted to be free of pornography addiction who wasn't eventually successful once they had the right tools and mindset. With an approach designed for his reality, Kimball found relief, and now wants his digitally native peers to know that there's hope. Full recovery is a reality! And we hope that with a new perspective, digital immigrants and digital natives can be more successful working together to achieve a lifetime of happiness.

## About the authors

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