

## Considering Graphic Pictures

*Two Key Questions: Which Pictures? Which Contexts?*

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*Note: Because we live in a visual culture, there is probably no more important topic of discussion for pro-life advocates than this: Which visual images should be shown in which contexts? This document orients pro-life advocates to this discussion.*

### **Why is there so much controversy surrounding the use of graphic pictures?**

Pro-life advocates tend to lump all graphic picture displays together in one group, as if it's simply good or bad to show graphic pictures. They see a graphic picture display in public that virtually forces people to look at graphic pictures and they decide they aren't going to use graphic pictures at all. Even if public displays are bad, should we make all uses of graphic pictures guilty by association?

When I discuss graphic pictures with pro-life advocates, I make two clarifications: (1) In what venue were the pictures shown? (2) Did the audience have adequate warning? My colleagues and I find that audience members (pro-life and pro-choice) almost never object to the presentation of graphic pictures where adequate warning is given (lectures and one-to-one conversations). If you don't know what you think about graphic pictures in public exhibits with little warning, can you at least start using them in public presentations and private conversations?<sup>45</sup> If you always give a warning, almost no one will object. On the contrary, many people will appreciate being encouraged to look at the truth about abortion.

What about the public displays that force unsuspecting onlookers to view graphic pictures? These can be divided further into two categories: those shown on college campuses (exhibits) and those shown in places where the general public travels or recreates (box-body trucks, planes with tow-banners, hand-held signs, stationary exhibits).

I've spent hundreds of hours in front of one college campus display, the Justice For All Exhibit. Many people criticize the Justice For All Exhibit for forcing students to look at graphic pictures. While understandable, this criticism is unwarranted. JFA (and another exhibit called the Genocide Awareness Project, or GAP) displays warning signs that alert students so they can take a different route and avoid the graphic pictures. It's true that the warning signs are dwarfed by the large JFA Exhibit, so even with the warning, it's reasonable to say that the Exhibit forces students to look for, shall we say, one second. After that, of course, viewers can look away. Many don't, because they are fascinated by pictures they've never seen before. Recently, I heard one student blame the JFA Exhibit for being so interesting she couldn't look away! She was angry about being forced to look, but when pressed, it became clear that she was looking by her own choice.

Is it wrong, then, for these exhibits to force a one-second glance on people? If abortion really kills an innocent human being, and our laws allow doctors to kill unborn human beings over one million times a year, isn't the graphic nature of the procedure being forced on those unborn children? Isn't that the real injustice? How can it be immoral to show someone pictures of legal injustice? Sure, there's the pragmatic question of whether these exhibits actually change hearts

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<sup>45</sup> Contact Justice For All (800-281-6426, [ADDhelp@JFAweb.org](mailto:ADDhelp@JFAweb.org)) for training in how to use pictures effectively in conversations.

and save lives. Testimonies from JFA<sup>46</sup> and GAP<sup>47</sup> show that they do. I personally have seen these exhibits change hearts and minds. These testimonies have convinced me that the public display approach, while controversial, presents us with one of the best opportunities to engage college students in dialogue about abortion. Unless there's a good reason to think that it's wrong to display a picture in public, we should certainly not oppose these displays. In fact, we should heartily encourage them.

Consider this: the college campus is the one remaining venue in which large groups of students gather for the purpose of discussing ideas. For most college students, free speech is valued and expected. If we want to change hearts and minds, we best go to the place where dialogue is expected and encouraged (at least in principle). It's especially sad when pro-life advocates, wary of offending *anybody*, totally avoid the opportunity to help *somebody*. I'd prefer they came to the exhibit and used the fact that they oppose the exhibit as an item of common ground to help create dialogue. At these exhibits, it's easy to find someone who's offended. Great! Agree with them and use the opportunity to create good dialogue!

What about the displays shown in places where the general public travels or recreates? These are even more controversial, because they invade public space where unsuspecting adults and kids see them. Apart from a specialized adult environment like the college campus, they seem especially out of place.

Again, how could these displays be immoral, given the injustice they are showing? How can we make the argument that the feelings of the people offended by the display trump the lives of the people who might be saved by the display?<sup>48</sup>

We are left with two questions: (1) Do these displays in fact save the lives of children? View the testimonials for yourself.<sup>49</sup> (2) Do the benefits of saving lives outweigh the cost of people being offended and children seeing the images?

JFA takes no official position on these displays to the general public, but we believe this approach is worth discussing. As you dialogue about this, keep one thing in mind: We should carefully consider arguments both for and against these tools and not simply dismiss the tools because they make us uncomfortable. Vague discomfort with the idea of offending people isn't a strong enough argument to rule out a tool that saves lives.

I fear that sometimes, without realizing it, we discuss these tools from a perspective that assumes the unborn is not fully human. In other words, these tools seem more extreme to us because we live in a world that treats unwanted unborn children like medical waste, and we have accepted some aspects of that idea system, without purposefully choosing to.<sup>50</sup> Imagine that one out of every four toddlers were being systematically killed in preschools around the country, by law. Over the years, the public has come to believe that toddlers aren't human beings. A group has found that showing people pictures of dead toddlers in public has caused some to recoil in horror and actively oppose the killing. The tactic is controversial because it offends many other people. Should we as pro-life advocates oppose this display of their bloody corpses in public? Does the

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<sup>46</sup> See [www.jfaweb.org/Conversions/Cass.pdf](http://www.jfaweb.org/Conversions/Cass.pdf)

<sup>47</sup> See [www.abortionno.org/GAP/gap\\_quotes.html](http://www.abortionno.org/GAP/gap_quotes.html)

<sup>48</sup> See <http://www.unmaskingchoice.ca/rcc-faq.html>, Question 4

<sup>49</sup> See [www.abortionno.org/RCC/feedback.html](http://www.abortionno.org/RCC/feedback.html)

<sup>50</sup> Ironically, wanted unborn children are treated like real humans. When they're sick we call them patients. When they're the subject of discussion, we call them babies.

discussion seem different when it's toddlers and not the unborn? If so, isn't there an assumption working under the surface that says the unborn is not fully human?

### ***Do you use different graphic visual tools in conversations and presentations?***

In conversations, my favorite tool is the Justice For All Exhibit Brochure.<sup>51</sup> During many public presentations, I show *This Is Abortion*, which you can download in high resolution for free at [www.abort73.com](http://www.abort73.com).

### ***Do you show only graphic pictures during abortion presentations and discussions?***

No! While showing the reality of abortion is essential, showing non-graphic pictures of the unborn in different stages of development (video, ultrasound, still images) helps people grasp the wonder and beauty of human development (sometimes for the first time). While some people and audiences are opposed to showing pictures of the unborn after abortion, almost no one opposes showing pictures of the unborn after abortion. Both the Justice For All Exhibit and [Abort73.com](http://Abort73.com) include these non-graphic, non-controversial pictures which can help clarify the facts and focus your audience on the question, "What is the unborn?"<sup>52</sup>

### ***Is it appropriate for pregnancy resource centers to use graphic visuals sometimes?***

Yes. See Scott Klusendorf's article, "Should Crisis Pregnancy Centers Use Graphic Visuals?"<sup>53</sup> It provides the definitive discussion of whether or not pregnancy resource centers should develop a protocol for using graphic pictures in certain counseling situations at the center. He makes an excellent case that while pregnancy centers shouldn't force pictures on anyone and shouldn't use pictures with every client, they should use abortion pictures with some clients (always with their consent). I highly recommend this article.

### ***What about women who have had abortions? Why trouble them with the pictures?***

Stand to Reason's *Making Abortion Unthinkable*<sup>54</sup> curriculum includes an excellent approach to showing pictures. STR suggests showing pictures in presentations with a warning that tells people exactly what they're going to see (graphic pictures of the results of abortion), encourages people to look away if they prefer, explains that the purpose is to clarify the facts about abortion rather than condemn women who have had abortions, and reminds those who have personal experience with abortion that Christ is eager to forgive.

If pictures of abortion are true representations of what abortion is, and women who have had abortions are troubled by the pictures, isn't it the abortion itself that is causing the women grief or distress? Showing the pictures either clarifies the facts for the woman (sometimes for the first time, which is understandably disturbing) or brings to the surface feelings the woman already had about her abortion. We believe that both of these effects, while difficult, are ultimately positive because they help her move from denial or ignorance to the next stage of a healing process.

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<sup>51</sup> Go to [www.jfaweb.org/brochure.html](http://www.jfaweb.org/brochure.html) for your complimentary copy.

<sup>52</sup> See [www.ehd.org](http://www.ehd.org) for beautiful video and still photos of unborn children in the womb.

<sup>53</sup> See [www.priestsforlife.org/resources/abortionimages/graphcpc.pdf](http://www.priestsforlife.org/resources/abortionimages/graphcpc.pdf)

<sup>54</sup> This article was originally written when I was employed by Stand to Reason. I heartily recommend STR's excellent speakers and resources. For more information about STR, see [www.str.org](http://www.str.org).