

THE FOCUS ON THE FAMILY® GUIDE

to Talking  
with Your Kids  
about Sex

HONEST ANSWERS *for* EVERY AGE

THE PHYSICIANS RESOURCE COUNCIL

J. THOMAS FITCH, MD,

AND DAVID DAVIS, EDITORS



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This book is a resource from Focus on the Family, which is responsible for its content. We have relied heavily, however, on input from the Medical Institute for Sexual Health (MI), especially regarding medical, scientific, and statistical information.

MI is a nonprofit organization that promotes healthy sexuality (physically, emotionally, socially, and psychologically) for all ages—rooted in credible science, in an attempt to combat the damaging effects of the casual-sex culture that has infected our society.

MI identifies, evaluates, and communicates scientific data in understandable, practical, dynamic formats to promote healthy sexual decisions and behavior. It distributes almost one hundred thousand pieces of material each year to individuals and organizations across the United States and throughout the world, and maintains a national advisory board of medical doctors, counselors, psychologists, educators, and parents.

Leaders at the Centers for Disease Control, the US Health and Human Services Department, the White House, and state-level government offices, as well as educators and parents across the nation, have sought advice from the Medical Institute about sexual issues affecting our nation's teens. You can reach MI at 1101 S. Capital of Texas Highway, Building B, Suite 100, Austin, TX 78746. To order resources, contact [www.medinstitute.org](http://www.medinstitute.org) or

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## INTRODUCTION

This book was developed to help parents like you navigate the often-challenging task of talking with their children about sex. You probably picked it up because you know you need to start the conversation, but you're just not sure how to go about it. You're not alone.

The medical doctors, educators, and parents associated with the Medical Institute for Sexual Health compiled more than four hundred questions from teachers, physicians, and parents across the United States. They combed the Internet to find out what kids are eager to know. This book is a result of those efforts, and we're grateful that they've shared their work with Focus on the Family. We don't regard the questions and answers in this book as the be-all and end-all, but rather as a starting place for your journey of helping your kids achieve a future full of health, hope, and happiness.

For some parents, talking with their kids about sex is very embarrassing. For others, it's not such a big deal. No matter where you are on that spectrum, we hope the answers offered here will enhance your parenting experience by providing practical, accurate tools that foster deeper discussions and more meaningful relationships with your kids.

These discussions and relationships are especially important for Christian families. To the believer, sex isn't just a physical or medical issue. It has profound spiritual and moral implications. In the first place, sexuality matters to God; in some deep, mysterious way, the distinction between genders is rooted in and reflects the divine nature: "So God created man in His own image; in

the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Gen. 1:27). In the second place, the Bible tells us in many passages and in many different ways that there’s a right way and a wrong way to approach sexuality.

Scripture makes it clear that sex is meant exclusively for marriage and that marriage is heterosexual by definition. Contrary to the popular wisdom of contemporary culture, sex is not just a matter of personal preference or style. Anyone who wants to follow Christ needs to take this idea seriously. We can’t expect to walk with God and experience the abundant life that Jesus came to bring if we aren’t willing to cooperate with His design for human sexuality.

We’ll explore this side of the subject more thoroughly in the first part of the book (chapters 1–6), which was developed to help you establish a basic spiritual, moral, and philosophical context in which to frame your discussions with your children.

The second part of the book (chapters 7–13) is divided into age-oriented sections, with answers to questions parents ask listed first, followed by answers to questions kids wonder about. The answers for younger kids are written so that you can use them line-for-line or rephrase them in your own words. For adolescents, questions were written in such a way that you can simply hand the book to your adolescent and go over the response together, or create your own response based on the information provided.

We wanted this book to be one you can pick up repeatedly over the years as your children mature. That’s why you’ll see some topics addressed more than once, but in distinctively age-appropriate ways.

Two short appendixes introduce you to the topics of sexually transmitted infections and contraceptive options. These sections are intended to help you and your child understand the medical risks associated with nonmarital sexual activity.

Overall, our goal is to empower you to talk with your kids about sex more freely, confidently, and effectively. If you make this investment, we believe it will pay rich dividends in the future. Among other benefits, you’ll enable your children to experience a healthy, satisfying, and spiritually meaningful sex life in the context of marriage—a sex life more likely to be free of guilt, pain, and disease because it’s consistent with God’s plan.

Remember, sex is not a four-letter word. And research shows that your kids want to hear about it from *you*.

## Part 1

# KNOWING WHAT YOU'RE DOING



## WHERE'S THE PARTY?

### *The Need for Parental Guidance*

No doubt about it: People of all ages are keenly interested in sex. That's especially true of preteens and teens who are just becoming sexually aware. They want to know more about this strange, wonderful, and exciting side of life.

There's good reason for this. The Creator has hard-wired sexual curiosity and sexual longings into the very essence of our humanity. He's designed people to function as sexual creatures and blessed them with the gift of sex as a way of addressing some of their most fundamental needs: procreation, companionship, and interpersonal connection on the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual levels.

For the Christian, sex is a mystery, a sacred symbol, and a great joy. A biblical understanding of the nature and purpose of sex begins with God's observation that "it is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18). It receives further definition in His declaration that "a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). It reaches its peak in the amazing statement that this "one flesh" bond is in some sense a picture of "Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:32). In the end, it leaves us with the distinct impression that sex was designed to be a very good and very holy thing.

No wonder the designer of human beings laid down some rules and guidelines to govern the sexual aspect of life. He didn't do this because He hates pleasure. Instead, His purpose was to maximize our joy and fulfillment and protect us from the painful consequences of abusing the gift. Sex experienced within the boundaries He's established—between one man and one woman, within a committed marriage relationship—is safe and pleasurable as well as holy and good.

Unfortunately, we live in a culture that's not only sex-saturated, but saturated with a view of sex that directly counters this biblical understanding. And this twisted culture can exert a huge influence on your child.

Sex sells—and believe it or not, kids are in the target audience. Young people are constantly bombarded with sexual messages—on television, in music, on the Internet, on billboards, and even at clothing stores in the mall. Beer commercials mesmerize viewers with beautiful bodies and seductive music. MTV lures viewers with hours of spring-break reporting showing girls and guys dressed in nothing but whipped cream. A myriad of “reality dating shows” encourages young people to abandon all restrictions and reservations—even encouraging involvement with multiple partners of both genders in just about every type of sexual act.

Is it any wonder that children (and even many adults) are confused about sexuality? Misinformation permeates the airwaves. Sexual innuendo creates unrealistic fantasies about what sex “should” be. Advertisers make illicit sexual activity look like a big party, tantalizing adolescents with dazzling images of exciting encounters with multiple partners. Many kids swallow the deception whole, believing that promiscuity is the doorway to happiness. But they end up sadly disillusioned when the reality leaves them empty and cold.

How can we help them avoid this painful trap? How can we show them that sex is not a self-centered party, but part of God's plan for a full and rewarding life?

### **Impossible Standards**

Advertisers promote pleasure—sexual pleasure in particular—as the goal of existence and the pinnacle of personal fulfillment. Whether the



product is an exotic cruise or frozen food, the basic message is always the same: Indulgence is the name of the game, and feeling good is the only thing that counts. Happy people are physically beautiful people. They're the kind of people who engage in lots of sexual activity (with no negative consequences). Is it any wonder young people are so consumed with sex?

So is it the media's fault that kids are having oral sex in seventh grade and babies in ninth grade? Are entertainers and advertisers responsible when adolescents reenact porn flicks at home? Has showbiz directly inspired same-sex experimentation among young teens? Or is Hollywood simply cashing in on preexisting social trends?

In a way, it doesn't matter. Some experts believe the media merely represent the world around us. Others feel that entertainment profoundly influences and directs our culture and has contributed significantly to the increased interest in sexual pleasure and sensuality. Either way, the *practical* challenge facing Christian parents and kids is the same: If we want to live by the standards God has established for human sexuality, we have to make up our minds to go against the flow of culture.

Nowhere is this more evident than in our young people's world. Promiscuous sex has become all too common on high school and college campuses. As a result, sexually transmitted infection (STI) rates among teens are skyrocketing. Of the almost nineteen million new STI cases each year in the US alone, over 50 percent occur in people under the age of twenty-five.<sup>1</sup>

If you're a parent of young children, you may react to these statistics with disbelief. If you have older kids, you may feel overwhelmed by despair. But this isn't the time to give up hope! If you want your kids to embrace a healthy, godly, biblical understanding of sexuality, all you have to do is open your eyes and make up your mind to act.

Your child doesn't have to be the victim of cultural influences. There's another way. You are the most powerful influence in your child's life (even when it seems he isn't listening). The media can fake it with smoke and mirrors, but you're the real thing. Your child knows you are, whether he admits it or not. That's why he needs *you* to talk with him frankly, honestly, and often about how sex fits into the bigger picture of life.

## Avoiding Mixed Messages

Woven into the fabric of our culture are a couple of distinctly different and mutually contradictory messages about sex and sexuality. The first is that sex is the most important thing in life. It's the goal of almost everything we do: how we dress and groom ourselves, how we present ourselves to other people, how we go about our daily business. And because sex is such a fundamental part of our physical and emotional makeup, there's no reason in the world why we shouldn't indulge our feelings and satisfy our sexual desires through any number of purely physical relationships.

The problem with this viewpoint, of course, is that it elevates personal pleasure above respect for God and other people. This mindset has spawned an epidemic in teen pregnancy, sexual addiction, and gender confusion, as well as STIs. And that's not to mention the "heart damage" that results from extramarital sexual activity: loneliness, hurt, depression, and low self-esteem.

An opposite but equally destructive message suggests that sex is a secret, shameful part of life that should never be discussed. In essence, this view denies that sex and sexuality are the good and holy gifts of a loving God.

The idea here is that a "good" person doesn't experience sexual temptations, sexual thoughts, or sexual feelings. Obviously, this is a lie. By divine design, sex is an integral part of life. Sexual feelings are part of our basic humanity. This negative view of sex has led to ignorance, shame, and secretiveness about sex and sexuality. Ironically, this perspective, like its opposite, translates into an increase in teen pregnancy, STIs, sexual addictions, loneliness, heartache, depression, and guilt.

Taken together, these lies leave teens between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, sex is simply a biological and emotional drive that one has the right to gratify in any way one sees fit. On the other hand, sex is a filthy, shameful thing to be avoided at all costs. Either way, sex is anything but the beautiful, fulfilling, and holy mystery God created it to be.

If you're a Christian parent, your challenge is to equip your child with an attitude toward sexuality that's both balanced and biblical. This approach suggests that sex is part of God's plan, and if it's kept in the context of marriage and integrated into life in a healthy, productive way

it will promote fulfillment on every level: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. Viewed from this perspective, sex is neither compulsive nor damaging. Instead, it's a gift intended to enhance the intimate "one flesh" bond between a husband and a wife.

## **Not Just Another Sex Manual**

This book is written from this uniquely biblical perspective. The authors genuinely believe that sex is a beautiful gift, given to us for our good by a loving heavenly Father. It's not just a feeling, a physical activity, or a biological drive. It's deeply relational, emotional, and spiritual (as well as physical). We're convinced that young people who understand this can embrace their sexuality with power and knowledge.

The authors of this book address sex and sexuality with clinical experience and the support of scientific evidence. Many of them are physicians who've spent decades dealing with patients who've experienced the unfortunate results of sexual activity outside of God's design. Such outcomes include unplanned pregnancies, STIs, and infertility.

In other words, acknowledging and embracing God's plan for human sexuality can help your child avoid a great deal of emotional, relational, and spiritual anguish as well as significant physical consequences. To help you in that cause, the questions and answers you'll read later in this book will be addressed with the caring but straightforward approach of the seasoned health professional.

Here are some of the issues you'll see addressed:

- Healthy sexuality requires that every person present his or her body to the Lord as a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1). It also implies respect for other people as creatures made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). True pleasure comes from recognizing the worth of others and the value of deep interpersonal relationships, especially the relationship of marriage.
- Sexual health is one result of a sincere desire to please God. It's centered in a positive self-image based on a deep understanding of His love. It's marked by strong character traits such as self-control, personal responsibility, honesty, and kindness.

- Sex within the relationship for which it was designed—marriage—is healthy and good. Sex outside of this context can have devastating results.
- Sexual desires are normal and healthy. At the same time, sexual passions and desires are not irresistible. They can be controlled by an act of the will.
- Self-control is healthy and necessary for achieving sexual satisfaction. People who operate solely on the basis of their physical and emotional urges find little joy and happiness in life.
- Avoiding promiscuous sexual activity is an emotionally, spiritually, and physically healthy choice.
- Parents are the most powerful influence in a child’s life. They have the ultimate responsibility for teaching biblical truths, spiritual values, and personal character to their children. They also have the primary right and responsibility to be involved in their children’s education—especially about value-laden topics such as character and sexuality.

Do you feel overwhelmed as you contemplate the task of equipping your children with a healthy, biblical understanding of human sexuality? Do you fear that your puny efforts can’t possibly compete with the influence of media and culture?

If so, we want to help you turn that attitude around. With God’s help, you can counteract the mixed and malignant messages and train your kids in the basics of Christian character and healthy sexuality.

You don’t have to be daunted or discouraged—or dreading the prospect of answering your kids’ questions. Talking with them about sex and sexuality is just another adventure on your parenting journey. Believe it or not, it can be fun! And the benefits will last a lifetime.

## 2

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# THE BIG DEAL IS YOU!

## *Parents Do Make a Difference*

When teens are asked, “Who has done the most to shape your attitudes and opinions?” rock stars and athletes don’t top the list. An overwhelming majority of kids respond, “My parents.” That’s you.

Children are created to be relational beings. The first relationships they develop are usually with their parents. Kids want intimacy and the opportunity to communicate with someone about the most important things in life. That includes sex.

Unfortunately, many moms and dads don’t feel prepared or qualified to discuss this “hot” topic with their kids. This is a common affliction, and it’s not hard to see why.

Think about it: If and when your parents talked to you about “the birds and the bees,” was it painful, perhaps even terribly embarrassing? If so, you’ve probably inherited some of their discomfort with the subject.

Some parents find it hard to discuss sex comfortably and confidently because of the sexual choices they made in their younger years—or even as adults. *How can I presume to tell my child the right way to think and act about sex when I made so many mistakes?*

Fear and lack of confidence in this area seem especially common among Christian moms and dads. Why? In many instances, these parents labor under a burden of confused theology and faulty teaching. They don't really understand the biblical view of human sexuality.

Some believers have been taught to associate sex with sin. Others have been told it's a gift from God, but find that modesty forbids them to talk about it and guilt prevents them from enjoying it. Many confuse the use of sexual terms with vulgarity and are too embarrassed to be specific. Some have been sexually abused by church leaders or volunteers, and as a result their view of the relationship between faith and sexuality has been warped. Still others are so used to fighting battles over sex-related issues—sex education, same-sex marriage, abortion, pornography, sexual content in entertainment—that they've become conditioned to see sexuality itself as negative if not downright dangerous. In some cases, fears that their children might lose their innocence or abandon the faith have compelled parents to adopt a controlling and sheltering style of parenting that squelches free inquiry and discourages honest conversation.

Let's face it. If we want to equip our kids with a healthy, balanced, biblical view of sex, we're going to have to acknowledge these hang-ups and misconceptions and resolve them—or at least work around them. We're going to have to learn how to be frank and forthright about sex. There really is no other option.

After all, times have changed. Our sexually saturated culture doesn't allow us the luxury of *not* talking with our kids about this basic aspect of human life. If we don't do it, the media, the peer group, and society at large will. We can choose to initiate and direct the conversation, or we can let the culture dictate our children's beliefs and values. Ignoring the issue can have disastrous results, including ignorance, pain, and loneliness for our kids in the future.

Rather than seeing this as a threat, though, you can see it as a tremendous opportunity. You have the power to provide your child with accurate, biblical, God-honoring information about sexuality. Your child desperately needs you to do this. Whether she knows it or not, she's looking to you to shape her attitudes, not just physically and emotionally, but also in the

areas of character and faith. And you're in an unparalleled position to make a real difference in her life.

### **The Journey Begins with Four Steps**

Exactly how should you go about meeting this challenge? Here are four steps you can take, and they all have to do with *knowing*.

1. *Know God*. It all starts with building a healthy, Christ-centered relationship with your child. To be as stable and effective as possible, the connection between you and your son or daughter should be rooted in your relationship with the Savior. It must be three-cornered, with the parent-child bond forming the base of the triangle and God Himself at the apex. If you put everything else, sex included, under the umbrella of His eternal truth—if you consciously make Him the focus of all you are and do—then your perspective on sexuality and sexual behavior will fall naturally into its proper place.

That perspective includes the fact that sex is the God-given mechanism whereby a man and woman become “one flesh” within the bonds of marriage (Gen. 2:24). The delights of sex, when experienced within that context, are just one of the many pleasures God grants to those who submit to His authority and live according to His plan (Ps. 16:11). Let these biblical ideas form the basis of all your interactions with kids on the topic of sex.

2. *Know yourself*. No parent is perfect. No parent has every issue figured out. We're all sinners in God's eyes, and we all have baggage from the past. That's standard for everyone who's ever lived, moms and dads included. The truth is that life is hard, and it's the rare person who gets to the stage of raising kids without accumulating bruises and scars. Parenting isn't a call to be perfect—just to be real. You don't have to ignore your pain and confusion. Make up your mind not to let your fears and failures taint your child's future.

If you're married, keep your marriage strong and maintain open lines of communication with your spouse. Kids need to see that while Mom and Dad don't always agree, they can express their differences respectfully and talk sensibly and civilly about all kinds of issues—including sexuality.

If you're no longer married (or never were), it would be helpful to keep talking to your former spouse or another trusted adult about your child's growth, character development, and sexuality. Parenting shouldn't be a solo flight. This is especially true when it comes to teaching children about sex.

3. *Know your child.* You can't effectively teach your child about healthy sexuality unless you really know him. Take time to get into his world, to understand and appreciate his temperament, to respect him as an individual. Take careful stock of his strengths, weaknesses, joys, passions, and fears. Avoid generic lecturing, and resist the temptation to think the job is done when you've delivered your ideas and opinions.

Developing a closer relationship with your child doesn't mean spoiling her by giving in to her every whim. It means providing her with time, attention, affection, affirmation, and comfort as well as appropriate structure, limits, and guidance. All these things contribute to a healthy sense of identity, which helps your child resist sexual pressures from culture and peers.

4. *Let your kids know you.* Relationship is a two-way street. If it's going to work, you'll need to let your children know you as well. This doesn't necessarily mean sharing all your mistakes and weaknesses, but kids need to hear how your experiences have influenced your journey. If you've felt the same emotions they're experiencing, if you've walked in their shoes, tell them in an age-appropriate way. When they see that you experienced some of the same struggles growing up and had many of the same questions, they'll be less likely to feel alone in their quest for maturity.

How much should you share? Let your words and actions be guided by a desire to give your children the information they really need for the situation at hand. Truthfulness is essential and transparency is critical, but the detail of your confessions should be determined by the child's age, maturity, and motivation for asking a question. Is she requesting that you reveal personal data, as in, "Did you and Dad have sex before marriage?" If not, ask yourself whether there's any good reason to volunteer this kind of information.

### **How's Your Sex Life?**

Much of the instruction your children get from you on the subject of sex will be nonverbal. Attitudes toward sex are caught more than taught.



That's why it's so important to ask how *your* sex life is doing. Would you describe it as good? Great? Troubled? Indifferent? It's important to figure out how you feel about the matter. Research indicates that those who have the best and most frequent sex are people who are married, monogamous, and religious—quite the opposite of any Hollywood stereotype.<sup>1</sup> But that doesn't mean your experience necessarily fits that pattern.

Do you want your kids to grow up to have a balanced, healthy sex life—one that's consistent with God's design for marriage? If you're like most parents, you want your kids to have a better life than you've had—personally, professionally, even physically. One of the most powerful ways you can help your child achieve a fulfilling sex life in the future is by nurturing a healthy, wholesome, balanced sexual relationship with your spouse today.

### **The Right to Remain Silent?**

You're the most influential person in your child's life when it comes to sexual issues.<sup>2</sup> Your behaviors and attitudes about sex—spoken and unspoken—will forever be imprinted upon his life.

But some parents are scared to talk to their kids about such a personal subject. Others are unprepared academically and/or emotionally. After all, you probably aren't a physician and don't hold degrees in anatomy or physiology.

But neither do most parents. And in today's world there are plenty of resources available and places to go for advice on this topic—as long as you make sure the advice is consistent with biblical teaching and supports your understanding of the divine plan for human sexuality.

Perhaps embarrassment is keeping you from delving into sexual issues with your child. If so, consider this: Songwriters and Facebook friends aren't embarrassed to talk candidly with him about sex. Why should you be?

If fear is holding you back, it's time to ask yourself why. Are you ashamed to talk with your kids because you had many partners early in life? Does it hurt to admit the mistakes you've made?

Maybe you're not emotionally ready to talk with your son or daughter about sex because you were abused as a child, or raped, or because your child was conceived while you were under the influence of alcohol or drugs,

or you weren't married when you got pregnant. Perhaps your sexual addictions or an affair have cost you your marriage and family, and you're not prepared to be vulnerable with your child about the pain.

Whatever your situation, your experiences can be building blocks or stumbling blocks for your child. Why not use them as springboards to growth and healing? Why not turn your failures into teaching opportunities?

It's understandable if one of these issues makes it difficult to speak up about sex. But that doesn't justify remaining silent. You need to deal with your issues so that you can protect your kids from the pain you've experienced in the sexual realm. Take the time to seek the healing you need. You'll be in a stronger position to help your child develop a healthy, balanced, biblical understanding of sex.

There are several steps you can take to begin this healing process:

1. *Start with an honest review of your life.* You can't hope to fix your problems until you know what they are. Face your mistakes and acknowledge the hurtful experiences of your past—especially those connected with sex and sexuality. This includes looking at how others have let you down and how poor choices you made have affected your life.

2. *Share these reflections with a trusted friend or professional counselor.* Find a reliable person with whom you can talk openly about these negative experiences and your feelings about them. Healing is unlikely to occur outside of relationships, and talking with a trustworthy friend or counselor can provide a tremendous sense of relief from the pain and sadness of your past.

3. *Forgive.* This is perhaps the most difficult part of the process. Forgive those who have wronged you, and forgive yourself. This is essential if you're to achieve freedom and help your children develop a healthy sense of self-worth and God-centered sexuality. Bear in mind that forgiving isn't the same as forgetting. It doesn't matter if the person has asked for or earned forgiveness. It's a process of letting go and moving forward. It's a gift you give yourself.

4. *Keep learning.* It's never too late to become a student again. As you talk with your kids about sex and sexuality, take the opportunity to glean new information from reliable sources so you can positively shape your children's future relationships.

## It's Never Too Late to Start

If you can embrace a positive outlook on sex and sexuality, you'll be better able to communicate effectively with your child about this basic aspect of human life. Releasing your pain is the first step toward equipping your child with the skills she needs to match her sex life with God's design, and to enhance her experience of marital sex in the future. If your child is in high school and you're just starting this process, ask her forgiveness and try to correct any misinformation you may have communicated in the past.

There's never been a more exciting time to give your child the gift of a positive, strong message about her growing sexuality. She'll learn about sex from someone. The question is—will that person be you?

Parents are powerful. You're more influential than you might have imagined! So take seriously the charge God has given you. Train up your child in the precepts of His Word. Do everything you can to prepare her for a life of healthy sexuality. At the same time, bear in mind that you're not ultimately responsible for the outcome.

If you're thinking, *I've tried everything, and my child is still a disaster*, don't be discouraged. You can't force another person to embrace the truth. Only God can draw your child to Himself and inspire her with a desire to live a holy life and apply the lessons you've taught.

Don't get bogged down under a burden of false guilt. Just do your best to model a healthy life and to develop a positive relationship with your child. Then commit your efforts to the Lord—and leave the result in His hands.