

It's not about the birds and the bees anymore;
How to talk with your kids about sex when they think you're clueless.

By Maggie Karner

Thank you for coming today. That not only tells me something about your desire to be an effective parent. It says you love your children and are looking for God's guidance, but it also sends an important signal to your kid.

I wanted to talk with you individually because I want to encourage you in your "vocation" as parent. This is the doctrine of vocation. The term literally means "calling."

According to Luther, every Christian is called to particular offices and tasks, through which God Himself works to govern and care for His created order. Lutheran author and educator Gene Veith says "God teaches through teachers; He protects us through the vocations of police officers, firefighters, soldiers and government officials; He brings beauty through artists; He proclaims His Word and administers His Sacraments through pastors. We all have many different vocations---but our calling as "parent" is one of our most important vocations.

When parents bring their children to Baptism, provide for their needs, discipline them, bring them up in His Word, and raise them to adulthood, God is at work every step of the way."

But when it comes to discussing sexuality, most parents---myself included---find it uncomfortable to talk about with their kids. After all, for years, we've been quiet in the bed room and hush-hush with our spouses trying to hide the fact that we actually have sex from our kids!

A recent study found that about 9 out of 10 adults surveyed said they believe parents should talk to their kids about sex, but often they don't know what to say, how to say it, or when to start.

But the teen years are a time of intense transition for parents and their kids. Don't think of this as a time to "let go." Rather it is a time when we need to draw even closer to our teens. Childhood does not magically disappear when a child reaches 15 or 16. Parents need to help shape their child's life now more than ever.

And despite the fact that TV, MTV, movies and music continually expose our teens to sexual imagery, there is some great new research that can give all us discouraged moms and dads some hope.

Studies show that parents are—in fact—capable of making a much more dramatic influence in their children's sexual decision-making that we originally thought.

Even science is now confirming this concept. Let me explain. . .

Recent MRI studies of the developing brains of normal adolescents clearly show that the physical development of the pre-frontal cortex is not complete until the mid-twenties. This is important because the **frontal lobes of each of the cerebral hemispheres of the brain are used for logical reasoning and emotions**, and the pre-frontal lobes play a role in **higher-level thought processes**.

In addition, **during fetal life and again during adolescence, there is also an explosive brain development in our children**. During both of these growth periods, more brain synapses develop than are actually needed. Most of the unused synapses will disappear, while the **often-used synapses are retained and strengthened**—sort of the “use it or lose it” phenomenon. This is really important because it means that the **experiences and activities of our adolescent actually mold their brains**.

What does this mean for us as parents? Well, it means that we need to reject the former thoughts of psychologists and our culture that promotes the idea that teens are capable of evaluating consequences and making complicated and difficult decisions for themselves.

Our teens are NOT of “mini” adults! Society has been giving us the message that---given enough freedom---teens will be able to employ “cause and effect” thought processes for their decision-making. All this new research simply confirms that this is not true. Something folks a generation ago knew by common sense.

Look at it this way; you wouldn't let your toddler play outside by the busy street without some boundaries or supervision because they simply aren't intellectually--or even physically--equipped to protect themselves. They would end up wandering gleefully after a ball into the busy street. Does your toddler like boundaries? No. Does your toddler need boundaries? Most certainly yes.

All this new research tells us that we need to employ a similar strategy during the teen years. These years can be tricky. . .my daughter and I wear the same shoe size now. . . and your teen will be studying biology and chemistry and memorizing the periodic table of elements and be a charming conversationalist (or not) and play in the orchestra and serenade us with Rachmaninoff or Bach or shoot amazing three-pointers and do all kinds of amazing and wonderful things we can be so proud of. . .but we need to stop and remember that they are not “mini-adults”. Just like when they were toddlers, they simply are not intellectually—or even physically, equipped to protect themselves from the many dangers they will encounter.

If given enough freedom, our teens will be just like that little toddler and wander gleefully after a distraction out into the “traffic”. . . the traffic of our culture. A culture filled with hidden and seductive dangers that Satan has specifically designed to target our children.

For most of my adult life the phrase "hooking up" referred to something one did with stereo equipment or cable TV.

Ask your adolescent (or anyone at random in your church's youth group) and you'll hear the current definition: a spontaneous, nonconversational, usually emotionless, apparently meaningless and definitely commitmentless physical encounter, typically at a social gathering where alcohol or other intoxicants serve as catalysts.

You remember the old baseball analogy of making out? Now, in the era of hooking up, "first base" meant deep kissing, groping and fondling; "second base" meant oral sex; "third base" meant going all the way; and "home plate" meant learning each other's names.

Recent studies have also shown that Christian teenagers are just as likely to be sexually active as non-Christians. A 1990 study of Wisconsin high school seniors reveal that 74 percent of the males and 44 percent of the females).

Each year about 10,000,000 Americans visit a doctor to be treated for a sexually transmitted disease (the actual number of persons infected each year is estimated at twice that). In the United States 3,000 teens become pregnant each day. That's a million each year!

There's a new theory that many people (including me) think is contributing to these problems. It seems that our society is experiencing a loss of the "culture of courtship"—the "set of social norms and expectations that once helped young people find the pathway to marriage." Most teens today have no idea of the type of "dating" that we grew up with--you know the nervous phone call from the guy. . .the girl accepts. . .he picks her up at home and is introduced to the dad. . .movie, popcorn, and the decision to go out again—or maybe not. The term "dating" is not even used much these days.

Part of this problem may be because sociologists have seen "the virtual disappearance of adult participation in, or even awareness of, how today's young people find and marry one another. Adults, especially parents, need to take a meaningful role in correcting this loss: Because this is an important step in teaching our children respect and honor of the opposite gender. We want our teens to learn this respect because that is what is found in Christian marriage.

Value-absent, condom-touting "comprehensive" sex education has so effectively devalued the meaning of human sexuality among the young that it literally handed us the hooking-up phenomenon on a (tarnished) silver platter. Properly taught abstinence—or I prefer to call it "chastity"—education, on the other hand, is all about relationship skills and much more: respect for self and others, self-discipline, servanthood in Christian relationships, understanding the dangers of sex outside of marriage and the possibility of debilitating disease, education about healthy interactions with the opposite sex and, above all, building the foundation for a solid marriage.

Ironically, the Institute for American Values study found that 83 percent of the undergraduate women surveyed indicated that "being married is a very important goal" for them. If we as parents, want to help our kids fulfill that goal, it is imperative that we step up to the plate and take a stand for sexual sanity and marital integrity.

Powerful forces shaping our society (including our public education system, our legislators, and the media) teach that it is unreasonable to expect unmarried people to abstain from sexual intercourse.

In this climate, even the plague of AIDS has been unable to demand support for sexual purity. In place of chastity, the lie of "safe sex" is being promoted. Public schools put a stamp of approval on premarital sex by making condoms and abortion advice freely available to their students. Television programs frequently portray promiscuity as desirable and healthy. Comic books feature super-heroes who are gay.

But we Christians need to be honest. The blame for our children's disregard for the sixth commandment lies at our own doorsteps, as well.

Parents need to speak with their children about sexuality. If you find that to be challenging—or a bit scary, you're in good company. Because of its intensely intimate nature, the thought of addressing the topic of sex with our children usually provokes a strong emotional reaction. But we can't avoid this responsibility. Because we live in a sex-obsessed society, we cannot prevent even our young children from learning about the subject long before they need to. Sex education of children by their parents is a matter of self-defense. Only if we serve as the instructors, can we be sure our children will accurately learn the essential facts together with the appropriate values.

Remember what we discussed earlier about the development of teen brains? Folks, this is one area where they certainly need guidance and support.

OK, so how do we do it? Well let's begin with three do's and three don'ts.

- 1) Do--communicate, communicate, communicate, and then repeat.

Remember the agonizing talk about the birds and bees our folks gave us—maybe ONCE if we were lucky? Well, did you know professional marketers say the average advertisement needs to be seen or heard at least 7 times before the message resonates and sticks with the consumer. Well, think about how many times the message that sex outside of marriage is OK is sent to your kids through our culture. They are constantly bombarded with that message. Unfortunately, it eventually registers with some kids. Let's make sure that God's plan for our sexuality within marriage is constantly before them as well.

- 2) Do--Listen first.

You can't communicate if you don't know who you're talking to. You can't communicate if you don't know your audience. Your audience is a unique young personality with hopes and dreams and opinions and questions. We need to make sure they feel comfortable talking to us, first, when they have questions. Create an atmosphere of trust and openness so they will try-out the questions and opinions on us first.

- 3) Do---get medically accurate information and know what is going on in your teen's world. I

I've brought a variety of pamphlets and information sheets with me today, and there is a list of informative resources on our WR/HC web site under life ministries.

Those were the Do's—here's the don't's:

- 1) Don't---be age inappropriate.

Don't bore a 4 year old with information about the female fallopian tube, and don't think you're 16-year old is interested in fairy tales about the birds and the bees. Know your child well enough to know what they can handle and what their current interests are.

Here's some suggestions:

Pre-schoolers and early elementary----reinforce the miracle of their bodies and how they were created. Make sure they know about appropriate and in-appropriate touching. Make sure they know they can always come to you for anything that makes them feel uncomfortable. Answer their questions in simple, concrete ways. Use everyday life events and turn them into teachable moments. If you are having another baby, it is a perfect opportunity for special learning opportunities. Allow the child to feel the baby moving, and drag out their baby book and talk about how you anxiously awaited them. Discuss God's creation in the garden and His formation of Adam and Eve for each other and for Him.

With older elementary kids: Get more detailed and discuss the formation in the womb. They will become increasingly more curious about their bodies and answer questions truthfully with accurate vocabulary. As they begin to become more aware of their appearance and fashion, it is time to introduce discussions about modesty. If someone on television is wearing something questionable, ask them for their reaction and use that as a springboard for a discussion about appropriate fashion. Dad's can be an important participant in these discussions with their daughters, too. This is also the time when they become intensely curious about the opposite sex. Again answer questions truthfully and accurately. Kids may also begin to have questions about inappropriate sexual behavior at this time. By this time, most kids have heard the term "gay" or "lesbian" and may want to know what those terms truly mean. If the subject comes up, you can explain that this is not the way God created us, nor is it the

way God intends for people to show love. You can let them know that this behavior is mentioned in the Bible as sinful. You can also tell them that we can pray for people who are burdened by this sin and love them as well, but we can't condone their decision to sin.

With Jr. High kids: This is crunch time. By now, you hopefully have talked about sexuality and thoughts and feelings so much with your kids, that it will not seem odd to them to have you continue more in-depth discussions. This is the age where listening becomes even more critical. This is also the age when your kids become increasingly independent of you and you need to stay in touch with them and their world. Ask casual questions in a non-threatening or humorous way. You also need to monitor who their friends are. Girls and boys will be going through some intense body changes during this period and don't let it take them by surprise. Make it a special time for them and highlight the importance of spiritual and intellectual maturity to go along with their maturing body. Let humor go a long way.

High School: OK. This is it. These are the years we all fear, right. If something's gonna go wrong, it's gonna happen here, right? I won't lie---I worry as much as anybody else. But this is where our faith steps in to rescue us from our fear. I would suggest that you begin these years with a clear set of expectations for your child and communicate---that and the consequences---prior to any problems. This is not meant to be confrontational, simply a set of clear boundaries that you can all adhere to. Know who your kid is hanging out with before they are allowed to go to their home. Make sure gatherings in homes or private places are supervised. Require frequent check-ins by phone when your teen is out and about. Require family time and reinforce the importance of family meals. Enjoy your kid! When you watch tv or movies with your kid, know what they are watching and watch it before you automatically ban something. It may be an opportunity or a catalyst for a great discussion about their world view or opinions. And let humor, again, be your tool---don't be afraid to be goofy. It can break the tension and lighten the moment. A goofy Dad who obviously cares is a lot better than a cool Dad who is too cool to talk to. Don't just talk about morality with them, engage them in discussions about political views or opinions about culture. #1 rule---listen, listen, listen.

2) Don't—forget to ask questions.

Ask them questions about their world and ask informal questions about their understanding of the issues.

3) Don't—Forget to pray, pray, pray and then repeat.

God loves our children more than we do. Trust in his care and guidance for your teen and for you--and then don't freak out about stuff.

Points to highlight when discussing sex:

- Sex is a beautiful thing—a gift God has gave us for procreation and for expressing love and servanthood to our spouse.
- Marriage is a boundary that God gives us for sex. It is for our own good and not to spoil our fun. God is helping us with the confusion BEFORE it arises. (Discuss good boundaries)
- Marriage is not about love, it is about commitment.
- Discuss consequences of living outside of God's boundary for sex---Pregnancy, STD's (physical danger), emotional heartache, spiritual decay.

OK, so that's my two-cents worth on this subject. But I'm not an expert. I'm just a mom who cares about kids---mine and others. I know you desperately love your kids, too. I guess my message is you can do far more for your kid than any child psychologist "expert"---you ARE the expert on your child. Gather all the information you can about these unique individuals and shepherd them. You are the professional and with the Lord's help and reassurance—you can do it!

