

How and When to Tell Your Kids About Sex

A Lifelong Approach to Shaping Your Child's Sexual Character

STAN AND BRENN A JONES



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PART 1

Foundations

The Big Picture

Preparing Healthy, Godly Adults

Sex is a gift from God. It is a frequently misunderstood, misused, and squandered gift, but a gift nonetheless. Our sexuality and the rules God has given us to direct our use of that gift are a tremendous blessing.

Many parents focus too narrowly and negatively when they think about goals for sex education. Worried by what they hear about sexual promiscuity, sexually transmitted diseases, and the like among young people, parents attempt to convince their kids not to have sex in an effort to protect them from the ravages that illicit and irresponsible sex can cause. Rightly so. But this goal is too small, too limited, too narrow. If we stop there, we seek to protect them only by stopping them from doing anything negative.

Don't we want to give them something profoundly positive? Protecting our children from the physical, emotional, and spiritual damage that can result from irresponsible and inappropriate sexual choices is important. *But our most important goal is to equip and empower our children to enter adulthood capable of living godly, wholesome, and fulfilled lives as Christian men and women, Christian husbands and wives.*

Our goal, then, is not just to protect our children from death or disease and not just to protect them from sin. Our goal is to prepare them to become adults who can have deep and meaningful marriages filled with spiritual, sexual, and emotional intimacy, and who can have loving and deep family relationships and friendships. Sex as God intended it is the giving over of the astonishing gift of our very selves to another in marital union. Sex education is about preparing our children for giving this gift rightly, preparing

them to be able to love and trust and believe enough to commit their whole selves and their whole futures to their spouses. When we do this, we also protect them.

Parenting as God Intended

Christian parents have a wonderful opportunity to prepare their children to experience God's best in the area of sexuality. Parents are capable of being effective sex educators; they just need some advice, encouragement, information, and help to get there. That's what this book provides, along with the four children's books that go with it in the GOD'S DESIGN FOR SEX series.

How do we achieve this goal of godly sex education? Parents rightly want help from our churches and schools, but we cannot abdicate such an important task to these organizations. The primary responsibility belongs to us. How do we do it? What are we to do? Here again many Christian parents think too small. We think of sex education in terms of The Talk, the single, dramatic sex talk with the early teen. Clearly, one or even several focused sex talks with a twelve- or fourteen-year-old cannot turn the tide. Wherever they turn, our children are inundated with messages and "programming" about sexuality, all pointing them in the wrong direction. Can one talk counteract all of the destructive messages they receive? No.

Here is our vision: that children grow up with godly, age-appropriate discussion and teaching about sexuality as a regular part of their relationships with their parents. Why? Because parents are God's agents for shaping the sexual characters of their children. And we believe that both parents and children can trust God's wisdom about sexuality throughout their lives, because that wisdom is given for their good. Listen to two of the most important passages in the Bible about parenting and about the beauty of God's commandments:

These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, *so that you, your children and their children after them* may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. Hear, O Israel, and be careful to obey *so that it may go well with you* and that you may increase greatly in

a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your fathers, promised you.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. *Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home* and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:1-9, emphasis added)

And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD's commands and decrees that I am giving you today *for your own good?* (Deuteronomy 10:12-13, emphasis added)

Parents are to shape children to become followers of the true God, to worship God in love and obedience. We are to do so trusting that God's commands are for their and our own good and are a source of blessing. Sex education is about making this great vision a reality in the area of sexuality.

Parenting is an extremely complex activity. Psychologists have been trying for quite some time to classify types of parents according to the most vital dimensions of parenting. The best research in this area should prove very encouraging to Christian parents.¹ Researchers have divided parents into four basic types on the basis of two major factors: (1) what the parents expect of their children and (2) how they respond to their children emotionally. The four types of parents are neglecting, permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative; and the authoritative style is clearly superior.

Neglecting parents expect little of their children and offer little emotional support. Permissive or indulgent parents are big on emotional support but expect little from their children and do not challenge their children to "be all they can be." Authoritarian parents overemphasize discipline, expectations, and control of their children; they push their children hard

but are cold and disconnected emotionally, leaving their children feeling unloved, valued only for their accomplishments.

Authoritative parents are strong in both areas, offering both high expectations and lavish love and support to their children. These parents have things they want to teach their children, but they combine an emphasis on discipline with warmth, communication, respect, and affection. *The consensus today is that this is the most effective parenting style and produces the healthiest kids.* Research suggests that children with this type of parent tend to have the highest levels of self-esteem, self-reliance, and social competence as compared to all of the other groups. They tend to perform better in school, having a strong motivation to achieve.

This research reinforces our belief that parents are representatives of God in the lives of their children.² Righteousness and love are two fundamental facets of God's character. God is perfect love and perfect righteousness. A Christian understanding of God balances these two realities. Overemphasize God's love to the exclusion of His righteousness, and God becomes the cosmic Santa Claus. Overemphasize God's righteousness to the exclusion of His love, and God becomes a terrifying Cosmic Tyrant toward whom we can feel only fear. God's perfect balance of these two characteristics is at the heart of the gospel.

Authoritative parenting reflects God's character to our children by manifesting both expectations and love. In having demands and expectations for their children, parents embody God's character of justice and righteousness, in which He reveals His will for His people and desires us to live up to it for our own good. In being accepting and loving parents, we embody God's loving and merciful character, in which time and again He pursues His wayward people out of love until He brings them home. Your child's future sexual choices will be affected by the overall quality of your relationship with him or her. We have the opportunity, as we function as the shapers of our children's sexual characters, to embody these two qualities as God would intend, indeed as God does Himself, by being authoritative parents as we do lifelong sex education in the family.

The Benefits of Following God

At the deepest level, we approach the task of sex education convinced that God's people will prosper as they handle the gift of their sexuality the way

God, the Gift-Giver, intended. They will prosper in three ways.

Prosper in Pleasing God

First, they prosper in pleasing God. The greatest benefit of conducting our sexual lives in the manner in which God urges us to, and teaching our children to do the same, is that we can know that we are doing what our Father wants us to do and that we are pleasing Him. Scripture promises that, in obedience — in living as God wishes — our faith can be completed or perfected:

[Jesus said,] “If you love me, you will obey what I command. . . . Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him. . . . If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.” (John 14:15,21,23-24)

We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, “I know him,” but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God’s love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did. (1 John 2:3-6)

Prosper in Safety

Second, we prosper in safety. In living according to God’s law, we experience the joy and blessing of sex as God meant it, free from fear. Obedience creates safety; we can live without fear of the devastation that can come from illicit sex. As you will soon see, sexual activity rates remain high among teens, with approximately 75 percent having had sexual intercourse by age 19 or 20.³ Sexually transmitted disease rates continue to climb, and teen pregnancy in the United States, though down from ten years ago, is the highest in the developed world.⁴ Premarital chastity and marital monogamy are

safeguards against unwanted pregnancy and the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases. More broadly, obedient Christians are also safer from the relational confusion and emotional traumas that premature and inappropriate sexual intimacy can foster. We are not only safe from bad things, we also have the blessing of experiencing the good that God intended in giving us the gift of sexuality.

Prosper in Marriage

Third, we prosper in marriage. Sexual chastity contributes to a successful marriage. While chastity before marriage is no guarantee of having a good marriage, the evidence that it helps is indisputable. An important sociological study of marriage found results that Christians will appreciate:⁵

- *The single most powerful predictor of a good marriage was whether couples pray together regularly.*
- *Couples able to pray together and enjoy good sex together were the least likely to divorce.*
- *Cohabitation before marriage approximately doubled the degree to which couples themselves believed they were likely to get a divorce; this reinforces numerous other studies that show cohabitation is bad for marriage rather than good preparation for it, as so many claim.*
- *The higher the incidence of premarital sex, the less the likelihood of the couple reporting high sexual satisfaction and the greater the likelihood of infidelity in marriage.*

The Twelve Principles of Christian Sex Education

This book is built around twelve core principles of Christian sex education. We want to explain our vision of Christian sex education in the family as we introduce these principles.

Principle 1:

Sex education is the shaping of character.

We have been discussing this principle already. If we are going to get this right, we must understand what we are doing. Many parents mistakenly

think that sex education primarily is about providing information—biological information. No wonder we shy away from the task! Most of us don't have college degrees in sexuality and biology, so how can we even get started?

But above all else, sex education is about shaping a child's character. Giving the child information is part of that, but only a part. We must also shape the values and attitudes of our kids, shape their worldviews, provide them with the emotional strength they will need to make godly decisions, and instill in them the skills to implement the good decisions they make. Most important, their behavior will spring from their hearts, which will be formed by their personal relationships with and devotion to God. Therefore, influencing their spiritual growth must be a top priority.

In chapter 3 we give you a way of thinking about your child's character that will help you understand how to shape his or her character; we build on this throughout this book. How your child responds to pressure to experiment with sex at age fifteen or to view pornography at age thirteen will have less to do with the biology he knows and more to do with his moral character and strength. The job of building his character belongs first and foremost with you as the parent.

Principle 2:

Parents are the principal sex educators.

No one will have an influence on your children like you do. If you avoid dealing with this topic, your influence will be confusing, frustrating, unsure, and unclear. If you take it on directly, you have the opportunity to have a powerful, clear, healthy, and positive influence on your child. Sex education is about much more than “sex-proofing” children through the teenage years. It is about preparing them to handle God's gift of sexuality rightly throughout life, preparing them to experience the fullness of God's blessing as they date, get engaged, marry, and have children themselves.

Children start learning about sexuality from their earliest moments. They learn about sexuality from watching how their mom and dad treat each other. They soak in the messages of the media, of their peers, of our culture in general. We urge you to start sex education early in the life of your children.

Principle 3:

First messages are the most potent.

Think of it this way: You wouldn't want your child to learn the wrong teachings about God for years and years, and *then* try to correct those erroneous lessons after the fact. So why do we let our kids learn about sexuality from everyone except us for years and years, and then try to correct all the wrong they have learned with an in-depth conversation when they are thirteen? It will be much more powerful, much more effective, to provide your children with a solid and age-appropriate foundation from the start.

Remember also that if you do not talk to your kids about sex, your silence is not just an absence of information. Your silence in fact teaches your kids that Dad and Mom do not want to talk about sex, are uncomfortable talking about sex, and probably are not good sources of information about sex. By seizing the opportunity to teach them about sex, you communicate the opposite: that you, the parents, are trustworthy resources for learning the truth about this most private and potent aspect of life. The children's books in the GOD'S DESIGN FOR SEX series are meant to provide starter conversations between you and your child. Reading them with your child opens up the topic, gets the words and ideas out on the table, and gives you a base from which to start.

Principle 4:

We should seize those teachable moments and become askable parents.

Many of the most precious opportunities to shape your children's characters come at unexpected moments. The pregnant mom at church, the foul word or leer in a movie preview, the news item about sexual abuse, the sexual affair of a celebrity, the mating animals in the zoo — these and hundreds of other events provide rich opportunities to discuss sexuality with your kids and thus to shape their characters.

Principle 5:

Stories are powerful teaching tools.

As you have these conversations, don't forget the teaching tool Jesus used so effectively—the story. You can teach your children a dry concept like “immoral sex can have bad consequences,” or you can have a powerful impact on your children by sharing with them real stories of the difficulties faced by a real person who had a child out of wedlock. Why is the media so powerful? In large part because it teaches by telling stories. Help your kids to learn the truth from real stories. Of course, we start with Bible stories, but we add to these the stories around us about real life.

Principle 6:

Accurate and explicit messages are best.

There is an old joke about the child who is looking around the parents' bedroom with a curious but doubtful look on his face. The puzzled father asks, “What are you looking for?”

“The shovel,” replies the son.

“What shovel?” asks the father.

“The shovel you use when you have sex.”

“Come again?” says the father.

“You told me that having sex is when you plant the sperm inside Mom's body, and you plant things with a shovel, so where's the shovel?” replied the boy.

Accurate messages are always best. They tell children that you care about them, that you respect their questions, and that you are a trustworthy source of truth. Explicit does not mean graphic or crude. It means that you give direct, truthful answers in an age-appropriate way. As we move through the developmental stages in this book, we will give numerous examples of how to give such appropriate messages.

Principle 7:

Positive messages are more powerful than negative messages.

We rob Christian faith of its power when we shrink the Christian teaching about sexuality to a list of don'ts. The first messages in the Bible about sexuality in Genesis 1 and 2 are wildly positive. God the Father and Creator made humanity—the first man and woman—as physical and sexual beings, male and female created equally in God's image. He made them (and us) so that the one man and the one woman could be blessed to form an exclusive and lifelong marital union, unite sexually and become “one flesh,” and experience the joy of sexual and personal union. They could also conceive and raise children. We even learn in the New Testament that Christian marriage serves as an earthly model of Christ's love for His bride, the church (see Ephesians 5:25-33). Yes, the Bible has to warn us that God hates sexual immorality, but this negative message is grounded in a profoundly positive reality.

Principle 8:

We must inoculate our children against destructive moral messages.

Try as we might to teach our kids the truth and nothing but the truth, the distorted beliefs of a world that has lost its balance will seep into the hearts and minds of our children. Will they be prepared? All parents know that a mild exposure to germs, whether in the form of a medical immunization or an exposure to real-world germs, can help to activate a child's immune system to fight off infection. In contrast, providing an environment that is too antiseptic (too much antibacterial hand soap, antibiotics, air purifiers, and so forth) can actually result in a child being more vulnerable, not less, to infection. In direct parallel, parents who expose their children to the destructive moral messages they will eventually encounter anyway help to strengthen their children by taking the surprise out of the destructive messages and teaching their children how to counteract them.

Principle 9:

Repetition is critical; repetition is really, really important.

Sex education is never done. You will think that you have already covered something, but if your child was not ready to hear it, it is as if you never said it. Kids need to hear the most important lessons over and over again.

Principle 10:

Close, positive parent-child relationships are crucial.

Research has shown that teenagers will be less likely to experiment with sex if they are close to at least one of their parents. It is not all about the information that is in their heads; it is also about what is in their hearts. Diet experts tell those trying to lose weight to never go to the grocery store hungry. Why would we let our kids go out on dates or out into the confusing world of teen relationships starving for affection and affirmation? A close relationship with a parent sends them to the relational grocery store full and strong. Such a close relationship also helps them remember that what they do sexually is ultimately about whom they love—do they love you and show that love by honoring what you have taught them? Do they love Jesus and honor Him with obedience?

The final two principles are about balance.

Principle 11:

Sexuality is not the most important thing in life.

Principle 12:

Our God can forgive, heal, and redeem anything.

You should not make the mistake of focusing so much on sexuality that it gets out of proportion with life. Yes, the stakes are enormous; a bad decision can have life-altering consequences. But God does not focus only on sexuality, and neither should you as a parent. And you should not make the mistake

of thinking that bad decisions on your child's part will be the end of life as you know it. We worship a God who brings good out of evil, life out of death, sweetness out of bitterness. Live as a parent in the confidence and freedom of knowing that God is in control, and He is a loving and merciful Father.

So the big picture is of parents and children in ever-expanding and deepening conversations about our sexuality. These conversations help to draw you together and help to deepen your children's faith in the goodness and love of God.

Here again are the principles in this book:

- *Principle 1: Sex education is the shaping of character.*
- *Principle 2: Parents are the principal sex educators.*
- *Principle 3: First messages are the most potent.*
- *Principle 4: We should seize those teachable moments and become askable parents.*
- *Principle 5: Stories are powerful teaching tools.*
- *Principle 6: Accurate and explicit messages are best.*
- *Principle 7: Positive messages are more powerful than negative messages.*
- *Principle 8: We must inoculate our children against destructive moral messages.*
- *Principle 9: Repetition is critical; repetition is really, really important.*
- *Principle 10: Close, positive parent-child relationships are crucial.*
- *Principle 11: Sexuality is not the most important thing in life.*
- *Principle 12: Our God can forgive, heal, and redeem anything.*

The objectives of this book revolve around giving you, the parent, the tools you need to instill in your child a distinctively Christian sexual character. We hope, in this way, that you will be able to equip your children to make godly and wise decisions about their sexuality in their teenage years. We also hope, just as importantly, that you will lay the foundations for them to experience the blessings of God's gift of sexuality as mature and responsible adults, whether married or single.