

Talking to Your Children About the Gift of Human Sexuality

1. Relax.

Your children are sexual beings. It is normal for them to have sexual curiosity and desires as they develop. It is not our job to *prevent* these feelings, it is our job as parents to help form them into healthy young men and women by providing the appropriate information and assisting them to *process* the feelings. Many parents feel so overwhelmed and anxious that they do nothing, rather than something.

2. Pray.

God has entrusted you with your children and says that you are the best person to teach them about sexuality. The Church believes this wholeheartedly. Pray for your children to make good choices, and pray for the graces to know how to guide them.

3. Find a good resource.

Regardless of your background, it is helpful to have a book or resource to assist you with forming your children and provide some basic images to aid your discussion. "Beyond the Birds and the Bees: The Secrets of Raising Sexually Whole (and Holy!) Kids" by Mr. Gregory Popcak, MSW, LCSW, is one excellent resource.

4. Find teachable moments.

Your children will be bombarded with issues of sexuality from a very early age. Use each of those moments as you see them to have discussions with your child. For example, when you see a commercial that is inappropriate, discuss it with your children. Explain how it did not treat our body or another person with respect and dignity. Teaching human sexuality is a series of hundreds of small conversations over many years...not just one "talk".

5. Protect them.

If you decide to purchase an electronic device to bring into your house, then you need to be responsible for learning how to use the device and how to protect your family from it being a free connection to the internet. Nearly every video game system, portable gaming device, computer, mp3 player, cell phone, and tablet now has the ability to surf the internet. If it has a screen, assume that your family can use it to view pornography.

6. Don't wait.

Choose the time to discuss specific topics on human sexuality with your children – do not let their friends choose the time. The Church has provided excellent tips and recommendations on age-appropriate discussions through the document, "The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality." The USCCB and many solid Catholic psychologists have made us aware that the 5th or 6th grade is when many of these discussions begin in your children's social relationships. This is when young people have begun puberty and the sexual discussions and curiosity really takes off. Your child may be a late bloomer, but they are often surrounded by kids who are developing. You want to be the first to have these discussions with your children.

7. Stay positive.

Remember that human sexuality is a beautiful gift from God; a most precious gift that we should be protecting and saving for our spouse. It is not dirty, gross, or bad. Pay attention to your language and how you describe this beautiful gift. Furthermore, teens learn from rewards, not threats. Do not concentrate on mortal sin, sexually transmitted diseases, or pregnancy...these do not scare kids into being good. Rather, focus on the rewards of living a sexually pure life.

8. Surround your child with great Catholic adults.

In Campus ministry I discovered that what kept college students from making bad moral decisions was often the fact that they would be letting down somebody at home; a parent, a youth minister, a priest, a coach, or some other adult from the parish. Do everything you can to get your child active at the parish and surround them with Catholic adults who are modeling a love for and commitment to Christ.

9. Remain realistic.

Each child is different. What works with one of your children may not work whatsoever with the next.

10. Share your stories.

Many parents are not sure how to start conversations about human sexuality. Talk to your children about how you and your spouse met, how you fell in love, your marriage, your honeymoon, how you discovered you were pregnant, and the story of their delivery. Few boys know if they are circumcised. Few girls know if they were a natural delivery or C-section. These stories can lead into more important discussions about dating, true love, how babies are created, the miracle of life, etc.

11. Teach what is important.

Contraception, abortion, masturbation, pornography, same sex attraction, etc. are important at the appropriate age and growth in human development. These topics are often being taught or discussed in secular venues, but are rarely taught by the Church. Parents should not be surprised if strong Catholic teens end up with a very secular understanding of sexuality as a result. It is up to you to make sure they understand the truth and beauty of human sexuality as God designed it.

12. Be their parent, not their friend.

They need you to teach them the truth. They need you to set boundaries and stick to them.

13. Set a good example.

If a tv show, movie, song, joke, or website is inappropriate for your teenager, then it is probably inappropriate for you.

14. Get to the sacraments on a regular basis.

If your son or daughter is struggling with pornography or a sexual relationship, they will probably never tell you about it. However, if you participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation on a regular basis as a family, then your parish priest will assist you in guiding your child towards purity.

15. Your authority comes from God, not from your past behavior.

Many parents feel that they cannot teach purity to their children because they made many mistakes during their high school and college years. Go to confession for your sins, and then help guide your child not to make the same mistakes. Nobody is perfect, but that does not mean that we cannot teach our children to strive for perfection.

16. This is your job, Dad.

Mothers are typically the parent that is most concerned about teaching the children about purity. They have a big role in teaching their daughters. However, boys need to hear from their dads. Men also need to remember that the way they speak to their wives greatly influences how their daughters expect to be treated by their future husbands.

A closing challenge...

“Some parents, seeking to protect their children’s innocence, go to great lengths to shield their children from any sexual information at all. This is foolish. What these parents forget is that there is a difference between innocence and ignorance. Children raised by parents who mistake the two are easy prey for those looking for a lamb to lead to the slaughter. I am aware of too many young men and women who led seemingly chaste lives while they lived with their parents but became seduced by the atmosphere of alcohol and sex that is alive and well on most college campuses. They simply do not have the tools to cope with these circumstances. Out from under their parents’ thumbs, these young adults first treat the sensuality and sin that surrounds them with suspicion, but once their initial shock wears off, they are too easily convinced to join the ride. They become like children set loose in a toy store.”

-Gregory K. Popcak, MSW, LCSW in “Beyond the Birds and the Bees”.

List compiled by Mr. Kevin Bohli. Kevin is the Executive Director for the Office of Youth, Campus, and Young Adult Ministries for the Catholic Diocese of Arlington. He has spoken to thousands of parents and 6th-8th grade boys about the topic of Human Sexuality since 2004. He is married with six children.