

# How to Talk to Your Kid about Sex

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Honesty and Openness  
for a Sensitive Subject

William P. Smith



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As you step out of your car at the end of the day, your nine-year-old announces that her friend Kate, standing twelve feet away, wants to be a lesbian when she grows up. Your six-year-old son wants to know how babies are made . . . and he keeps pressing for more details. Your daughter came home from seeing the sex education film at school that urged her to “go ahead and experiment” as she gets older. Your fourth-grade son has started grabbing himself and doesn’t seem aware of the effect he’s having on others.

To top it all off, you just learned that the elementary kids are playing Spin the Bottle on the playground with the bemused blessing of the recess aide. This sounds like way too much way too early, but you’re told that *everyone* thinks it’s normal. You’re struggling to know how to talk about the physical aspects of relationships without sounding like you just teleported in from the 1800s.

### **Talk about the Context for Intimacy**

In an oversexed society, it is tempting to believe that the less said, the better for everyone. That’s not true. What will happen is not that your kids will hear less, but that you will have allowed

everyone *except* you to shape the content of those conversations. Your children will still overhear or take part in what's said at school, on the playground, in home-school clubs, at the park, even in church. They will still be exposed to sexual content through the media, even if it's only through billboards on the highway or the magazine rack at the food store. By keeping quiet you will turn them loose into that world unprepared to handle what they encounter.

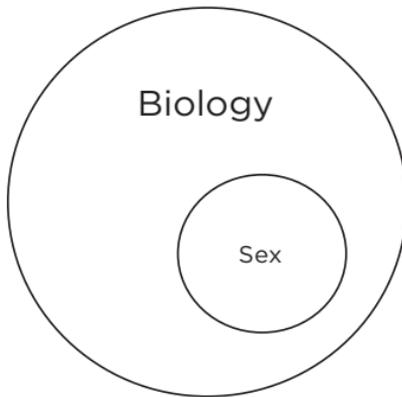
Sadly, the extent of sex education for many good church kids appears to begin and end with "Save sex for marriage." Effectively, that's like telling someone "No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no!" for a couple of decades, then expecting them on their wedding night to suddenly be able to say "YES!"<sup>1</sup>

Only slightly better is when we tell them, "God knows the way you work best, so learn to trust him in this area and just wait." Good advice, but it doesn't go far enough. It doesn't give our kids a context for why smart and sensitive people in our society come up with a completely different approach to sexuality. Simply saying that treating sexuality any other way is the result of sin is not satisfying to a thoughtful young person, especially

in the face of so much pressure to accept so-called alternative lifestyles.

Here's a picture I've used to help my own kids (as well as older folks) develop a positive view of their own sexuality and organize the messages they hear from our society. It's a simple picture that gives a framework for processing ungodly messages while valuing the precious thing that our sexuality is. (As a bonus feature, you don't feel pornographic drawing it!)

I start by drawing a large circle with a smaller inner circle and say, "Context is everything. If sex [label the smaller circle for your child as you talk] is best understood within the circle of biology [label the larger circle], then it really is no different from the color of your hair.



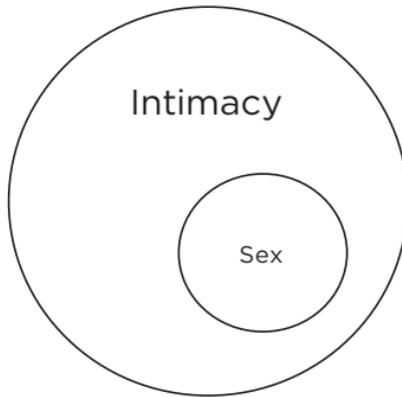
“You didn’t ask for the kind of hair you have or for its color. You could just as easily have had straight instead of curly hair or red instead of brown hair and you would still be you. In fact, you can play with everything about your hair—change its color, change its style, change its length, even shave it all off—and still be you. Your personality and all the things that make up the real you will not be changed if you do different things with your hair.

“That’s the same way many people think of sexuality. You got certain parts and other people got other parts. Your parts are not essential to the person you really are on the inside, so what you do with those parts doesn’t change who you are either. How you use them is entirely up to you and what you do with them really doesn’t make much difference.

“In a purely biological mindset, personal preference and experimentation make sense because they are simply physical aspects of a person with no necessary connection to a deeper, more essential person.

“But,” I continue, drawing another set of circles identical to the first, “sex [again label the smaller

circle] is much more than a piece of biology. It is better understood within the context of intimacy [label the larger circle] where it serves to connect two people at a deep level with each other.

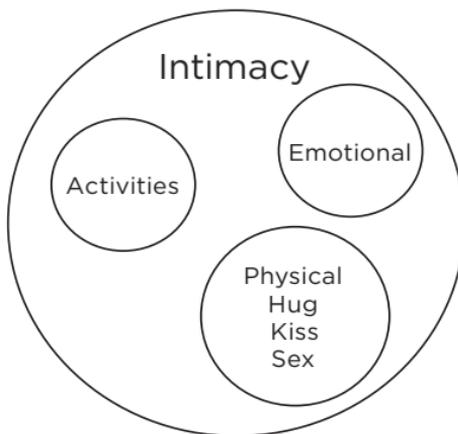


“Intimacy happens at multiple levels. There are emotional connections we build with people by the ways we share our lives with each other and the things we talk about. [Add a smaller Emotional circle within Intimacy.] In that respect, we’re building intimacy between us right now. We’re using words to connect our lives together.

“We also build intimacy when we do things together. [Add an Activities smaller circle.] When we go hiking or throw a ball or cook something

or help shovel Mr. Gerry's driveway, we're doing something that joins our lives together.

“There are also things that people do physically that connect them; things that communicate that they like and trust each other and want to be with each other even more. People can hug each other, pat their shoulder, accidentally-on-purpose bump into each other, sit next to each other, give a back rub, hold hands, or kiss . . . or in some special cases, be involved sexually with each other. [Add labels as you talk.]



“Each of those physical expressions aims to connect two people more closely, which means you have to understand the kind of relational connec-

tion that is good for those specific people to have. A parent-child kiss is different from a husband-wife kiss because the relationship is different. Both are intimate. Both are seeking to deepen the connection they enjoy. But both are expressed differently because the goal is different. Parents and children are not trying to become one, merged life.

“God designed sex to be the most powerful physical connector, for the most special, most intimate human relationship we can have on this earth. It’s the physical way you give yourself most freely and fully to someone else. It’s the physical expression of two people learning to share one life (Genesis 2:23–24); it’s one life lived through two bodies. It’s a relationship so special and so unique that God says it is a picture of how Jesus relates to his bride, the Church (Ephesians 5:31–32). That’s why God wants you only to share yourself sexually with one other person, and that should happen only when you and that person have promised to give yourselves to each other completely. That’s what happens in marriage. Any other way of using sex frustrates its real purpose.<sup>2</sup>

“Solo flights (masturbating) don’t try to connect you with anyone. Experimenting with your

sexuality also misses the goal of connecting with the opposite sex at a level that reflects the sold-out-forever-only-to-each-other relationship that God shares with his bride.

“That’s why we want to steer you away from sex before marriage. Since casual hookups don’t try to share one life, you end up sending mixed messages. Physically you’re saying, ‘I am all yours and only yours’ while you and the other person both know that’s not true. You become a relational hypocrite. In the moment God designed for two people to be authentic and genuine with each other, you are simultaneously holding yourself back while proclaiming you’re giving all you’ve got. You’re lying.

“Everyone else recognizes you’re dishonest, even if you don’t, by the unflattering names they give you—playa, ho, slut, etc. The problem is worse, however, than just being insulted.

“When hooking up becomes a lifestyle, it affects the way you see people. They become things to be used and then discarded as you move on. That attitude can’t be kept tightly closed in a little box. Instead, it seeps out into the way you approach friendships in general, as you teach yourself to think, ‘What can I get out of this other per-