



Vincent E. Gil, PhD, FAACS

WHO'S REALLY INFORMING WHO THESE DAYS? Our children live in a highly sexualized society where they are exposed to sexual language, images, and even behaviors (yeah, those impromptu scenes that pop up in seemingly inane TV shows, huh!)—before they are in any sense “developmentally ready” to understand or handle what they experience.

Naturally, as a parent, as a Christian parent, one can have apprehensions about when to start this important *series* of conversations, and hope at the same time these don't start because there's an unwanted moment on TV, or otherwise, that prompts them. I have some close family members that have 'delayed' such conversations, because they themselves are *uncomfortable* with the topics, and how to approach them. One would think otherwise, given the enormous and abundant exposure to sex that exists, and thus, calls us to explain—and do so with parental urgency.

Some of the excuses I've heard go something like, “*Well, they already know a lot about the birds and the bees*” (*birds and bees, really?*); or “*We'll do it before they get to 'that stage' where they need it.*” I hate to break it to these family parents, but by the time they do, it may be too late to rearrange the scripts that have already formed in the minds of their children.

Another common situation I find among many Christian parents—even younger ones—is the hesitancy to use *sexual language* (I mean, using appropriate terms for body parts, and for behaviors), assuming the children will “*repeat these*” in improper places, like their classroom, or out loud to each other while in the hearing of adults, etc. I'm here to suggest it is never inappropriate to use sexual terminology that is grounded in common understandings of anatomy and physiology. . .and parents shouldn't be feeling they need to make apologies if their kid *does* use appropriate terms in appropriate places.

Elsewhere, in articles posted on this webpage, I've alluded to the reasons why Christians are hesitant to get too detailed about sex. But when it comes to teaching your kids, and having an appropriate appreciation for the sexed body that they are responsible for, we should never hesitate as parents to educate about sexuality, and do so in a systematic way.

Here are some suggestions on the *how*.

- ***Remember your own childhood and sexual information-gathering!*** We often push memories of our own learning and discoveries to the memory dustbin. But we should recall *our own* childhood sexual awakening, and *remember* how we became knowing, cognizant sexual persons. Some of it may not be pleasant to recall; while other parts of the

memory may still be fresh and enduring. Whatever these are, the lesson here is to *remember*—and remember how we *felt*. This will generate greater awareness and compassion when you address your children, teaching them about their sexual body; eventually, about their sexuality.

- ***Don't shy away from educating your own children.*** If you don't, someone else, or some situation will. Below I'll discuss age-appropriate education. For now, understand that children will learn from their environment: the *semantics of sexual language*, the *attitudes* that go along with sexual representations, and the *modeling of adults*—whether it be in impromptu scenes of unwanted material, or via their own curiosity. Media and popular culture will more than take care of that! *Peers* will share what they (assume they) know; and sometimes these tidbits of information become *rites of passage* for the prepubescent child. What a kid knows or doesn't know at that age may presage their standing in their peer group. *Stand up and let your views and Christian ideals be counted as part of their sex education!*
- ***Talk. Talk! Talk to your child about their body, about their body parts,*** as early as when they start to identify them. Usually this happens when young children are bathed, and it is an important moment to take advantage of; to instruct them on what is a *vagina* (a funny-sounding word to most kids by age two); what is a *penis* (another funny word); what *testicles* are, and what *nipples* are. (Don't call body parts by other names! I've heard some whoppers, but none like the mother who told me after a training venue that she "always called her girl's anatomy, *'little melon half.'*" No wonder the kid had an aversion to cantaloupe!) It's also a perfect time (and time again, when prompted) to introduce the idea of God's beautiful gifts in the body! Using appropriate terminology, one can delight in explaining and helping the child to appropriate and own their body. ***Always, provide accurate information in a developmental context, by understanding your child's ability to absorb information.***
- ***Be mindful of the "right time" and "right place" for sex education.*** Of course, you need to "meet them where they are" in terms of understanding. Your young child may ask you, "*What does sex mean,*" and may wonder what the teacher meant when he said, "*Line up by sex.*" As a parent, and any time you are asked a question that invokes something sexual, you need to find out exactly *what the question is*. (Children, pre-teens and teens often misword their questions, or use phrases that may sound ambiguous to an adult.) Then, try to give an honest answer that is age-appropriate, accurate, and doesn't presume to leave out important information. Children, especially pre-teens today, "will know" if you are being complete and thorough. In this sense, ***respect their intelligence and curiosity,*** even if you know they are only partially correct. When "correcting," insure you don't demean their effort at making you understand what they presume to know (or don't know.) Above all, be mindful of not "talking down" to your child or teen (especially) about sexuality.
- ***Don't do the "Don't, Don't, Don't."*** I heard one mother repeat to another, "*I've taught them all the 'Don'ts,' and make sure they keep hearing them.*" This is the *worst methodology*—and it'll work to the contrary:

Don't have sex
Don't get pregnant
Don't get a disease
Don't be a fool and get someone pregnant

Worst yet,

Don't disappoint God and your parents by throwing your virginity away

We seem to leave out the most important aspect while obviating what teens, especially, already know and have heard. That “most important aspect” is **the Do's!** What *can they do* to remain true to self and to the ideals, values, morals they've been taught to hold. What *should they do* to keep themselves sexually healthy; sexually celibate. How can they determine whether a boy- or girlfriend is interested in them *as a person*, or just as a *sexual partner*, a “friend with benefits.”

- ***Empower your children by teaching them God's word—about the sexual body, about the gift of sexuality.*** Here, we need to begin with being “fearfully and wonderfully made “ (Ps 139:13-14). Insure you get off on the right footing when embodying sexuality: **It is God's good gift**, and not just for procreation: Our sexual anatomy, glandular system, is also essential to our good health and overall function! Besides (and when age-appropriate), communicate it is also one of the most pleasurable gifts the good Lord gave us.

Beyond explaining anatomy from an early age, insure you leave open doors for communicating about how that body—and mind—are going to develop sexually.

We should begin this portion by helping our children understand how our mind connects to our body, how what we see and experience can generate rather indelible “imprints” on the sexualizing brain. Therefore, when we have the conscious ability to *discern* the differences between “oughts” and “shoulds,” we make conscious decisions about what we focus our attention on. You can give examples any 8-10 year old nowadays would understand from TV shows, to what pops up on the internet, unwanted.

The point is: *Generate a feeling and understandings from Scripture that we own our minds and bodies, and we can manage them well:* What goes in it, what we do with it, and what we become responsible for. ***Teach in the spirit of ownership, not in the spirit of fearing the body or the mind.*** (1 Cor 6:19-20; Ro 12:1-2; Matt 6:22-23; Phil 1:20; Prov 3:7-8; Matt 5:29; and Gal 2:20.)

- ***Empower your children by generating trust in them.*** Here I emphasize the importance of letting your children know they deserve your trust; so keep repeating that they are *trusted to make right decisions*. And no, a “**purity ring**” isn't going to substitute for good decision-making, any more than a “marriage ring” discourages married persons from having affairs! Engendering trust includes helping your kid develop feeling good about who they are. The world of sexual knowledge is full of *friends* and eventually *relationships*. Teach them to expect a give-and-take, but that in the end, good relationships help one to be more of who one already is, values included, and feel even better about it all.
- ***Be real, and live as example.*** Let your children know, and see, your good relationship with your spouse. Let them witness your love for each other, as well as you having

disagreements and settling them. That doesn't mean all things go 'public'—what it does mean is that children/adolescents also learn from the *modelling they see in their home*. **And fathers, this is especially true if you have daughters:** They will see the *only man in their lives at the time*, treating the *only significant woman in their lives*—their mom. **Make it so honorable they'll want your qualities in any future mate!** Respect, support, mutuality in decision-making, refraining from "*the man in the house*" syndrome, and instead taking on qualities of servanthood, are all good means to embed in your daughters the character a Christian man should have, and that they should want in any future partner.

A FEW WORDS ON DEALING WITH TEENS AND SEX. You already know how pubertal sexual development goes: **"It's complicated!"** Understand, then, the enormous hormonal, emotional, and physiological changes that are taking place in your pre/teen. **Here are some advisory points:**

- ***Respect their privacy, but do not support their isolation.*** We've come to believe every American home with teens has their rooms as "off limits" for parents—and we've seen teen room doors with signs and cautions, as if this 'enclosure' was private property and out of bounds for adults. No, it's not that they are doing *evil things* behind that closed door (maybe, but give them the benefit here); it's that it encourages "interiorization," and at just a point in their development where camaraderie with parents is also being substituted for "their friends." **Don't encourage isolation. Encourage openness and participation.** I never allowed my children to shut their room doors for hours. That's not private space, even though I taught them I would respect their privacy.

More to the point, yes, be respectful in their room. I had a mother explain her teen son would routinely over-sleep. Mornings became repeated calls for getting up. She thus got into the habit of coming into the son's room and tossing off his covers while yelling to get up. . .only to find him with "**morning wood**" and totally half-asleep, but dreadfully embarrassed. She was too!

Now there's no way for a teen boy to not feel embarrassed and awkward after such episodes. Especially, when there was no conversation either way of what was felt—or seen. (The mother never acknowledged her son's maturation, which never allowed the boy to learn his manhood needed morning attention before the mother's "storming of the Bastille.")

- ***Yes, most will explore their maturing bodies, and quite a few will masturbate.*** Notice I did not differentiate between the sexes in this segment heading, because despite our assumption that most girls "don't masturbate," data I've personally collected from my Human Sexuality college students tell a different story. Room here doesn't allow for details, but let me underscore that about **67% of girls do masturbate**, or at least play with masturbatory elements. Boys, well, data on these from both secular and Christian sources confirm nearly the same statistics: **By age 18, about 92% of most boys will have masturbated**, and about **82-87% masturbate "regularly."** Fact is, even **when married, about 60-70% of men "still solo masturbate"** and the tag-line is, "on occasion."

There are many views by Christians on masturbation. This article can't cover them all, so I will give you my perceptions: Masturbatory behavior seems to be commonplace in all cultures, and despite some having dire warnings, is more of an inane behavior than a threat to health—mental or physical. Parents worry. Christian parents worry more, that their kid's masturbation will veer them off into pornography; into lust; into "compulsions" that they then cannot get rid of.

Seeing masturbation from a more clinical point of view does us good here: Masturbatory behavior may have sundry reasons, but it appears to be a natural means of discovering the body's sexuality and response systems; also (in men seemingly more, perhaps due to the effects of testosterone), ridding the body of excess sexual energy. Thus, men have numerous occasions during adolescence and into adulthood, of "**wet dreams,**" nocturnal and spontaneous ejaculations which happen during REM sleep.

I know. "What about the mind—what is thought about during masturbation?"

Unfortunately, the lure of porn—and it comes in many forms, including seemingly innocuous chat rooms or apps—is an ever-present temptation which can obviously complicate masturbation for the Christian.

But the fact is, if you help your adolescent *before their adolescence*, understand how the mind and body work, and how they can *avoid* getting the wrong imprints in there, the "temptation" to think about what porn, or any other lascivious thoughts bring to the mind, ought to be lessened.

Every Christian who masturbates has to deal with the "lust" issue – and there's no room here to detail that, other than to say: Teach your child to honor God with their minds! To learn how to move desire to a place where it does not damage, but rather encourage the day when it can be fulfilled. It's not impossible. As a parent, you can do everything to assist your adolescent stay on track, mentally, and otherwise. But you probably won't stop masturbation behavior, because it is a natural response to how the body eroticizes during puberty, and often 'stays erotic' beyond it. Be honest here, and remember your own.

- *Finally, teaching pre/adolescents about sex doesn't mean parenting without values.* Acknowledging sexuality is *not the same* as condoning sex outside of marriage, or giving a teen permission to "*explore*" and "*have sex, but play it safe.*" Helping one's children understand that sexual thoughts and feelings are normal gives you as a parent an opportunity to follow up with conversations about *how* (and from what contexts) abstinence should be understood. As well, it gives parents opportunity to discuss how one can *regulate impulses*, and *understand urges*. It opens the door for continued conversations that enable greater ease to talk about such elements, at increasingly awkward stages of their growth. Teach them that things that have value are sometimes hard. And hard things are often things that have value. Teens will make mistakes. Help them to learn *through* their mistakes. . .and consider yourself a great parent if they come to you for help when they *do* make mistakes! Ultimately, be clear that *safety* is non-negot-

iable! In that vein, seriously consider vaccinating your pre-adolescent child with the now-available polyvalent HPV vaccine. Both boys and girls ought to be vaccinated against HPV, to prevent future possible cancers associated with HPV clades.

MY HOPE IS THAT THIS ARTICLE BRINGS YOU SOME CONSIDERED THINKING, such that will help strengthen your efforts at educating your child, adolescent, into Godly sexuality. I mean by that, teaching them to honor God's teaching by honoring their bodies, and taking care of their sexuality in ways which enable the *best* God has planned for them, including enjoyment of the "joys of sex."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



VINCENT E. GIL, PH.D., FAACS, is Emeritus Professor of Medical & Psychological Anthropology and Human Sexuality at Vanguard University. He is senior adjunct professor in Nursing. His Ph.D. in Medical and Psychological Anthropology is from UCLA, and included coursework at UCLA's Neuropsychiatric Institute. His postdoctoral in Sexual Sciences (Clinical and Medical) is from The Masters and Johnson Institute, followed by a second postdoctoral in Public Health Epidemiology (Sexual Diseases) from UCLA. His recent book, *"A Christian's Guide through the Gender Revolution"* (Cascade, 2020) gives voice to understanding gender and intersexuality as well as addresses a theology of being that reflects Jesus' care and concern for all. Dr. Gil is remains a licensed minister with the SoCal Network of the Assemblies of God, and a member minister of the support network of United Evangelical Churches. Dr. Gil can be contacted at vgil@vanguard.edu.

©2021. Vincent E. Gil. Author's Common Law Copyright. *This article can be reproduced and cited under the provisions of common law copyrighting. Such includes downloading a personal copy, sharing a copy with someone else, and making this article a referenced reading for a course. The copyright protects infringements of plagiarism, misquoting, misrepresentation, and lack of providing authorial attribution in any quote, review, or reading. The article is not to be reproduced, sold or distributed for financial gain of any sort.*