

## Parents Matter: *Raising Kids with Integrity*

By Pam Stenzel, MA

Have you ever felt that you are on a death defying rollercoaster ride from which there is no exit? This might actually describe the experience of parenting today. My own children, now 23, 22 and 15, have reinforced this fact for me. The pace of change with the world my kids have grown up in and currently navigate is mind-boggling. The differences between the issues I needed to address with my now 23-year-old daughter, compared to those I am forced to deal with today with my freshman son, are incredible! How in the world am I supposed to keep up? Just when I think I have the tools to monitor the movie ratings, I am now compelled to monitor social network videos, pornography in video games, and "sexting." Most days I just want off the ride.

Before bailing out, there are some important things we need to understand, timeless truths we need to consider as anchor points. First, Mom and Dad, **YOU MATTER!** The media constantly mocks parents in sitcoms and belittles us with ads that I think are meant to encourage us to talk to our kids about drugs, but fall sadly short. We need to be reminded that parents continue to be the most important influence on a child's decisions. What you value, communicate and teach your child, matters!

In studies ranging from talks about drugs, to nutrition, to sex, one constant is the influence of the parents' communication and modeling of their values. This did more to influence a child's decision than either media exposure or their peers. These findings contradict the feeling by most parents that the media and peers are so powerful that their input has no influence. Nothing could be further from the truth.

A second timeless truth is that all decisions we make are an outward expression of our inward character. We are constantly building or destroying our character. The teen years are critical in character development. This is why guidance from parents and mentors is vital during these years as thoughts become deeds, deeds become habits, and habits become character. In light of these two truth anchors, let's explore how this matters when it comes to your teen's decisions about sex.

Our kids are facing a whole new world of challenges when it comes to sexual purity. Not only has access to

pornography of every kind increased, but the dangerous consequences for participating in sex outside of marriage have also rapidly intensified. The emotional and spiritual consequences have always been evident—broken hearts, infidelity, a distant relationship with God, just to name a few.

However, when it comes to the physical consequences, especially with STDs (sexually transmitted diseases), our kids are in a world different from many of their parents. If you graduated from high school in 1967, approximately one in 32 of your classmates would have been infected with an STD; in 1982 that ratio was one in 16. Today, one in four of our kids' classmates are infected with at least one STD.

In the 1950s there were approximately five major STDs known about; today there are more than 30, and 30 percent of these are incurable. This generation is dealing not only with HIV, but with many STDs that can be deadly. Cervical cancer deaths in women from infection with HPV are higher in the United States than deaths from HIV infection. The Center for Disease Control now estimates that 67 percent of sexually active teens are infected with at least one of more than 100 strains of HPV. Another staggering consequence of epidemic level STD infection is a huge increase in infertility among young women. Many studies show a 500 percent increase in 10 years.





Teens have always lived in a fantasy world that says, "It won't happen to me." Today, that is not possible. There is no statistical way someone under the age of 22 today could have sex with someone who is not a virgin and not get a disease—it is a statistical impossibility. The cost of having sex outside of marriage for our girls will always be much greater than for our boys because girls have an open sexual system more vulnerable to infections. When our daughters are making the choice to be sexually active, they are putting everything at risk.

In light of these frightening realities, the message we communicate about purity and choosing to wait to have sex until marriage is a now a matter of life and death. It must be communicated often and without compromise. Recently, a public health nurse said to me at a parent education night, "Pam, good parents tell their kids to abstain from sex. But good parents also tell their kids that if they are going to have sex, they should use a condom." Really?

Think about this: What kind of message is it to tell your child to make the right choice, but if they decide to do the wrong thing to try to be safe? That would be the same as telling my daughter, "Kara, I don't want you to shoplift, it isn't right. But just in case you are in the mall with your friends, and everyone is shoplifting and you cannot help yourself, I am going to take you to the mall and teach you how to shoplift without getting caught. Now understand, I don't want you to do this. But what is most important is that you don't end up in jail, with a record and the whole town finding out—that would be embarrassing. So, here is how you shoplift without getting caught. . . ."

What have I taught her to do? Shoplift! I have just taught my child that sin doesn't matter as long as you don't get caught or can avoid its consequences. The reality is you cannot sin safely. I told the aforementioned public health nurse that although I do not want my child to end up with an STD or an unplanned pregnancy, these are temporary consequences. Teaching my child that she can shake her fist at a God who loves her and disobey His commands without consequence will affect her eternal soul, which is far more valuable.

It is important to understand that, as parents, we

are not responsible for the choice our child makes. We are responsible to tell them the truth. We are responsible to set boundaries and communicate them clearly. They are responsible to obey. If they choose not to, there are consequences. I cannot tell you how many parents have said to me, "I can't have a rule. They won't follow it."

When I have explained a few of my personal rules for my children (Abridged version: No dating at all until you are 16, and date in groups until graduation from high school) many parents react with: "Those rules are really strict. Your kids are going to rebel!" My response is, "Did you have a pow-wow with your teen and ask them what rules they were planning to obey and then set only those rules? Does that make you feel like a good parent?" I am the parent, and it's my job to set the boundaries and clearly communicate them. My child is responsible to honor and obey. Your child does not have to like you—and if you are doing your job they will, at times, definitely not like you. You are called to be the parent, not the friend.

It is important that we find many opportunities to discuss our values about sexuality with our kids. The media can actually help with this. Because it is next to impossible to watch TV, go to a movie or listen to music without being confronted with some message about sex, it is important to not be a passive consumer, but to teach your children to evaluate every message they hear or see. My kids used to constantly roll their eyes and say, "Do you have to be the running commentary on everything?" My answer was and is "Yes!" Then, when they are watching a movie or TV, or listening to music with their friends, the Holy Spirit (with the voice of their mother) will be constantly reminding them of the truth.

Talking to our kids about sexual purity should take place in the context of all of the character qualities we have been patiently teaching them since they came into our world. Some of the critical character qualities we need to be teaching are personal responsibility (owning our behavior), delayed gratification, and empathy (being able to walk in the other person's shoes). When our kids know that if they don't turn in an assignment they will get a zero, and no amount of bribing or whining or blaming will fix it, they learn that choices have consequences. I would rather my child learn this in the little things, not

with choices for which the consequence can be deadly. It is also imperative that we teach our kids that their choices have consequences not only for themselves but for others. Every choice we make has ripple effects, and can either bring help and hope to others, or can damage them and bring them pain. We also do well to teach our kids, that sometimes we have to say no to something in the short term, in order to get something better in the long term (saving versus spending). We can't have everything right now—for some things we must simply wait.

Even though it would be easier some days to jump off the rollercoaster by trying to avoid dealing with this life issue with your kids, let me encourage you to commit to strapping yourself in and hanging on. Seek out encouragement and help from other parents who are on the same ride. Avail yourself of all of the wonderful material out there to help and encourage you. Stay connected with your church family and make sure your teens are connected to a community of faith. And above

all pray. Pray for wisdom, for courage and for strength for this important task. I am praying with you!

I will continue to clearly teach my child that God created sex for marriage—and monogamy does not mean one at a time, it means one partner who has only been with you. Also, that any sexual activity outside of the boundaries of marriage will come with a consequence. Before my child makes a decision about sex, he or she must fully understand the gravity of the decision they are making, and the consequence to themselves and their future spouse and family. And no one can communicate this with more power than you, mom and dad.

**Pam Stenzel's complete talk, *Parents Matter: Raising Kids with Integrity*, is available on DVD, as well as other resources, for parents and youth leaders to use to communicate sexual purity with their youth and students. Check out Pam's website at [www.pamstenzel.com](http://www.pamstenzel.com).**

# Who Do You Choose to Give Your Children Their View of Sex?

By Lenore Buth

It may be uncomfortable to think about, but someone will, probably before you think they will. In fact, strangers already are passing on sexual values to your kids every day, right under your own roof.

If you doubt that, look through your "child eyes" as you watch a typical evening of television viewing at your house. Listen for sexual nuances and innuendos, including commercials. Count up how many characters have sex outside of marriage. Try to spot the married couples who love each other and remain faithful.

That's what your kids see, too.

Even television programming aimed at children can't be counted on. Watch the "cute" characters on kid sitcoms, how they dress and how they move, and how males and females interact. Would you want your daughter or son to copy what you see? If not, casually talk about it while you're watching the program or when there's a break. Ask your child what impressions these individuals convey. Discuss how others form opinions about you by what you wear and how you act. Do it now! Your kids are gathering information for future reference, so help them file away the right stuff.

Don't miss what's happening in your child's school. There's a push right now to help students understand "diversity." Even your early-grader may read books or hear it said that all variations of sexual behavior and lifestyles are equal, and every bit as positive as their own mommy

and daddy being married to each other. Even textbooks are changing.

It's crucial to realize not all training comes in formal sex education classes, which begin earlier because today's children physically mature earlier. Most teachers who present sex education curriculum lay out biological facts of being male and female. Most explain intercourse and various positions, means of birth control, preventing STDs, and pregnancy. Open discussion with both sexes present is common. Typically, teachers cannot discuss behavior, other than to stress anti-discrimination. The slogan is, "Everyone has to decide for themselves and no one has the right to judge another individual."

## Where Does That Leave Us?

One truth becomes obvious. Your child needs to hear from you first. Otherwise these outside teachings will form the base for their attitudes.

God intended for parents to instruct their children in how to live and to communicate what matters. If you believe that sexual intercourse is God's gift, reserved for husbands and wives, say so—and tell them why. Don't expect your adolescents will intuitively grasp how what they wear and how they talk and act, can transmit sexual messages they don't mean to send.

Your kids learn from you now, every day, even when you're unaware. They watch how you interact, how much love and respect you show your spouse, and are learning about marriage by watching their parents. They listen in as you, their role models, comment about the "hunky TV sportscaster," or the "hot babe," who gives the weather report. Be careful, you are being watched.

One truth becomes obvious. Your child needs to hear from you first.



Both boys and girls look to their parents to formulate their picture of what it means to be male or female—and how to treat someone of the opposite sex. Every survey confirms that teens consider their parents the major influence in their lives. (Ignore the fact that your adolescent may appear bored. That doesn't mean they don't hear you.)

### When and How to Begin

Forget waiting around for the perfect setting and the perfect moment to have the "Big Talk." There is none. Instead of a one-time event, think instead of an ongoing conversation.

Just begin, even if you think you can't bring up the subject of sex without stammering. Start before your kid hears another version somewhere else and imprints that as a foundation. First, tell your children that you love them more than anyone else, and that you care about their welfare. Second, your stumbling words from the heart will touch them more than the most polished professional lecture. Be yourself around them.

So relax. Your child will filter out anything beyond their present level of understanding. (This will be an ongoing conversation, remember?) Your daughter or son will absorb what they're ready for and little by little, they'll fit the pieces together. Be sure to welcome their questions, too. If you don't have answers, promise to find out and report back.

For confidence read aloud Genesis 1:27, 31, and 2:21-22. God created male and female, then pronounced all He had made "very good." Seize that opening to tell your son or daughter that God did not just create two identical beings, except for a few body parts. Rather, He created two unique beings. Male and female are different and they are designed to be. These unique differences are part of human sexuality, which is not the same as the

act of sexual intercourse. Sexuality is who we are, either male or female. Stress that every human being is one-of-a-kind. Let that balm away being shorter or wider or slower than a sibling. Help your youngsters appreciate their own strengths.

All around us we see the wreckage of "sexual freedom." Part of your calling as a parent is to help your kids grow strong from within so they won't get caught in this snare. Make your home a place where you communicate Christian values about everything—including sex. Talk about the joy of what God intends—which is that husbands and wives enjoy the sexual relationship within the security of their marriage vows. Perhaps you fear your child will ask a question about your own history that may make you squirm. Then know it's okay to say, "Sorry, but that's personal."

Your task is not to be perfect. Your task is to help your child navigate into adolescence and through the teenage years with a healthy Christian outlook on sexuality. If you doubt your competence, remember this. God paired you up with each of your children and you're a perfect match. He knows you and He knows them. You have everything you need to parent these loving gifts given to you. Just ask Him to give you the words, then be alert for openings. Now, start talking.

**Lenore Buth** lives with her husband, Bob, in the Sacramento area. She's the mother of four daughters and has eight grandchildren. Her book, **How to Talk Confidently with Your Child about Sex**, fifth edition, is part of the Concordia Publishing House Learning about Sex series. Buth has written three other books on marriage and parenting, as well as numerous articles. She is presently writing another book for moms.

## Learning About Sex

The *Learning About Sex* series (Concordia Publishing House, 2008) offers separate editions for boys and girls covering topics that are age-appropriate from preschool through young adults over the age of 15. Written within a biblical context, the various authors provide an excellent educational tool equipping parents and other educators with information about the physical, social, emotional and spiritual nature of God's gift of human sexuality to guide conversations with their children and youth.



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