

How I talk to my children about sex

Or rather, how I'd *like* to.

by [Jonathan Tran](#) in the [October 2024](#) issue

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(Illustration by Lilli Carré)

I've never been sure what to tell my kids about sex. Early on, rather than explaining how they were conceived, I borrowed the old line about storks delivering them to our door. Later, as a strategy for raising my daughter in a sex-depraved culture, I considered holding off potty training until her late teens. (Diapers: the ultimate mood killer.) As my kids got older, the stork story wore thin and potty training, sadly, took its normal course. Years later, I still haven't got the foggiest idea what to say. Once, at a parents meeting, our youth pastor encouraged us all to talk to our kids about sex. I raised my hand, objecting, "That's why I send them to church, for you to do that!"

Back in my day, it felt like we had all the answers. The United States was emerging from the anything goes '70s and '80s. (Any society that considers big hair and bell-bottoms sexy is constitutionally disposed to permissiveness.) By the '90s, American Christianity was ready to clap back, and we showed our moral superiority by outspending the Soviets and saving ourselves for marriage. In that context, telling people what to do and what not to do with their bodies felt totally normal. We had no problem condemning "going too far," and we talked early and often about lust, pornography, and masturbation.

It all feels rather quaint now. It's hard to imagine saying anything to anyone about sex these days. In the long shadow of Christianity's history of patriarchy, misogyny, and sexual abuse, telling others what they should do with their genitalia strikes people as pretty cringy.

I have reservations about telling kids to save themselves for marriage, even though I hope that they do. We teach kids about abstinence right about the same time evolution has trained their teenage bodies to prepare to procreate, which is what *puberty* scientifically names. We talk about purity when it's mostly about biochemistry, such that instructing them to stick with first base when everything tells them to go for home plate feels like asking bees not to pollinate. This can't help but put them at war with their own bodies. When I look back on what that did to me as I was coming of age, what I remember most is feeling ashamed, all the time, running myself through a buzz saw version of Christianity in which holiness reduced to one thing: sexual purity and my inability to maintain it.

I'm at a total loss when it comes to a topic like masturbation, something that is both perfectly natural (it comes with the territory) and perfectly complicated (it comes

with the lust Jesus warns us against). I recall hearing James Dobson say that it's OK to masturbate so long as you do so with pure thoughts. I remember thinking that I get how one may do that but not how one *can*. Is setting impossible standards like this what it means to talk to our children about sex? Doing so simultaneously sets them up for failure and, probably worse, teaches them that failure isn't part of the process.

One way parents get away with talking about sex without actually saying much about sex is by talking about consent. This focuses the conversation on sexual assault and rape rather than on love. To be clear, love does not nullify the need for consent! But in the context of love, consent is a necessary condition for sex but not a sufficient one.

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Love asks for much more, because love involves vulnerabilities that consent is meant to guard against but can't. Now, if my kids are having sex where love has nothing to do with it, where love bears no threat, then consent isn't finally going to save them, much less those they have sex with. But if sex is about love, as it most certainly needs to be, then talking about consent simply misses the point. To love completely is to give oneself completely, something consent simply can't touch. Can you imagine someone saying to their lover, "I consent to your stage 4 cancer diagnosis," or, "I consent to you changing my adult diaper now that the cancer has taken over"?

Still, I don't want all these problems and perplexities to mean that I don't say anything. I don't want to allow my ambivalence to strand my kids to a sexual wilderness where everything is up for grabs.

I suppose I want my kids to know that sex can actually live up to the hype. That while some of the hype is riddled with lies, what the hype is after—nothing less than the consummation of creaturely being and desire—is spot on and should be pursued even more than the most sex-obsessed parts of our culture suggest. I want them to know that the sex on offer in that culture, the pleasures and purposes of which become transactional, pales in comparison to the sex their bodies most yearn for, an absolutely non-transactional involvement in the gratuitous pleasures of God, what Rowan Williams beautifully calls "the body's grace." I want them to know, and hope

they see in their parents, that sex is about love, and that when sex gives up its natural connection to love, it gives up the one thing God gives us to refine sexual love: marriage. I want them to believe that sex without love makes about as much sense as love without marriage or, for that matter, marriage without love.

Mostly I want my children to know that they themselves are the surest sign of this non-transactional life with God. Children are pure grace, a sign of God's peace and patience, an indication that the gratuities of sex reflect the endlessness of God's delight in us. Meaning that we have time to find time for these conversations—not to excuse my daddy-dallying, but perhaps to contextualize it.