

4 VIEWS ON TALKING TO TEENAGERS ABOUT SEX
Pragmatic Help for Teaching Sexuality

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Publisher: Mark Oestreicher
Managing Editor: Sarah Hauge
Cover Design: Adam McLane
Layout: Marilee R. Pankratz
Creative Director: Alfred Kinsey

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ISBN-13: 978-1-942145-43-1
ISBN-10: 1-942145-43-8

The Youth Cartel, LLC
www.theyouthcartel.com
Email: info@theyouthcartel.com
Born in San Diego
Printed in the U.S.A.

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INTRODUCTION

I've spent my 35+ years of youth ministry working with middle schoolers. As a result, how I've talked about sex with the teenagers in my churches has probably looked a little different than it does for those of you who work with high schoolers.

Two examples:

The overkill story: I once hosted a Parent/Teen Sex Retreat. I really should have named it something else, as that name was just so, so, so creepy. Sorry. But the name wasn't the worst part.

We had some fun and did retreat-y things, but the bulk of our time was spent in teaching and dialogue. I stood up front as a host, introducing topics and giving a bit of biblical framing. Young teens and their parent or parents sat in pairs and trios clustered around the room, with most of their time spent in dialogue. That sounds great, right? *Except*, I think I just made it way too awkward. I wanted them to talk about real stuff, rather than merely having a five-minute talk that followed this predictable outline:

Parent: "So, I think we need to talk about sex."

Teenager: (shudders, looks for escape route)

Parent: "So...uh...we're wondering if you have any questions? You can ask us anything."

Teenager: "Nope. No questions."

Parent: "Awesome. I'm really glad we had this talk!"

I mean, the conversations I hosted on that retreat were pretty uncomfortable. I had parents share about their first sexual experience, and stuff like that. They were compliant enough. (I can't believe none of them walked out, or told me, "This is just too much!") All I know is that I'm glad I didn't take my own teenage children on a retreat like that with my church's youth ministry.

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The silly story: Knowing that talking about sex with middle schoolers instantly leads to panic or snickering or both, I wanted a way to both “normalize” the topic and remove the tension. So I developed *The Sex Song*. Any time we were going to talk about sex (which we did at least once a year for a couple weeks), we started by singing this song. I can’t share the tune here in this book, but the lyrics were:

Sex, sex, God gave us sex
Sex, sex, God gave us sex
And he made it for two specific purposes
MAKING BABIES! (shouted)
and
SHOWING LOVE AND AFFECTION TO YOUR SPOUSE!
(likewise shouted)
Sex, sex, God gave us sex

Honestly, the song was a winner. After the first few seconds (which were filled with facial expressions approximating either “What the heck?” or “Are we allowed to sing this in church?”), my middle schoolers totally got into it. It worked perfectly to disarm and normalize, and we were able to move into whatever specific topic was planned without as much weirdness.

Except, they loved the song so much they wanted to sing it all the time, even when we weren’t teaching a sex series. They sang it at the top of their lungs in a McDonald’s, once, on a mission trip. They sang it in the hallways of the church. It certainly made me wonder if I’d created a problem for myself!

Null curriculum

Curriculum developers (to be clear: curriculum means just “what you teach”) talk about a wide variety of curriculums present in any intentional or unintentional teaching time. These include:

- *Formal curriculum* (what you intend to teach)

- *Hidden/covert curriculum* (all the variables of your learning environment that aren't openly communicated, but still transmit tons of "lessons," including norms, values, and beliefs)
- *Non-formal/experiential curriculum* (learning—hopefully intentionally—that happens when we're doing things together)
- *Null curriculum* (read on...)

This last one—null curriculum—is likely the one you've not heard of. It is, quite simply, the topics we do *not* talk about. Read this carefully, as it's important: ***what we avoid talking about teaches just as much as what we choose to talk about.***

For example: if you don't ever talk about sex and sexuality with your teenagers, you're communicating a bunch of unhelpful, even inaccurate, lessons about sex and sexuality. You're teaching that God/the Bible/church don't have anything to say about this topic; you're teaching that Christianity is disconnected from the topics that are important to the teenage experience; you're probably even teaching a subtle "sex is dirty and shouldn't be talked about" negative message, which is completely out of alignment with God's desires and intent for creation.

I find that sex is part of the null curriculum in most homes (including Christian homes), and in the majority of youth groups. And that's a huge problem, particularly since our teenagers are indigenous to a hyper-sexualized culture where they're receiving massive quantities of harmful messages about sex on a daily basis.

In short: we *have* to talk about this!

Everything or nothing

A number of years ago I was helping an author develop a youth ministry resource on the topic of sex, and he said something that has stuck with me: *Most youth workers talk about sex as if it's everything, or as if it's nothing.* Both of these extremes are, really, dishonest.

Sex isn't everything. When I hear people say that teenagers are a "walking ball of hormones," I get uncomfortable. In one sense,

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this is close to accurate, developmentally. Yes, teenagers are being enormously impacted by the (God-given!) hormones that are bringing unprecedented changes to their bodies, minds, emotions, relationships, and faith. But when people make proclamations like that, they are usually implying that teenagers think about nothing but sex, 24/7/365. And it just ain't true. There's at least a bit of video games or nail polish color in there.

Yes, sex and sexuality (those two are not exactly the same thing) are huge issues for teens, as, I would suggest, God intended them to be. But they aren't everything. To say or imply that they are would be misleading.

But sex sure isn't nothing (apologies for the double-negative). While we shouldn't obsess over it, we should be committed to making it one of our top five or ten topics we talk about with teenagers.

Why 4 views?

We developed this line of *Views* books to provide youth workers with practical dialogue on topics that can sometimes be polarizing. The first book in this line—*4 Views on Pastoring LGBTQ Teenagers*—allowed us to prove that we can have civil, respectful dialogue, focused more on practice than theology. Not that we think theological discussion, even debate, isn't important. It certainly is. And it will be overtly clear that each of the four contributors in this book is theologically grounded, and is writing from biblical/theological anchors (which is why we had them each include their theological anchors in an early section within their chapters).

But the point of this book is to offer you pragmatic help. And these four diverse youth workers are here to offer that to you.

How we talk about sex with teenagers deserves thought, prayer, and reflection. And *what* we talk about (and what outcomes we're hoping for) clearly needs to go deeper than "don't do it."

For this book's contributors, we were very careful—and took our time—to choose four articulate youth workers, who:

- had years of experience with talking to real teenagers about sex. We wanted writers who were “in the trenches,” but had worked out their thinking through some years of trial and error.
- were diverse from one another in their perspectives and desired outcomes.

We also asked each of them to write a response to one of the other views. The intent of this is to provide a bit of clarity on differing points of view, and to offer some pushback to each other’s takes on the topic.

I’ve gone back and forth about whether or not I should give you a heads up or summary of each of the views. Ultimately, I want you (the reader) to discover these, rather than be predisposed, or even make a pre-conclusion, about if you will be open to learning from each contributor. But I’ll give you this: one word that I believe captures the primary focus or highest value for each author (which, really, you’ll see reflected in the chapter titles we collaboratively came up with for them).

- Jake: *Honesty*
- Jonathan: *Truth*
- Jen: *Ownership*
- Joel: *Design*

That’s a little tease for you, to whet your appetite.

Oh, and it’s a coincidence that the four writers are all J names: Jake, Jonathan, Jen, and Joel. I regularly called them “the 4 Js” when communicating with them. Maybe they should form a band or something.

We hope reading this dialogue will have an impact on more than just your thinking, though that’s a great place to start. Our greater hope is that these ideas will show up in your practice, and that teenagers

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will be helped in this wonderful and amazing and terrifying and potentially damaging area of their lives. Let's get sex out of our null curriculum.

And feel free to use my sex song.

– **Mark Oestreicher**
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