

Teaching

CHASTITY AND VIRTUE



By Matthew O. Richardson

Second Counselor in the Sunday School General Presidency

Parents can use these six strategies to teach their children about sexual intimacy.

I have been privileged to meet with youth and young adults from every walk of life and from all over the world. On one occasion I spoke with a group of particularly impressive teenagers about virtue, chastity, and moral living. After telling them how impressed I was with their comments, confidence, appearance, and demeanor, I asked, “How did you become so articulate, assured in your responses, and so comfortable with a sensitive topic like this?” One young woman said without any hesitation, “I have parents who teach.” The others nodded their heads in agreement. This simple yet profound experience emphasizes the influence parents have in the lives of their children—especially in their role of teaching virtue, chastity, sexual intimacy, and proper relationships.

Unfortunately, many parents may not be teaching their children about sexual issues as well as they could. For example, in surveying over 200 active young single Latter-day Saints, I found that only 15 percent considered their parents to be the primary source of information regarding sexual issues. These young members said they learned about this important topic primarily from friends or peers, the Internet, media, entertainment, textbooks, extended family, or their Church leaders.

Of course, it’s not an easy subject to teach. But I believe parents are the best teachers to convey such sacred principles. The following strategies will help you develop simple, effective, and lasting principles and practices that promote effective learning and teaching—especially in teaching your children how to live virtuous and chaste lives.

Teaching and learning should begin early. Parents who effectively teach their children about sexual topics understand that most children encounter such topics at far younger ages than they or their parents expect or desire. Many children become exposed to sexual content on the Internet as young as 11 years old and some even younger. Entertainment venues, sporting events, advertising, and even social media are increasingly saturated with sexual images and innuendo.

Some parents rightly ask, “When should I begin talking about sexually related issues?” It depends on the age and maturity of the child and the specific situation. Spiritual guidance will come as parents prayerfully and carefully observe their children’s behavior, intentionally listen to their children, and take time to consider and discern when and what to teach. For example, I recall my son asking me questions about anatomy when he was barely five years old. While it was a little unnerving, it was obvious that it was the right time to talk. However, as I thought about how to respond, it seemed clear that this was *not* the right time to talk with my son about every sexually related topic.

Teaching and learning should occur often. Learning is a process rather than a single event. When it comes to teaching children about sexual intimacy or other related matters,



people often refer to it as “the talk.” Whether intended or not, this term implies that parents teach this topic in a single conversation. That is not the most effective way for a child to learn. The Savior taught that we learn “line upon line, precept upon precept” (2 Nephi 28:30). We will have more success teaching as we revisit the topic with our children as they age and mature. Parents who understand this principle prepare themselves mentally, emotionally, and spiritually to teach their children about sexually related topics during their children’s childhood and adolescence.

Effective learning and teaching hinges on the relationship between the teacher and learner. When it comes to teaching children about sexually related topics, most parents worry almost exclusively about *what* they should say. While this is important, effective teaching and learning goes well beyond talking and telling about content. In fact, the

way parents approach teaching their children may be more important than what they might actually say. Research supports the conclusion that parents who influence their children most when dealing with sexual issues are those who communicate openly, express love and concern, and are actively engaged in the lives of their children.¹

Comments from my informal survey of young Latter-day Saints repeatedly centered on wishing their parents were more open or willing to talk about sexually related topics. These young adults expressed that they not only wanted their parents to be involved in the process, but they also wished their parents would “talk *with* them rather than talk *at* them.” They longed for conversations that were “natural,” “normal,” “comfortable,” and far less “awkward.” This should motivate parents to work harder in being approachable, available, natural, and unruffled by a topic,

Parents who influence their children most when dealing with sexual issues are those who communicate openly, express love and concern, and are actively engaged in the lives of their children.

situation, or even timing. If there is a price to be paid for parents to effectively teach their children about things that matter most, it is for parents to act in ways that help their children feel comfortable and safe in talking about all subjects—especially the more personal ones.

Teaching and learning are most effective when the subject is relevant and real. Depending on our approach, teaching about sexual intimacy can feel awkward, unrealistic, impractical, or even preachy. A key to success is to realize that most questions and concerns children have are reactions to real-life situations and observations. As we pay attention to, listen to, and observe our children, we will discern what we need to teach.

For example, movies, styles, fads, television programs, advertisements, or music lyrics provide ample opportunity to talk about moral standards. Other opportunities will come as we observe our children's relationships and interactions with others, the way they and their peers dress, the language they use, how dependent they feel on the opposite sex, as well as varying interpretations of chastity and moral standards in the community. There are plenty of real-life opportunities to talk *with* children about morality and virtue.

Perhaps the most important aspect of real-life teaching is done as parents model chastity, modesty, and virtue in their own lives. Children will more readily listen to and follow the counsel of their parents when such counsel is based on their parents' good examples.

The opposite is also true. As Elder Robert D. Hales of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said: "In many ways, our actions speak louder than our words. President Brigham Young (1801–77) taught: 'We should

As we pay attention to, listen to, and observe our children, we will discern what we need to teach.

set [our children] an example that we wish them to imitate. Do we realize this? How often we see parents demand obedience, good behavior, kind words, pleasant looks, a sweet voice and a bright eye from a child or children when they themselves are full of bitterness and scolding! How inconsistent and unreasonable this is! Our children will notice such inconsistencies in us and perhaps find justification for acting in similar ways."²

Learners learn best when they understand what teachers are teaching. Too many youth and young adults express frustration that their parents and even Church leaders tend to use "code words" and implicit messages that actually render more questions than answers and more tension than relief. This is especially true when it comes to sexual topics.

While serving as a bishop of a young single adult ward, I was often asked what "petting" meant. My faithful ward members had been taught that they shouldn't be involved in petting, but they were never taught what petting actually means. It was difficult for them to keep instruction they didn't understand.

President Marion G. Romney (1897–1988), First Counselor in the First Presidency, explained that it is not enough to teach in a way so others will understand, but we must also teach in such a way that no one will misunderstand.³ Rather than speaking in code or even slang, we will have more success if we use correct and appropriate terms. This promotes understanding and cultivates respect.

Consider how Elder Richard G. Scott of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles effectively taught moral principles and standards. He said: "Any sexual intimacy outside of the bonds of marriage—I mean any intentional



contact with the sacred, private parts of another’s body, with or without clothing—is a sin and is forbidden by God. It is also a transgression to intentionally stimulate these emotions within your own body.”⁴

To teach effectively, we have to ensure that those we teach understand the message. Simple questions like “Does this answer your question?” or “Did I explain that very well?” or “Do you have any other questions?” are very helpful.

Learners are converted when teachers connect the message with everlasting principles and standards. Rather than focusing only on the relevant “facts of life,” effective gospel instruction occurs when we connect those facts with the “facts of eternal life.” When talking about our bodies, for example, we can talk about how a loving Heavenly Father created our bodies and how we should approach His creations with respect and according to His expectations.

As the world drowns in immorality, there is still hope for future generations. This hope centers on parents devoting their best efforts to teaching the rising generation to be virtuous and chaste. Parents who teach their children to live virtuous and chaste lives strive to increase their understanding and improve their teaching skills. In doing this, they come to know that “the Lord will magnify [them] as [they] teach in the way He has commanded.” After all, this “is a labor of love—an opportunity to help others exercise their agency righteously, come unto Christ, and receive the blessings of eternal life.”⁵ ■

NOTES

1. See Bonita F. Stanton and James Burns, “Sustaining and Broadening Intervention Effect: Social Norms, Core Values, and Parents,” in *Reducing Adolescent Risk: Toward an Integrated Approach*, ed. Daniel Romer (2003), 193–200.
2. Robert D. Hales, “Our Parental Duty to God and to the Rising Generation,” *Ensign*, Aug. 2010, 32.
3. See Jacob de Jager, “Let There Be No Misunderstanding,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1978, 67.
4. Richard G. Scott, “Serious Questions, Serious Answers,” *New Era*, Oct. 1995, 6.
5. *Teaching, No Greater Call* (1999), 4.

Perhaps the most important aspect of real-life teaching is done as parents model chastity, modesty, and virtue in their own lives.