



How, When, and Why: **Talking to Your Children about Sexuality**

If you were to ask youth, “What is the law of chastity?” you may get a blank stare, or they may fidget with discomfort and then quickly quote something like, “It means not having sexual relations before marriage.” Our experience is that many young people remain abstinent before marriage but deeply misunderstand the full meaning and purpose of the law of chastity or of sexuality—misunderstandings that often, sadly, result in future marital struggles. Our goal as parents and leaders should be to help our children to be both sexually pure and prepared.



To help our children prepare for and enjoy sexuality in its beauty and wonder within marriage, we need to guide them as they work toward controlling their God-given feelings.

By Laura M. Padilla-Walker

Professor, School of Family Life, Brigham Young University

and Meg O. Jankovich

Student in BYU Marriage, Family, and Human Development master's program

Consider All Aspects of the Law

The physical aspects of the law of chastity (for example, abstinence before marriage and complete fidelity after marriage) are central and important. However, abstinence is sometimes discussed more often than the emotional and spiritual aspects of the joy and beauty of sexual intimacy in marriage, as well as the peace that comes from living a life of virtue and purity both before and after marriage.

In addition to procreation, sexual intimacy in marriage has another important purpose.

Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles explained: “Intimate relations . . . are not merely a curiosity to be explored, an appetite to be satisfied, or a type of recreation or entertainment to be pursued selfishly. They are not a conquest to be achieved or simply an act to be performed. Rather, they are in mortality one of the ultimate expressions of our divine nature and potential and a way of strengthening emotional and spiritual bonds between husband and wife.”¹

In order to help our children prepare to enjoy sexual intimacy in its beauty and wonder within marriage, we need to help them understand their sexual development and guide them as they work toward controlling their God-given feelings and emotions.



As our children grow, they need information taught by parents more directly and plainly about what is and is not appropriate.

- Let your children know they can ask you any questions, and then try not to overreact or attach shame to their questions or confessions. Celebrate that they are talking to you, show them love and support, and do your best to keep lines of communication open.
- Avoid using metaphors for sexuality. Children need information presented in a clear and honest way. For example, some youth tell of lessons where breaking the law of chastity is compared to chewed gum or food that is passed from person to person around the room and therefore no longer desirable. Though well intentioned, these types of metaphors often promote fear of sexuality or feelings of low or irreparable self-worth, undermining the hope and peace that results from true repentance.

If you worry that you haven't talked with your children about sexuality soon enough or in the right ways, you're not alone. There are a number of reasons why these conversations can be challenging. However, it is never too late to start teaching. Below are three tips to help you get started:

1. How to Talk about Sexuality

One critical element of healthy parent-child conversations about sexuality is to promote a culture of openness. Research suggests that teenagers get most of their information about sexuality from media or peers but that they *want* to get information from their parents.

President M. Russell Ballard, Acting President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, said: "As our children grow, they need information taught by parents more directly and plainly about what is and is not appropriate. Parents need to . . . talk to [their children] plainly about sex and the teaching of the gospel regarding chastity. Let this information come from parents in the home in an appropriate way."²

To foster open communication, you can:

- Start when your children are young by calling body parts by their correct names. This teaches children about their wonderful bodies and provides them the language they need to be healthy and informed.

2. When to Talk about Sexuality

Most parents have a single conversation with their children about sexuality. But given the false messages youth are getting from the world today—sometimes on a daily basis—children need more than one talk from their parents.³ Children benefit

most from a proactive approach in which parents anticipate the struggles children will face regarding sexuality and arm them with helpful strategies.

In speaking about potential exposure to pornography, Sister Joy D. Jones, Primary General President, said: “Earlier discussions are better, and children will come forward more readily when they know they are loved and nothing they say or do can change that love. . . .

“Parents, we must start the conversation and not wait for children to come to us. . . . We want children to feel prepared and empowered, not scared. We want to talk with them and not at them.”⁴

To be more intentional, you can:

- Have home evening lessons on topics related to sexuality and let your children teach as they feel ready. Topics might include puberty, body image, the positive aspects of sexuality, the dangers of pornography use, that it is normal to have sexual feelings, and more.
- Help your children come up with specific strategies to resist temptation. For example, if your child is struggling with impure thoughts or behaviors, brainstorm together on what to do when these thoughts come. For example, sing a hymn, think of a scripture, pray, engage in physical exercise, or wear a bracelet that reminds them to choose the right.
- Teach children how to avoid sexual predators and to stay safe. Note: try not to teach about safety (which often produces fear) at the same time you teach about sexual intimacy within marriage; children may project fear onto all aspects of sexuality.





3. Talk about the *Why* of Sexuality

Children often want to know *why* they are expected to do things. Why *should* they keep the law of chastity when some people around them do not? When they understand the reasons behind expectations, they are more likely to internalize shared gospel and family values. Youth who know why they are committing to keep the law of chastity find that this commitment “ceases to [be] a burden and, instead, becomes a joy and a delight.”⁵

If we want our children to keep God’s law of chastity, we need to give them reasons for why it is important to abide by this law. They must be taught that “sexuality is a powerful gift from Heavenly Father and that it should be used within the bounds He has set.”⁶ Understanding how this “powerful gift” develops will help youth make choices in line with their desire to keep God’s law of chastity.

As you discuss sexual development with your child, consider these teachings:

- Sexuality is an inherent part of each child of God. We are created “in the image of God” (Genesis 1:27), which means that our bodies, including our sexual organs, are a divine creation.
- Experiencing sexual feelings and sexual arousal is normal. Children don’t need to act on those feelings and sensations but instead can be mindful of them. This means noticing sexual

Youth who know why they are committing to keep the law of chastity find that this commitment ceases to be a burden.

feelings but not negatively judging them. Research has shown that practicing mindfulness can help us make better choices that are in line with our values and goals, such as keeping the law of chastity.

- Masturbation is often a child’s first experience with sexuality and is done in ignorance. Even young children are prone to self-touching, and how parents respond to these early behaviors can set the stage for how young people feel about themselves and their sexuality. It is important for parents to find a balance

between helping children understand the why behind God's commandment that sexual behavior occur within a marriage relationship, while also not reacting with disgust or anger when children engage in self-touching or youth admit to masturbating.

- If children understand the why behind standards related to relationships and sexuality (including dating, modesty, chastity, etc.), they are more likely to see the wisdom in God's laws and have the motivation to keep them. As you teach these standards, remember that it's important to do so without imposing shame or fear.

Emphasize the Power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ

Just as when our toddlers are first learning how to walk, youth may stumble as they learn to understand and regulate their own sexuality. It is important for us to remember to promote growth instead of guilt and to teach children that Jesus Christ can bless them with grace and power and mercy to strengthen them and help them remain sexually pure and one day enjoy the blessings of sexual intimacy in marriage.

Being a parent is not easy. And our efforts in teaching our children may not always be perfect, but we can do our best to teach our children about the beautiful gift that is sexual intimacy in marriage. If we feel that we fall short, we can do better with the Lord's help. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said, "With the gift of the



Atonement of Jesus Christ and the strength of heaven to help us, we *can* improve, and the great thing about the gospel is we get credit for *trying*, even if we don't always succeed."⁷ ■

NOTES

1. David A. Bednar, "We Believe in Being Chaste," *Ensign*, May 2013, 42.
2. M. Russell Ballard, "Like a Flame Unquenchable," *Ensign*, May 1999, 86.
3. See Dalmacio Flores and Julie Barroso, "21st Century Parent-Child Sex Communication in the United States: A Process Review," *Journal of Sex Research*, vol. 54, no. 4-5 (2017), 532-48.
4. Joy D. Jones, "Addressing Pornography: Protect, Respond, and Heal," *Ensign*, Oct. 2019, 25, 26.
5. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Forget Me Not," *Ensign*, Nov. 2011, 122.
6. "Sexual Intimacy Is Sacred and Beautiful" (family home evening lesson), ChurchofJesusChrist.org/addressing-pornography/resources.
7. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Tomorrow the Lord Will Do Wonders among You," *Ensign*, May 2016, 125-26.

Editors' note: If you have teenage children, consider sharing with them the article on page 14 on this topic, as well as the August *New Era* article "Talking to Your Parents about Sex."